

Briefing #17: Net Zero

“Net Zero” was defined at the 2015 Climate Summit in Paris as “a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases”. So, for example, it would be OK to continue burning gas in power stations as long as all the carbon dioxide produced in the process is captured and permanently stored.



Paris COP 2015 CCO

Net Zero was an attempt to translate the temperature target of “well under a two degree rise above pre-industrial levels” into something countries could be held accountable for.

Since then, governments have rushed to announce long-term Net Zero emissions goals. The Climate Change Committee has also fully embraced the Net Zero concept – hardly surprising because the members of the Committee are appointed by the UK and Devolved Governments.

As a result of these goals billions of dollars have been invested in research and development of low-carbon technologies, all of which face massive technological, economic and land use challenges when used at scale.

The Net Zero concept emerged in 2013 in the run-up to the Paris Summit, against the background

of the collapse of the talks at Copenhagen in 2009. However well-intentioned the idea was, it’s notable that it arose among a group of 30 lawyers, diplomats, financiers, and activists, who met at Glen House, a country estate in the Scottish Borders owned by a ‘green’ investment pioneer.

The current front runner technology, which governments are pinning their hopes on, is “Carbon Capture with Storage” (CCS). This is defined as “a process in which a relatively pure stream of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from industrial and energy-related sources is separated (captured), conditioned, compressed and transported to a storage location for long-term isolation from the atmosphere”. The companies developing this technology are either the same companies which extract fossil fuels, or closely related to them financially.

CCS is an energy-hungry process and as such is not financially viable at scale for the companies experimenting with it. They are calling for government subsidies. In the US extracted carbon dioxide has been used to facilitate pumping in oil wells – a process known as “Enhanced Oil Recovery” – to close the energy gap, make CCS more financially viable, and enable the big energy companies to continue extracting fossil fuels.

On four related counts CCS is not in the interests of either people or the planet. First it requires too much energy; second it would need subsidising by taxpayers; third it would be controlled by giant corporations who already make obscene profits; and fourth it would be too slow to prevent catastrophic climate change.

In the UK at Drax Power Station – the site recently of vigorous strike action by the inadequately paid workers – biomass is being burnt and from time to time some of the emitted carbon is being captured in a process called Bioenergy and Carbon Capture (BECCS). ScotE3 Briefing 10 explains why this is a crazy idea, primarily because it would require huge areas of land to be planted up with monoculture forests.

It's clear then that both Net Zero and the technologies which underpin it are meaningless greenwash, being used to justify continued investment in fossil fuel extraction – an effective distraction from the urgent need to deliver sustained radical cuts to greenhouse gas emissions in a socially just way.

What's needed is a Real Zero, not a Net Zero. We have the technology to achieve this – we don't need new technology. This is what we need to do:

1. Phase out the extraction of fossil fuels, starting now
2. Invest in renewable energy
3. Invest in mass transport
4. Invest in insulating buildings
5. Oversee all this through a publicly owned and democratically controlled Energy Company so that the changes can be as fair as possible to workers and their communities.

About Scot E3

E3 is a group of rank-and-file trade unionists, activists, and environmental campaigners. In 2017 we made a submission to the Scottish Government's Consultation on a Scottish Energy Strategy. Since then, we have been busy producing and sharing leaflets and bulletins. We have published a ground-breaking study on the North Sea Oil tax regime by Jean Carlos Boué



March 31st, 2023 – protestors gather at the UK government offices in Edinburgh to highlight the sham that is policy on net zero.

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