

Ambition and Smoke, Love and Courage: What to Expect from the Climate Treaty Negotiations in Paris

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“The most important question raised by the climate summit may be: Does the power to change the world belong to the people in the conference rooms of Le Bourget or to the people in the streets of Paris?”

– Rebecca Solnit, “[Power in Paris](#)“



The Paris COP 21 UN climate summit is upon us, now, starting on Monday, November 30. I have spent the last year, ever since the dust of Lima was wiped from my shoes, trying my best to get a grasp on what was going to happen and communicating what I found out to all interested parties. This has led to two long pieces, “[Just Say ‘No’ to the Paris COP: A Possible Way to Win Something for Climate Justice](#)” and “[A History of the Climate Negotiations in Six Videos](#).”

In the last two months, the world’s attention has really started to focus on climate, the COP, and the possibilities and probabilities of “success” and (gasp!) “failure.” The murder of 129 people in the streets of Paris on Friday, November 13, has only trained hearts and minds more on this ground zero in the interlaced struggles for peace on Earth with justice.

Within twenty-four hours, the French government and the UNFCCC had reassured us that the COP would proceed exactly as planned, with added layers of security. The incredible and creative plans of civil society for making sure that the world's demand for climate justice will be heard in Paris hung in the balance until the government of François Hollande made it known that the twin bookends of our strategy – the massive march on Sunday, November 29 and the nonviolent civil disobedience and other acts of protest scheduled for the outcome of the COP on Friday and Saturday, December 11 and 12 – would be prohibited from occurring.

A COP without the full-throated participation of global civil society, however, has a less than zero chance of succeeding, whatever that nebulous term connotes. Just as the COP must go on, so, too, will we, the countless members of the global climate justice movement, whether marching under that banner in Paris or simply showing up in our hearts and heads.

But the carefully prepared script that global elites have been busy writing for Paris may not end up to end the way they think, and here's why.

Ambition and Smoke: The Negotiations Will Take Unexpected Turns

In “Just Say ‘No’ to the Paris COP,” I developed an argument that the best possible outcome would be a conference that ended in disarray, without an agreement that would lock in catastrophic climate change or be hailed by most of the world as the first step on the road to a future without climate chaos and social turmoil (as if). I have seen nothing on the part of the negotiating process in the intervening weeks that makes me think differently.

What is it that the governments of the world are being asked to do in Paris? Their remit is to agree on a global treaty that would address several key elements: 1) an ambitious upper limit on the amount of warming that humanity should countenance as acceptable and somehow safe for future generations, 2) a legally binding set of measures that all countries would agree on to achieve that goal, and 3) mobilization of the technical and financial resources to ensure that all countries would have the means to make the transition to a low or zero carbon way of life, and to do so in a way that enables the rapid emergence of the global South from poverty and inequality in the name of social justice.

Operationally, this means choosing between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius as the temperature target, creating a mechanism to close the widening emissions gap to put us on that path, and securing at least \$100 billion annually for a Green Climate Fund, and something similar for the Loss and Damage mechanism that will provide immediate emergency aid countries hit by extreme weather events.

At the moment, all the national pledges for climate action – the Individually Determined National Contributions (INDCs) – are in. Unfortunately, the best estimates for the warming that they will give us vary between an optimistic 2.7 degrees and around 3.3 degrees or a little more. The calculations are rendered more difficult because the UNFCCC failed to agree on any uniform ways of making these pledges in the four years that they gave themselves at COP 17 in Durban, South Africa, in 2011 to make this happen.

In Climate Action Tracker's estimation, after careful [review](#) of pledges “covering about 71% of global emissions, 17 have not been rated as ‘sufficient’.... Two are sufficient but cover only

0.4% of global emissions.” They [conclude](#) that the current level of ambition would give us a 66 percent chance of staying under 3 degrees Celsius!

There is a major risk that if current INDCs are locked in for 2030 and not reviewed and strengthened every five years, starting in 2020, that achievement of the 1.5°C goal called for by all the most vulnerable countries may be locked out, and achievement of the 2°C goal fundamentally threatened.

Based on the climate action promised under the INDCs it is now clear that governments at the Paris climate conference need to consider a formal acknowledgement that there is an insufficient level of mitigation ambition for 2025 and 2030 to limit warming below 2°C.

