

Opinion piece: 'global change, social justice and climate strikes'

"You cannot be pro-environment on Monday and against raising fuel costs on Tuesday" I remember Emmanuel Macron disdainfully saying during one of his speeches in December, in the full eye of the 'yellow jackets' storm. However, that is exactly what we should be doing, as it is all part of the same battle. The battle for article 23 of the Belgian constitution; "Everybody has the right to live a dignified life". Mobilizations and strikes are organised around the country and even world to do just that, fight for an integral and structural reformation where the strongest shoulders will have to carry the biggest burden. Because, as Dirk Holemans wrote (DM, 26/11): "Climate policy will either be social and just, or it won't."

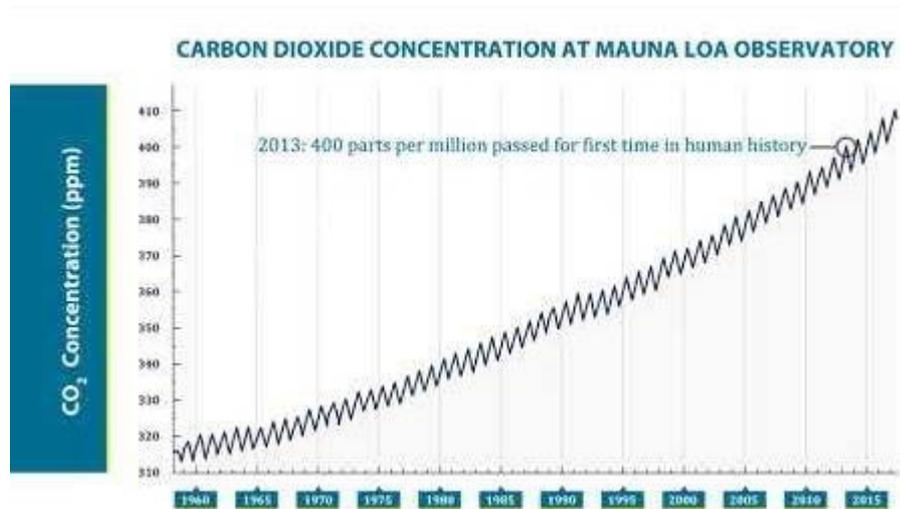
Triple injustice

Even though violence is never the answer to problems and should be condemned at all times, the outrage about this also should not be louder than the legitimate concerns of protesters. Because today, our climate policy is still unjust. Moreover, a threefold social injustice is at the basis of this policy. Firstly, not everybody carries the same responsibility in the climate change phenomenon. Oxfam calculated that the richest 10% of the world population is responsible for 50% of greenhouse gas emissions, while the poorest 50% is only responsible for 10%. Secondly, the consequences of climate change are also hugely out of proportion. Multiple European studies show that people in vulnerable socio-economic positions suffer bigger consequences from environmental pollution. Even in Belgium, they mostly live and work in more polluted areas, where their health is more severely impacted. Finally, it is always the weakest shoulders that will feel the impact of the measures the hardest. Not the upper(middle) class worker with his company car and fuel card will feel a rise in basic goods prices like fuel. No, it is the increasingly large group people who can barely make ends meet at the end of the month, for which a raise might be the final straw.

Belgium fails immensely on every front concerning climate policy, tangling somewhere at the bottom of the European class. But even worse, our climate policy enlarges the social injustices we face today, doubling the shame.

Ecology is politics

However, before climate policy can be just, it needs to be effective too. To get the best view of current progress to tackle global warming today, we should climb a large volcano in Hawaii. There, on top of the solidified lavas of Mauna Loa, towering more than 3km above civilization, high-tech instruments from the Mauna Loa Observatory have been taking daily measurements of atmospheric CO_2 concentrations since 1958. The long-term output of these measurements is a graceful curve, The Keeling Curve, showing a gradually rising trend through recent decades. In June 2018, CO_2 levels passed the milestone of 410ppm, which is the highest concentration that has been measured since the Pliocene, about three million years ago. Today, even despite the Paris agreement, concentrations continue to rise, measuring in at 411 ppm on January 7th.



Source: https://twitter.com/Keeling_curve/status/921130770445381632.

But let's remind ourselves just what the Paris agreement is. Signed in 2016, it can be seen as the first global effort among nations to tackle the huge threat of climate change. The treaty centres around three key elements. Firstly, the long-term objective to limit global warming to an average temperature increase "well below" 2°C above pre-industrial levels; while making serious efforts to pursue an increase of only 1.5°C. Basically, this means that CO₂ emissions have to be reduced to zero by 2050 the latest, and even earlier in developed countries. Secondly, action is required from all signing countries and, unlike previous agreements, these actions and targets need to strengthen through time. There is no room to go backwards. Thirdly, the Paris agreement also involves a system of transparency and accountability where countries' actions are reviewed by other nations.

However, the Keeling Curve is a reality check, because there was and is no sign of even the smallest downward glitch, despite efforts of the international community to limit greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Not after the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, not after the Copenhagen Accord of 2009, and not even after the much-praised Paris Agreement of 2015. In other words, despite the warnings from the scientific community, the climate protests, the sleepless nights and long days suffered by delegates at the annual COPs, all the treaties on GHG limitations, solar targets, etc., humanity is not even close to doing enough to make an actual difference in the battle on climate change.

The reason for this lack of progress is not difficult to find, just take a look at the annual reports of the International Energy Agency. In 2000, 80% of the global primal energy supply was provided by fossil fuels. By 2006, this was 81%. And in 2017 it was... drumroll... 81% again. Indeed, renewable power sources, led by wind and solar power, have grown tremendously in the last years. In response to the Paris agreement and the lowering cost of renewable power technology, more and more countries, businesses and investors are investing in the transition to cheap and clean, zero emission energy. In 2017 alone, about 70% of the global new power installations ran on renewable energy, with more solar PV capacity being added than that of fossil fuels and nuclear energy together. But the global economy has grown enormously too, and with it the demand for energy. In absolute terms clean energy can barely keep up with the growth, so the proportion of fossil fuels remains unchanged.

The goal to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels seems next to impossible to achieve. We've hit 1°C already, and unless GHG emissions are cut by half in the next 12 years, an 'economic and political impossibility', passing 1.5°C is a virtual certainty. And it gets worse. The current political climate and turn to the right-wing side, with a prime example in the election of President

Trump, who withdrew America from the Paris Agreement, threaten the tiny progress that has been made so far. Australia's right-wing government has hinted it might follow Trump's example in ditching Paris, while president Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil has indicated he will redouble the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, where the pace of deforestation has already increased.

Hope?

However, there also seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel. Worldwide people are taking to the streets to demand a fair action plan for the climate, for our world and the next generations. The hands of the clock are at five to twelve for both the environment and people in the most vulnerable social positions. The COP is important, but what happens out on the streets in the real world maybe even more so.



Source: <https://phys.org/news/2018-12-big-brussels-climate-cop24.html>

The figures don't lie: with each passing day of inaction, CO_2 concentrations are building up irrevocably with each year of delay. Despite decades of COPs, the fight to save the Earth's climate from collapse has still barely begun. Everybody will have to contribute if we want to make the indispensable transition to renewable energy. However, this should also not make us blind to the huge inequalities climate policies can support. We must build an sustainable ecological transition in which the strongest shoulders carry the heaviest weight, and for this we need extensive political and social changes that encompass social inequalities. Let us build bridges together, work out alternatives, and unite both battles in one movement. One movement for a social, just and ecological future. One movement for everybody's right on a dignified life.