

COP 17 Climate Change Talks Begin

“You have been negotiating my whole life – don’t tell me you need more time.”

Christina Ora, a youth delegate from the Solomon Islands, said this at the climate change talks two years ago in Copenhagen. She was addressing the conference at a plenary session. It is a brilliant statement. It perfectly represents how frustratingly slow progress on climate change negotiations have been.

Representatives from just about every nation worldwide are now gathering for the 17th Conference of the Parties (COP 17) United Nations climate change negotiations in Durban, South Africa from November 28 to December 9. It is time for progress and for words that will lead to direct action to slow and eventually stop climate change.

The world is warmer

Christina Ora is right – we are running out of time. The planet has warmed 0.8°C and continues to get hotter. Parts of the Arctic have already warmed 2°C. Greenhouse gas emissions globally continue to rise. Anywhere you look in Canada and worldwide there is evidence of climate change. The effects – once projected into the future – forcefully hit us now on a regular basis:

- **Hotter temperatures:** 2010 in Canada was the warmest on record since 1948.
- **Widespread flooding:** severe spring flooding on the Canadian prairies in 2011 prevented farmers from planting between 2.4 – 3.2 million hectares of land.
- **Loss of Arctic sea ice:** sea ice cover has declined and thinned steadily over recent decades to the point where the Arctic Ocean is forecast to be ice-free in summer as early as 2030, if not sooner.
- **Forest fires:** there has been a four-fold increase in the area of Canadian forests burned from 1960 to the end of the 1990s.
- **More frequent and more intense storms:** the atmosphere now holds more moisture due to – among other factors – greater surface water evaporation from warmer temperatures. This helps trigger more intense storms that damage infrastructure, forests, agriculture, natural and human habitats and just about anything in their path.
- **Massive economic costs:** all of the impacts mentioned above (and others) come with huge costs that will only increase year in and year out.
- **Negative impacts on water:** climate change is causing water shortages due to higher rates of water evaporation, changes in precipitation patterns, less snow coverage and increased rates of glacial melting. These changes affect water quality and quantity, which, in turn, disrupt many aspects of our lives.

CUPE members on the frontline of a warmer world

The list of impacts grows the more the planet warms. But we don't necessarily need climate scientists to tell us things are changing. CUPE members' work brings them face to face with a warming world. Municipal workers see the effects of climate change when powerful storms flood streets and wreck infrastructure. Healthcare workers see the effects when hospital emergency visits spike during intense heat waves. Energy workers see the effects when they have to repair infrastructure damaged by powerful summer storms. Water workers see the effects when fluctuating water supplies sometimes overwhelm water systems from never-before-seen heavy rain storms and when high temperatures and drought deplete water supplies.

We also witness these things as citizens, such as higher temperatures and bizarrely unseasonable weather, worse storms, strange invasive species in our gardens, forests and other green spaces, and less snow and wintry weather. We know we now live in a weird weather world that is rapidly changing for the worse.

Worse impacts in developing world

In other parts of the world, however, climate change effects are more severe than shorter winters and hotter summers. Parts of the developing world – for example many African countries – are being hit very hard by climate change. Droughts in Africa take a drastic human toll, driving people off their land in search of arable lands and causing famine and death.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has said that Africa is at the greatest risk from climate change. A global average temperature increase of 1.5°C (which is inevitable, given the trajectory of emissions) will cut crop yields in Africa by 30 per cent, making famines worse, causing major food insecurity, while contributing to economic collapses, conflict and war.

A coalition of African faith leaders wrote to COP 17 negotiators urging that a treaty be signed "to ensure the survival of coming generations."

Canada's emissions continue to rise

Meanwhile, at home, Canadian emissions continue to rise thanks in large part to the Harper government's near-complete neglect of the climate change file:

- Following Copenhagen, Canada is the only country in the world to weaken its greenhouse gas emissions reduction target. This happened because Harper turned his back on Canada's Kyoto Accord commitment and instead pledged voluntary emissions cuts under the terms of the Copenhagen Accord.

- In 2010, Conservative senators killed Bill C-311 (the only piece of climate change legislation under review in Parliament) with no debate on the bill at all, leaving a huge void in environmental legislation.
- Under Harper, Canada is meddling in climate change policies in the European Union and the United States by lobbying *against* measures that might restrict exports from the tar sands.
- Canada continues to have no plan in place to cut or regulate greenhouse gas emissions and all indications from Harper's government are that climate change will not be a priority.

This profound lack of leadership and action at the federal level has a negative effect on Canada's emissions. Canada's emission have increased from 522.93 million metric tonnes of carbon equivalent emissions in 1990 to 714.78 million metric tonnes of carbon equivalent emissions, a rise of 36.7 per cent in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 to 2008. Canadian emissions have risen to 17.32 metric tonnes per person in 2008 from 16.56 in 1990, an increase of 4.6 per cent. The overall emissions rate has increased more than the per capita rate due to an increase in the Canadian population. But the bottom line is that while Canada pledged to cut greenhouse gases six per cent from 1990 levels under the terms of the Kyoto Accord, we have seen emissions skyrocket rather than come down. This trend is why Canada is widely regarded as having one of the poorest records in the world on stopping and slowing climate change.

Canada in Durban

Internationally, Canada's reputation on climate change could not get worse. Simply put, Canada – by virtue of our federal government – is reviled for not taking action on climate change at home and for getting in the way of progress at COP negotiations.

Canada is drifting morally, as we ignore harsh climate change impacts on developing countries while favouring, principally, the interests of the domestic oil and gas industry. At the same time, the federal government does next to nothing to advance the green society and economy we need to ensure a climate-stable and sustainable future.

In Durban, if Canada is not willing to be part of the solution, it should at the very least stay on the sidelines while other more progressive and compassionate nations lead. The world needs an ambitious, equitable and binding international agreement on climate change. The evidence at home and across the globe shows that the natural and human worlds are at grave risk from climate change. Not acting now, especially after so many years of plodding negotiations, will only warm the planet further, making the Earth a more dangerous place for everyone and everything on it.