In November a group of NGOs including 350.org, Friends of the Earth International, the PanAfrican Climate Justice Alliance, and others issued “[Fair Shares: A Civil Society Equity Review of INDCs](#),” which finds that

The INDC commitments will likely lead the world to a devastating 3°C or more warming above pre-industrial levels. The current INDCs amount to barely half of the emissions cuts required by 2030. Moreover, the INDCs submitted by all major developed countries fall well short of their fair shares. From the list of countries highlighted in the report, Russia’s INDC represents zero contribution towards committing its fair share. Japan’s represents about a tenth, the United States’ about a fifth, and the European Union’s just over a fifth of its fair share.... On the other hand, the majority of developing countries’ mitigation pledges exceed or broadly meet their fair share, including Kenya, the Marshall Islands, China, Indonesia, and India. Brazil’s INDC represents slightly more than two thirds of its fair share.

So, on the main question, what is on the table will warm the planet at least three times more above pre-industrial levels than what we currently have done, about 0.85 degrees Celsius. No one wants to see worse effects from climate change than we are experiencing now, but that is inevitable since there is already enough carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the air to take us to 1.4 degrees, even if we stopped burning fossil fuels tomorrow.

To make matters worse, these “pledges” will not be legally binding commitments. They will not even go into effect until 2020. They will not be reviewed so they can be “ratcheted up” for five more years till 2025. And they will take us well beyond the supposedly “safe” threshold of 2 degrees in the next quarter century.

This is what Christiana Figueres, the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, President Obama, and other world “leaders” will hail as a success, if all goes well for them in Paris.

But to get agreement even on these dispiriting and ecocidal targets, they will need nearly every government of the world to agree that this is fair and reasonable. To do so, they are going to have to come up with about \$90 billion more for the Green Climate Fund than has been pledged so far. And they will have to do something for Loss and Damage as well.

And herein lies a little room for hope. Many countries – more than 100 – have said that they cannot live (in some cases literally) with 2 degrees of warming, and are demanding that the treaty inscribe 1.5 degrees as the target. Many are insisting that \$100 billion for the GCF is a non-negotiable promise (it was made at COP 15 back in 2009 in Copenhagen). And others, such as the Philippines, need substantial funding for Loss and Damage as well.

So how exactly will the global North get an agreement under these circumstances? The negotiating text has not shrunk below 50 pages in the multiple “intersessional” meetings that took place in 2015. Most of the text is in brackets, meaning that there are competing proposals for all of the clauses that involve these and other crucial issues. There are seemingly unbridgeable differences of opinion among the nations at the table. And the working time and process at a COP are simply not constructed to produce efficiency or progress in the negotiations.

Thus even if the will existed, and it doesn't, it strikes me as absurd to think that these two weeks in Paris will get to the finish line. They have kicked the can down the road for four years, avoiding all the intractable differences, barely making progress on the shape of the treaty itself, let alone the content.

On the other hand, Sunita Narain, who along with Chandra Bushan of the Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment is the author of a devastating critique of US proposals on climate change – “[Captain America: U.S. Climate Goals – A Reckoning](#)” – has made perhaps the [best case](#) for how world leaders (and there are no world leaders in climate change, except perhaps for Pope Francis, who doesn't have a country to bring to the table) are going to pull an agreement out of the hat.

So, what is likely to happen? Let me use my 20-COP past to map out the likely scenario and explain what it means for us in the emerging South that is already affected by unseasonal weather but needs its right to development.

First, there will be a Paris deal. This is a given. But to make it happen the French will make some clever moves, given that the current draft has been negotiated for over four years, is more than 50 pages long and full of disagreements. They have already changed the order of things by inviting heads of state on the first day and not the last. Everyone from Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is coming. The French will produce (and I hope with more finesse than the Danish government) a zero draft with the bare bones of the agreement at the start of the two-week meeting. The heads of state will have little room but to endorse this broad agreement. Then for the next two weeks negotiators will idle away time till the gavel comes down on the midnight of the last day.

Second, this zero draft for the Paris treaty will be minimalist and, therefore, seemingly non-controversial. It will endorse the submission of the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), which are voluntary commitments made by countries to cut carbon emissions. It will admit that the sum of these commitments does not add up to keeping the world below 2°C rise, which is seen

to be the least risky option. But it will say that the agreement provides a stable and predictable foundation to ratchet up the commitments in the future.

