

The talks are taking place in Poland against a backdrop of mounting urgency and expectations following a report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The UN's annual climate talks kick off next week in the southern Polish city of Katowice, in the country's coal heartland. The stakes are high, but — as always — it won't be plain sailing.

The two-week meeting will be another pivotal moment in the global climate negotiations and the successful implementation of the Paris Agreement. Countries are expected to finalise the accord's rulebook and start the process of a global stocktake to ramp up ambition to reduce emissions.

The talks are taking place against a backdrop of mounting urgency and expectations following a report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which warned that the world has 12 years to halve its carbon dioxide emissions if it is to keep warming to 1.5 degrees and avoid catastrophic climate change.

Spontaneous protests

In the UK, the report has become the call for action of the grassroots climate campaign Extinction Rebellion, which uses civil disobedience tactics to push the government to take meaningful action to prevent climate breakdown and aims to reach net zero emissions by 2025.

While expectations are high for countries to agree on a robust set of rules to implement the Paris Agreement, the global political context is once again testing the resilience of the UN process.

DeSmog UK takes a look at some of the issues at stake, and the forces that could hinder the global negotiation process.

Each year, the UN climate talks offer a platform for climate activists and campaigners to take to the streets and demand meaningful climate action. But this year's meeting could be quite different.

Earlier this year, DeSmog UK revealed the Polish Parliament approved a bill that banned all spontaneous protests in Katowice during the talks. The ban does not apply to demonstrations organised inside the conference centre.

Permission

The bill provides a raft of initiatives to “ensure safety and public order” and allows police to “collect, obtain, process and use information, including personal data about people registered as participants of the COP24 conference or cooperating with its organisation, without the knowledge and consent of the people involved”.

Meanwhile, the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has signed an order declaring an

ALFA alert — the first of four increasing terrorism security levels — across the entire southern province of Silesia and the city of Krakow.

The Polish border police also confirmed that Poland's borders with Germany, Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia had temporarily been restored and that the border could only be crossed in designated areas, with further checks being carried out at ports and airports. This heightened security has led climate campaigners to describe "a tense atmosphere" in the city of Katowice, days before the start of the talks.

A March for Climate has been organised in Katowice on December 8 with the permission of the local authorities and it is unclear whether other events could take place in the city centre during the conference.

Cleaner alternatives

Patryk Bialas, a newly elected independent councillor for Katowice and a long-standing climate activist, told DeSmog UK that the mood in Poland "was very bad".

"There are already a lot of police on the streets and officers are telling people to keep away of the city centre during the talks.

"There will be protests during the talks outside the conference centre in Katowice but also all around Poland but many Poles are afraid of taking part. There is a possibility protesters could face prison if they break the ban on spontaneous protest," he said.

Meanwhile, there are reports that some climate campaigners from developing countries where there are no democratic institutions have decided not to attend this year's COP24, fearing that the collection of their personal data by Polish authorities could have implications in their home countries.

Taking place in Poland's coal heartland, this year's climate talks are once again expected to provide a platform for more discussion on the future of coal. The fuel powered western countries through industrialisation but is also the dirtiest fossil fuel — meaning developing countries are being asked to largely 'leapfrog' this source of energy in favour of cleaner alternatives.

Coal interests

The choice of the city of Katowice, which is home to the EU's largest coal company Polska Grupa Górnicza, has angered some environmental campaigners who denounce Poland's reluctance to fully engage in the UN process while still being influenced by a strong domestic coal industry.

And indeed, the coal lobby is already out in force at this year's meeting.

Earlier this week, the Polish government announced that six state-owned companies, including Jastrzębska Spółka Węglowa, the European Union's largest high-quality coking

coal company, and two other coal-sector companies would sponsor this year's climate talks. In a statement, JSW said the partnership would guarantee "the company's active participation in the event and the possibility of promoting pro-ecological changes in the mining sector".

For Sébastien Duyck, a senior attorney at the Center for International Environmental Law, the news of the COP24 sponsors raised serious questions about the philosophy and intentions of the Polish Presidency during the talks.

