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Climate

Trump goes for bust on the national-populist trail. What did you expect?

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The United States has denounced the Paris climate agreement, cancelled all the measures decided by the United States in application of this agreement and withdrew from the Green Fund for the Climate. These are the major decisions that Donald Trump finally announced, on Thursday, June 1, after a long period of suspense.

These decisions are in line with the promises made by the new President during his election campaign. In the past few months, some observers had wanted to believe that Trump would change his tune, but he did no such thing. On the contrary, the speech he delivered in the Rose Garden of the White House flowed from a disturbing nationalist and populist demagoguery. What did you expect? - as the advertisers say...

Victimization and nationalism

For Trump, the Paris agreement was nothing but a scandalous piece of trickery imposed on the USA. "The Paris agreement is not about the climate," he said, "it's about the financial advantage that other countries get compared to the United States. The rest of the world applauded when we signed the agreement. They were happy, for the simple reason that we suffer from a very great economic disadvantage."

Drawing an apocalyptic picture of the implications of the agreement, the president said it would lead to the loss of 2.7 million jobs, cost the US \$3 trillion and would result in a loss of purchasing power for US citizens of up to \$7,000 a year. He listed the figures of the reductions in economic activity that would affect the industrial sectors: "86 per cent in the coal sector", he said... omitting of course to mention that solar energy already gives employment to 800,000 US workers (against 67,000 in coal) and creates more jobs than the coal industry loses. [\[1\]](#)

For Trump, it is simple, there is a conspiracy: the poor Americans, who are too honest, are victims of an enormous injustice hatched by an evil machination of all the other countries. The denunciation of the agreement is therefore an elementary reaction of sovereignty and national dignity: "The heads of state of Europe and China should not have more to say about the policy of the United States than American citizens do. We do not want to be the laughing stock of the world. We will not be."

Populist and security demagoguery

Rediscovering the tone of his electoral meetings, throughout his speech Trump staked everything on social demagoguery. As if the goal of his billionaire government was to give decent employment and a decent income to workers in Detroit and Pittsburgh, as if the Paris agreement was taking the money and the jobs of American workers in order to distribute them to others.

"The Paris agreement is unfair to the US. It blocks the development of clean coal [in the United States]. China can build hundreds of coal-fired power plants, India can double its coal production, even Europe can build coal-fired power plants." "We have sufficient energy reserves to get all US citizens out of poverty, a mine is going to reopen in Pennsylvania," he said; but because of the Paris agreement, "millions of American families will remain in poverty".

The axis of this propaganda is employment. For Trump, as a good capitalist, employment obviously depends on growth: renewables could suffice for soft growth, he says, but not with the assumption of 3 to 4 per cent growth. And this is what Trump is dangling before people with his slogan "Make America great again": an America that creates jobs by building walls and making weapons. "For that, we need all kinds of energy, not just renewables," he said. "Otherwise, there will be a huge risk of power cuts for millions of families."

When you stick to populist demagogy, you might as well go the whole hog by invoking the fight against terrorism. Trump did not fail to do so: "A billion dollars has already been paid to the Green Fund for the Climate by the US, including money that was destined for the fight against terrorism - not by me, by my predecessor," he said.

Not far from a call to hatred

Trump has no time for the principle of differentiated responsibilities - which is at the heart of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change - and the fact that the United States remains in the lead of the countries that emit the most greenhouse gas emissions per capita - far ahead of China, India and Brazil. In the Paris agreement, "China can continue to do what it wants for 13 years, (while) India is taking part in the agreement on condition of receiving billions of aid".

Speaking of the Green Fund for the Climate (decided at the Cancun COP to help southern countries to make the transition and to adapt), the President was not afraid to say that the Fund was aimed at "seizing the wealth of the USA to redistribute it to the developing countries". "We have \$20,000 billion of debts, millions of unemployed workers, cities that have no money to hire police. This money should be invested here, not sent to countries that have seized our factories and our jobs." Here, we are not far from a call to hate. An imperialist hatred, to divert the anger of US workers from US employers who have relocated their production to low-wage countries... and from the policies of Trump's himself, whose tax reform will bring billions of dollars to rich people like him!