Third, it will not make the commitment or the expected result legally binding. Instead it will make the procedure of submitting reports binding. It will also sidestep the tricky issue of review of INDCs, which countries like India have strangely objected to. It will simply say that in five years there will be a stock take of the aggregate of all INDCs. So no individual country's progress will be reviewed, only the sum of their actions and how close it is to keeping the temperature rise below 2°C. On the really tricky issue of additional finance it will not mention specifics, just make a broad promise. And to keep the Americans happy it will try and do the finance bit on another piece of paper. In this way, the Paris Climate Change Treaty will be ready for signature even before the leaders leave. It will be weak but aspirational. The spin will be that it lays the ground for future action.

She goes on to pass judgment on what this would mean:

What it means is a little more than this. The world would have agreed to a framework, pushed by the US, which is voluntary, bottom up – countries decide what they will do rather than get targets based on their contribution to the problem – and most importantly universal. It breaks once and for all the distinction between developing and developed countries. As agreed in the Framework Convention on Climate Change, developed countries had to take the first and drastic action because of their historical responsibility.

It also means the US will appropriate an even greater share of the carbon budget, simply because its intended action is unambitious. The world is left with a limited space to emit greenhouse gases, if it wants to stay within a not-too-dangerous threshold. The still developing world – India and all of Africa – needs to increase emissions for its development. But by 2030, the timeframe of the intended Paris treaty, almost all the carbon budget would be gone. Our future right to development will be surrendered. We will be told to find a different way to grow economically. Ours has to be a low-carbon growth and if it is expensive, it is our problem. There will be no money or technology to aid us to get there.

This would be clever indeed. It is precisely the dangerous scenario we have to block, to figure out how to throw a wrench with “climate justice” etched into it into its gears.

“Where is the ambition in these rooms?”

So who might make it awkward for the architects of this disastrous treaty in Paris? In addition to the dozens of countries who are on record for a 1.5° temperature ceiling and the nearly unanimous desire for a legally binding treaty worthy of the name, there is the Climate Vulnerable Forum, a diverse set of countries who have formed a loose negotiating bloc for the summit. Their [Founding Communiqué](#) gives some hope, insisting that “the minimum deliverable for the

UN Climate Change Conference at Paris (UNFCCC COP21) is an agreement entirely consistent with the non-negotiable survival of our kind.”

AOSIS, the 44-member strong Alliance of Small Island States, has also [endorsed](#) keeping warming under the safer, if more difficult limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius, and has called on the nations of the world to be fully de-carbonized by 2050. The 48-member Least Developed Countries bloc issued a statement in February calling for “emissions peaking for developed countries in 2015, with an aim of net zero emissions by 2050 in the context of equitable access to sustainable development.”

On the truly poignant side, Peru, Mexico, and Colombia have pledged money to the Green Climate Fund, shaming the wealthy nations of the world, who have so far put up only about \$10 billion of the promised \$100 billion annually by 2020 (the claim that there is actually now \$62 billion promised to the Fund is full of double counting and includes forms of “aid” that come with plenty of strings attached). Perhaps the wealthy should just ask the global South to fund the rest!

Hope and Possibility: Climate Justice at Cop 21 and Beyond, or, Why We Are Going and What We Hope to Do There for Climate Justice

I have just argued that the best possible outcome of the COP 21 negotiations would be *not* to agree on a treaty, but instead for the talks to descend into chaos in the halls in a scenario where nations inside the negotiations blocked any outcome because what is on the table is completely unacceptable.

As this is the position of the vast majority of the global climate justice movement – that the COP process is hopelessly compromised and inadequate – we might ask: What can or should the movement do in Paris to enable such an outcome, however slight the chance of it may seem?

In “Just Say ‘No’ to the Paris COP,” I outlined the variety of actions that the movement has planned for Paris. I’d like to return to them here, updated under new circumstances, and with the COP itself (no pun intended) fast on our heels.

Global Climate Marches will take place (almost) everywhere

The [November 29 marches](#) in Paris and around the world are intended by their big NGO organizers such as Avaaz and 350.org to take the rhetoric of global leaders and turn it into a weapon with which to shame or encourage them into doing the right thing. Their potential to appeal to newly active people in a variety of ways, taking into account that different people respond to different messages, aim to help forge a truly broad and deep climate justice movement, which will require moving more and more people into and through climate action to climate justice.

