

The green goldrush

by Oscar Reyes
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It is a long time since activists spray painted "We are winning" on a wall at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation in December 1999. Movements for global justice have had little to celebrate since then. Will things be any different for the "carbon movement" that is emerging around the Climate Camp " which took place again at Kingsnorth power station in the UK this August " and engaging in direct action campaigns on aviation and coal?

Some victories have already been chalked up. When we started to campaign against the EU's 10 per cent target for agrofuels in transport by 2020, it seemed unwinable. Activists pointed out that turning crops into fuel would increase food prices, exacerbating poverty and even resulting in starvation. A World Bank report leaked in July backed this up " finding that up to three-quarters of recent food price rises can be explained by the switch to agrofuels.

Other scientific studies have shown that deforestation caused (directly or indirectly) by agrofuels means that they are actually damaging the climate. In response, the European Parliament environment committee has now recommended that the 10 per cent target be dropped. The UK government's Gallagher report, released in early July, also found the introduction of agrofuels should be "significantly slowed".

Yet look elsewhere and the picture is decidedly more mixed. On the face of it, the UK renewable energy strategy (RES) was also a victory. "The government has at last begun to take renewables seriously," concluded George Monbiot. And, indeed, it contains many positive proposals, ranging from renewable energy for heating to the promotion of electric cars.

Yet delving further into the details reveals a murkier picture. The most remarkable point is that the RES separates out any investment in renewable energy from the issue of reducing emissions from the power sector. These are supposed to be dealt with by the EU's emissions trading scheme (ETS), but there is strong evidence that it doesn't work.

The idea is that the ETS places a "cap" on emissions. Yet in the first phase of the scheme, corporate lobbying resulted in these caps being set so high that they did not actually cap anything. Even if this is corrected, the ETS still offers companies numerous ways to reduce emissions "on paper" without closing fossil fuel plants.

In other words, the RES offers an approach whereby investment in renewable energy will be promoted alongside further investment in coal and nuclear power (with seven new coal plants and "at least" eight new nuclear plants planned). In this framework, the whole point of the exercise is lost. Renewables are being promoted as a supplement to coal and nuclear, a "green goldrush" that has more to do with capital accumulation than a transition to a post-carbon economy.

The problem is then compounded by suggestions that "domestic" reductions might be met from projects elsewhere in the world, largely the global South. In essence, this suggests that the UK can meet the EU's target of 20 per cent of renewables by 2020 through investments in schemes elsewhere " weakening the pressure that the target might otherwise impose for a reduction in power output from fossil fuel sources.

Yet wind farms off the coast of Scotland are not the same as wind farms in Maharashtra, India " where large-scale renewable investments have already resulted in the appropriation of common land used for farming, without even providing local residents with electricity. Counting investment in such projects towards domestic targets is another form of offsetting " making the global South pay for over-consumption in the North.

It also provides a useful complement to industrial outsourcing. In effect, these renewables investments can be used to power factories that have relocated from the UK, driving a race to the bottom on labour conditions and wages, while at the same time artificially lowering UK emissions figures. Already, about a quarter of emissions in China are actually “exported carbon” (according to a 2004 calculation by the Tyndall Centre) “generated in the making of products for export back to the North. It is worth recalling such figures when the G8 tries to hold industrialising countries like China and India responsible for the continued rise in global emissions.

At the G8 Summit the UK pledged funds towards a World Bank “clean investment fund”, which will promote investments in “clean coal”, as well as reintroducing the “conditional loans” that, post-Seattle, global justice activists successfully discredited as holding the South to ransom.

It is hard to conclude from all this that we are winning. But what it points to is the need for a carbon movement that emphasises the repayment of our ecological debt to the South, and one that places climate justice at its heart.

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