A difference of 0.2C?

On the climate itself, the occupant of the White House did not say much. Let us note however this extraordinary peremptory affirmation: "the Paris agreement would only make a difference of 0.2°C". By what date? Compared to what baseline? It's a mystery.

We have repeated here often enough that the Paris Agreement is only a declaration of intent. But it is a declaration of intent which at least has the advantage - it is the only one it has - of setting a goal: "stay well below 2°C, and continue efforts not to go beyond 1.5°C". National contributions to this goal put us on the path of a 3 to 4°C warming by the end of the century. But doing nothing could push the temperature up by 6°C. Now, doing nothing is precisely what the United States has just decided. Trump is trying to make Americans believe that his decision has no ecological consequences for them, but it implies a difference well over 0.2°C!

Renegotiate? My eye...

At the same time that he repeated tirelessly his denunciation of the agreement reached at COP21, Trump declared that he was ready to negotiate the re-accession of the United States to this document, or to negotiate an "entirely new" agreement provided that it does not harm America and its citizens. He does not believe what he says. What is the consistency of this proposal, coming from an individual who claims that climate change is a hoax created by the

Chinese to harm the US economy?

In any case, the violence of Trump's words leaves little credibility to this idea of renegotiating. In addition to the "emerging" and "developing" countries, the White House troll has gone on the offensive against his European partners: "Those who ask the US to remain in the agreement are countries which cost the US a lot by their commercial practices and do not contribute to the military alliance." Merkel is the target. The quarrel is hotting up between Washington and Berlin. In any case, let us remember that, for Trump, the profits of the US bosses and the militaristic policy of defending their interests are more important than rescuing the Earth's climate.

How should we interpret all that? It needs to be analyzed on several levels, and it will be necessary to return to this: this is only a first reaction.

The forward flight of an injured troll

In terms of US domestic policy, the denunciation of the agreement gives the impression of Trump careering ahead to try to get out of an increasingly precarious situation, where more and more voices are being raised in favour of an impeachment procedure.

Trump was faced with a difficult choice. If he remained in the agreement, he "normalized" himself (a little) as a "responsible" President, responded positively to the majority wishes of the business community (including ExxonMobil and other energy groups!) and reassured US public opinion" (which is mostly convinced and concerned about the reality of climate change). But if he "normalized", himself he would turn his back on his militant, populist and reactionary base, and lose an important asset among the Republican Party's elected representatives, who are far from supporting him unanimously, but of whom the majority are climate negationists.

Precisely because he is weakened, Trump chose to satisfy his base - represented in his team by Bannon, Pence, Pruitt, Sessions and some others. Mike Pence - who introduced his speech - and Scott Pruitt who commented on it - both insisted heavily on this aspect: the President was doing what he said. (Pruitt, who really looks like a master-polisher of his master's shoes) added an extra dose of populism, speaking of the "working class", and greeting Trump as "the champion of the forgotten of this country"!).

This choice in favour of his base was probably the least bad possible for Trump, in the short term. But in the medium term, by refocusing on his national-populist core business, the President could bring closer the moment when the dominant circles of big capital and their political representatives decide to get rid of him and Bannon, his Alt -right evil genius. We will know more in the coming days, including the hearing of former FBI chairman Comey at the Senate Intelligence Commission.

Measuring climate impact

In terms of its climate impact, US withdrawal is serious, but should not be dramatized. The substance of the matter, in fact, is that the Paris agreement absolutely does not enable us to avoid the catastrophe. This does not mean that its denunciation by Trump is unimportant, it means that the damage caused by Trump must be appreciated at its proper extent... It is not a question of becoming supporters of the Paris agreement, nor of its European, Chinese or other supporters for whom it costs nothing to strike a progressive pose while contributing to the climate catastrophe.