Now, of course, the situation on the ground in Paris is vastly altered after the November 13 massacre of 129 people by the terrorists of ISIS/Daesh. So the organizers are calling for a huge turnout around the world to replace the momentum stolen by the French authorities from a march that would have numbered in the several hundred thousands – indeed, with the solidarity of the

climate justice movement for real peace throughout the world based on social justice, it would not be too far-fetched to imagine that closer to a million people would have been in the streets of Paris, with Parisians responding to this solidarity. After the *Charlie Hebdo* murders in January, some 1.6 million people marched in Paris and three million across France a week later; think what could have been this time.

Meanwhile the [People's Pilgrimage](#), inspired by Pope Francis's bracing climate encyclical *Laudato Si*, is set to arrive in Paris just before the COP opens on November 30. Yeb Saño, one of its co-organizers, [points out](#) that "Paris is not our destination. Our real destination will be the hearts and minds of people, so our journey continues even after Paris." He told a group I was with this summer that "Paris is merely a six-year delay of what was promised in Copenhagen. Paris will give us a ten to fifteen page 'Motherhood' statement with lots of 'creative ambiguity.' Unless we change the system, the same system that got us into the crisis, the negotiations process cannot, for the life of me, I cannot see it get us out of it."

The question remains: what will happen in Paris on November 29? I will be there with a dozen other members of the [Climate Justice Project](#) with the aim of participating fully in the actions and doing our best to report on them. I know that I will show up at the duly appointed place and time, and we will have to see who else does.

The Climate Games

Creative ideas abound in this movement, and there will be many thousands of imaginative, passionate people on hand to enact them. In the aftermath of the French crackdown on public demonstrations, the role that will be played throughout COP 21 by participants in the [Climate Games](#) looms even larger than before.

Organized by the [Laboratory of Insurrectional Imagination](#) (le Labofii) as an open call to anyone who feels moved to do express their views about the COP and the larger forces behind it, conceived as *the Mesh* – "austerity-dictating politicians, fossil fuel corporations, industry lobbyists, peddlers of false solutions and greenwashers," it anticipates a joyful chaos that will bring together "artists, activists, designers, scientists, hackers, architects, gamers, performers and other citizens together to conceptualise, and build and rehearse effective new tools and tactics of resistance to be used during the COP21." Teams of activists will form to engage in "a mass participation transmedia action framework that merges the street, disobedient bodies and cyberspace, and turns the city into a total resistance performance event open to all."

The Climate Games organizers' eloquent [response](#) to November 13 merits quoting in full:

First of all, we want to clearly state our solidarity with all victims of all forms of terror. Machine guns and explosives hurt the same whether in Paris or Beirut, Ankara or Yola, Damascus or Kobane, Baghdad or elsewhere. The hurt feels the same whether it comes from the gun of a jihadist or a police officer, the missiles of a fighter plane or a drone.

These attacks must not change the conversation but deepen it. We want to clearly state that our dedication for social and climate justice remains as strong as ever. We are convinced that the geopolitical and economic dynamics that underpin

climate chaos are the same as those that feed terrorism. From the oil wars in Iraq to the droughts in Syria caused by ecological collapse, all feed the same inequalities that lead to cycles of violent conflict.

We are writing this from a city under a state of emergency. The government has announced that the COP21 negotiations will go on, but all public outdoor demonstrations across France, including the Global Climate March and the day of mass actions on December 12th, have been banned. We refuse this shadow of the future, we will not bend to the politics of fear that stifle liberties in the name of security. The biggest threat to security, to life in all its forms, is the system that drives the climate disaster. History is never made by those who ask permission.

We believe that COP21 can not take place without the participation or mobilizations of civil society while governments and multinationals continue with business as usual. Only the Climate Justice movements with their disobedient bodies will be able to do the necessary work of keeping 80% of the fossil fuels in the ground.

We are still and more than ever dedicated to forms of actions that aim to address the root causes of climate chaos in determined non-violent ways. Our playing field has been totally transformed in Paris, but everywhere else in the world we encourage people to continue with their plans and adventures. We call all teams in Paris to take into account the exceptional circumstances and to not put anyone in fear or danger.

