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It's the hottest year in recorded human history, and quite possibly the hottest the planet has been in 100,000 years. Climate scientists are desperately sounding the alarm, warning that the earth's "vital signs" are worse than at any time in human history, and that the only way to avoid climate catastrophe is to drastically cut carbon emissions.

Against this backdrop, the world's fossil fuel industry continues spending hundreds of billions of dollars extracting oil, gas, and coal, with the energy plans of petrostates openly contradicting promises made in their climate policies. One of those states then hosts an international climate conference on how to best avert the impending crisis. Denying conflict of interest even with a record number of fossil fuel lobbyists in attendance, the host even appoints as summit president the chief of its national oil and gas company.

A closer look at the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (or COP28) shows that things are much worse than we might believe.

The COP28 deal uses the watered-down term of "transitioning away" instead of "phasing out" fossil fuels due to pressure from oil-producing countries, despite 130 out of 198 countries supporting the use of the latter phrase. It calls for tripling global renewable energy and doubling the rate of energy efficiency improvements by 2030, but fails to quantify the goals, thereby giving countries free rein to choose whatever baseline suits them. The deal also uses language that is promoted by the fossil fuel industry, such as including carbon capture and utilization and storage (CCUS) as part of "zero- and low-emission technologies" alongside renewables and nuclear energy. Scientists have identified CCUS as a limited and inefficient technology that ultimately buys the fossil fuel industry more time to do as they please.

The focus on the role of "transitional fuels" has also been called a poison pill that greenlights liquefied natural gas expansion at the expense of renewables—great news for the United States, which became the world's largest LNG producer by installed capacity in 2022. The deal was also wholly ambiguous on the issue of finance, with no mention of the historic responsibility of developed nations in burning fossil fuels, exploiting poor and resource-rich countries, and accelerating the climate breakdown in the first place. Though the deal operationalized the much-needed loss and damage fund, and acknowledged the trillions of dollars needed for climate adaptation and mitigation, the final text provided no quantifiable amounts and laid out no concrete plans.

As the lead negotiator of the Alliance of Small Island States, Anne Rasmussen put it simply, "[The] process has failed us." Indeed, as the World Meteorological Organization has warned, in less than five years, we could breach the crucial 1.5 degrees Celsius warming threshold agreed upon in Paris in 2015. Yet, COP28 leaders could not even bring themselves to include a statement on how global emissions should peak by 2025. A United Nations report from last month also notes that it's business as usual for the world's worst polluters, with the US, Canada, Russia, India, Saudi Arabia, and the COP28 host, the United Arab Emirates, planning to expand oil and coal production in the coming years.

This foot-dragging on climate action is infuriating, but perhaps unsurprising, especially in light of the current global political situation. For the past two months, we have watched horror unfolding in Gaza while world leaders either looked the other way, or actively supported Israel's "right" to commit war crimes. Almost 19,000 deaths later (around 8,000 of them being children), the US continues to veto ceasefire motions, and the UK abstains—the same United Kingdom that had three private planes fly in their leaders to COP28.

If recent events have shown us anything, it is that world leaders are not in the least bit interested in justice—in terms of climate, or otherwise. In a report last month, Oxfam revealed that the richest one percent of the world was responsible for more carbon emissions than the poorest 66 percent, and that the decision-makers at COP28—senior politicians including US senators, British ministers, and European commissioners—are also in the top one percent of income earners.

It is difficult to not feel defeated by COP28's end results, but if there is one silver lining, it is that there are now more climate activists and advocacy groups than ever before, and their voices are becoming louder each day. The loss and damage fund is one example of how these movements are, against all odds, pushing through results. After COP28, it is now abundantly clear that, ultimately, the people, and not the powerful, will take on the responsibility of fighting for the planet. The Daily Star/Asia News Network

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