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/US-OUT-Paris.jpg>

Infographic showing the impact of the fact that the US is joining Nicaragua and Syria, the only two countries that have not ratified the Paris agreement

US emissions account for 15% per cent of global emissions. Decided under Obama, the United States' national contribution (NDC) aimed to reduce them by 26 to 28 per cent in 2025, compared to 2005. This represents an effort hardly greater than what the USA should have achieved at the latest in 2012 (compared to 1990), had they ratified Kyoto. Moreover, the measures taken by Obama covered only 83 per cent of the target.

That is not all. This effort was in fact not an effort at all: it corresponded almost entirely to the "spontaneous" reduction of emissions stemming from the fact that American energy groups are disinvesting in coal to the benefit of shale gas - which is at the same time less polluting and cheaper - and renewable. The removal by Trump of the Clean Power Plan and other Obama measures is more serious than his denunciation of the agreement, but it will not stop the movement of capital.

Danger of geostrategic skidding out of control

It is at the geostrategic level that what is essential seems to be playing out. Trump's climate communication confirms that a disturbing process is underway. The crisis between the European Union and the US is sharpening, and the tone is rising between the competitors. A vast realignment of imperialist forces, including the break-up of NATO, EU reform/militarization, and China-EU rapprochement is no longer quite a science fiction scenario.

The dominant circles of big international capital do not want this scenario but, as we noted in our article on "The Place of Trumpism in History", certain elements are making the situation escape the control of the protagonists. One of these elements is obviously constituted by Trump's own policies.

Here, it must be stressed that these policies are not simply and mechanically dictated by the bourgeoisie (hundreds of executives of major US companies have urged Trump to remain in the agreement, including leaders in the energy sector) or even by any sector of the capitalist class. On the contrary, there is a dual relative autonomy, which is particularly evident in the context of political crisis: the autonomy of the political sphere in relation to the economic sphere, and the individual (Trump and his close circle) in relation to the bourgeois political sphere as a whole.

In other words, Trump's forward flight on the climate - because he is weakened by the investigation of his ties with Russia - could extend into other areas, including military. This could then have the most serious consequences... and reduce ipso facto the fight for the climate to the nth rank of his preoccupations. That goes for all the protagonists, even when the emergency is really maximum.

What to do? What to say?

This is not the time to get our objective wrong...

Obviously, it is necessary to denounce Trump's policies, but to demand that the USA remain in the Paris agreement makes little sense. Negotiating concessions for it to stay there would be unacceptable. Rather, let it leave: that will lead to the maximum isolation of Trump; it will encourage the struggles of social movements in the United States against his policies and prevent him from spreading his climate-negationist nonsense in the course of climate negotiations.

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The emission reduction targets of the governments that are indignant at the US withdrawal must be drastically increased to fill this gap, but also to close the gap between the target of 1.5°C maximum on the one hand and the contributions of those states on the other. They must be so increased from the point of both social justice and North-South justice, which implies radical anti-capitalist measures instead of "polluting rights" and other "market mechanisms".

So we should give no support to the Paris agreement, no support to the China-European Union axis. What the Trump affair ultimately proves is that a response to the climatic challenge is not possible by respecting the laws of a capitalism that is thirsty for growth/profit and neo-liberal policies that produce unemployment, poverty and inequality. The defence of the climate requires the struggle of social movements and the convergence of struggles. We need to revive a global movement for climate justice, in solidarity with the social movements in the United States.

Enough of sleight-of-hand and half measures: unconditional respect for the commitments of the Green Fund for the Climate; a halt to major fossil infrastructure works; suppression of unnecessary, harmful (weapons!) production and programmed obsolescence; socialization of energy, credit and water; support for local ecological agriculture and food sovereignty; a drastic reduction of working time without loss of pay; development of the public sector under the control of users in the areas of transport and insulation-renovation... Only demands of this kind open the way to a solution that corresponds to the urgency and gravity of the double social and ecological crisis.

June 1, 2017

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[1] These figures come from a report by the National Economic Research Associates (NERA, a well-known climate denial body) sponsored by two Conservative lobbies: the American Council for Capital Training and the US Chamber of Commerce, well known for their opposition to any environmental regulation.