The decentralised creative nature of the Climate Games could become the alternative nonviolent response to this state of emergency. Like the mushrooms that emerge at dawn, the ants that scuttle across borders at night we will rise out of fear and shock, we will adapt and resist. We are not fighting for nature, we are nature defending itself.

For details, and to enter, stay tuned [here](#).

A People's Climate Strike Builds Out from Paris

Another intriguing and promising new strategy for the movement that will have its premiere in Paris is that of a global or [people's climate strike](#). As Ben Manski and Jill Stein [explain](#): “What makes a strike different from mere protest? A strike is an economic stoppage. A strike does not plead. It does not demand. It simply *does*.”

[A People's Climate Strike](#) is being planned – to bring the engines of economic and ecological destruction to a grinding halt, demonstrate our growing power, and promote community-controlled, just, and green alternatives. The People's Climate Strike will move us from the symbolism of marches towards the assertion of power in the streets. We will begin to develop a tool that has been essential for democratic social change throughout history.

In Paris, there is a [call for students](#) (including children) to skip classes or turn their schools into sites of climate action on November 30, the day the COP opens. There are actions planned for seventy countries on that day. In the eyes of the organizers, “The adult generations have **promised** to stop the climate crisis, but they have **skipped their homework year after year**. **Climate strike** is a wake-up call to our own generation. And it is the start of a network that will solve the greatest challenge in human history. **Together**. We need your *hands* and *hearts* and *smarts*!” The measure of its success will be the number of people who [raise their hands](#): “The open hand is the symbol of Climate Strike. *If you agree to the three demands of Climate Strike*: 1) fossils should stay in the ground, 2) transition to 100% clean energy, 3) help people impacted by climate change then show the world your hand.”

Creating a People's Alternative to the COP

At every COP, movements seek to create strong counter-spaces and projects, whose impact on countless activists over the years would be hard to overestimate. In Paris, the network of French and global organizers who have come together as [Coalition Climat21](#) has shown an astonishing capacity to make it possible to share insights, teach skills, strengthen bonds, plan actions, and envision futures across a variety of venues. One of these will be a two-day [Citizen Climate Summit](#) or “Village of Alternatives” on December 5 and 6, in Montreuil, a working-class neighborhood of Paris where my group will be staying. In the words of the organizers of the Coalition Climat21, this will be a place “to put forward solutions tackling climate change. Let’s show decision-makers that these solutions already exist and are building a better world: with more justice, more solidarity, more happiness! ... Putting in common our experience, analyses, struggles, and hopes will enable us to anchor our movement for the long-term.”

This will be followed between December 7 and 11 at the [Climate Action Zone](#) (ZAC) at the CENTQUATRE-PARIS in the northern part of Paris, where “All people are welcome – from the activists who will come from every corner of the world to local French high school students. Here one can get basic information on the climate crisis and the UN negotiations, as well as meet with others to share information, create, and organize.” During the “crunch time” of the second week of the COP when the negotiations will likely be floundering, participants in the Climate Action Zone will generate plans for their movements’ actions and messages at the end of the COP on Friday, December 11, and Saturday, December 12, seizing our chance to “have the final word” on COP21. As Amy Goodman of Democracy Now! [puts it](#): “If the leaders fail, many will be there to storm the Bastille.”

The Streets Await Us

Things are most definitely heating up (so to speak) for Paris. While the French state cries for a war on terrorism and denies our civil liberties, this is being met with a cry for a just peace with climate justice.

COP 21 is a litmus test of where power lies. The balance of forces has greatly changed, and the climate justice movement is much savvier than at Copenhagen in 2009. In the [heart-wrenching words](#) of the Network of Spiritual Progressives:

What if the wake-up call of these kinds of acts are to help us see that the only real response (once we recognize the existential crisis of being alive, being vulnerable, not knowing if we will live or die today and try to find some acceptance and peace with that while we go about living our lives and perhaps in remembering our vulnerability we choose to live our lives more fully, love more unconditionally, and be more generous and kind) is to build a movement and take back our country and our world. Perhaps this moment is a call to action – not to create a false sense of safety or security or to turn more inward – for ordinary people to rise-up and lead because our leaders are failing us.

In this crucial moment of history, I don't think I could rise out of bed in the morning if it wasn't for the global climate justice movement – its creativity, growing numbers, passion, imagination, grit, and joyfulness.

In hopes to see you or your spirit on the streets of Paris!



History is never made by those who ask permission.