Technology

"We need to ask ourselves what is the priority of this COP and who does it intend to serve? The pro-coal message signalled by the Polish Presidency through the talk's sponsorship sends a very contradicting and alarming message," he said.

A fortnight before the start of the talks, the Polish energy minister Krzysztof Tchórzewski published a statement defending his country's reliance on coal. A spokesman for the COP24 Polish presidency was quick to tell Climate Home News the statement did not represent the Polish government's position.

In 2017, coal represented 78 percent of Poland's energy mix. How this government infighting will translate during the talks is unclear and there are signals that the Polish government wants to ensure some progress is made during its presidency.

But strong pro-coal voices will be coming from other corners of the globe.

The US is again planning a sideshow on coal, with plans to promote nuclear energy as well as technology that allegedly burns fossil fuels more efficiently.

The event is unlikely to go unnoticed and is already on the radar of campaigners, who last year heavily disrupted the Donald Trump-backed pro-coal event.

Governments

Although there is no evidence of an alliance of coal-friendly powers around the US and Poland during the talks, observers will be watching the place pro-coal forces will take throughout the conference.

However, it's not all doom and gloom on the coal front.

Last week, Climate Home News reported that rapidly increasing EU carbon prices could see Hungary plan an exit from coal-fired power generation by 2030, a move which could shake up eastern Europe, which has traditionally been staunchly opposed to robust climate measures.

Meanwhile, an announcement is to be expected from the "Powering Past Coal Alliance", which was launched by the UK and Canada last year and aims to build a symbolic alliance of countries, states, regions and businesses committed to phasing-out coal.

The alliance, which currently has 75 members, including 28 countries, 19 sub-national governments and 28 businesses, will be holding an event during the second week of the talks.

Conflict of interest

Every year, the presence of big corporate polluters at the COP sparks vehement debate between climate campaigners arguing they should be “kicked out” of the UN process and those who argue they have their place at the negotiation table.

This year should be no exception.

Jesse Bragg, a spokesman for NGO Corporate Accountability, told DeSmog UK the issue was “likely to be on display in Poland”.

“Corporate sponsors, and direct interference in the negotiations will be rampant as big polluters attempt to lock their agenda into the rulebook,” he said.

For the past four years, civil society groups have campaigned for a “conflict of interest” policy within the UN process, which would develop a set of rules and principles and differentiate between the participation of governments and sub-national governments that represent public interests, and those who represent private interests.

South American countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia, Cuba and El Salvador have all led on the issue at the UN level. Last year, the African Group of Negotiators submitted a continent-wide position, which demands “a clear framework to address potential conflicts of interest”. Standing in the way of progress on the issue are the usual suspects led by the US and which include the EU, Norway, Australia and New Zealand.

While discussion on a conflict of interest policy is not on this year’s official agenda at the talks, debates on the issue are most likely to underpin this year’s conference.

Committee for future

One way in which this debate around conflict of interest could be revived at the talks is through a proposal rolled out by Ukraine last year as part of discussions on non-market approaches to implement the Paris Agreement.

The proposal would create a “permanent subsidiary body” known as the “Committee for Future” which would — among other things — “enhance public and private sector participation” in the UN Climate Change negotiation process.

Within civil society, there is much concern the text is a back door to corporate capture and one that would give big polluters a say in the way the Paris Agreement is implemented.

Over the last year, Ukraine has warmed up its relations with the Trump administration following a deal that has seen the country import US coal.

During last year’s talk, Ukrainian diplomats told Climate Home News the initiative received

“a positive response” from the US and that both delegations were “in permanent contact”. As part of the climate negotiations, Ukraine also operates as part of an umbrella group of negotiating bodies which include the US and other major fossil fuel exporters such as Japan, Russia, Canada, Australia and Norway.

According to Arthur Wyns from Climate Tracker, the text was proposed at last year’s talks with the intention of being brought back to the negotiation table at this COP24.

Whether Ukraine will try to take its proposal forward and what this could mean in practice for non-state stakeholders and private interests’ involvement in the negotiation is one to watch.

Greenwash

COPs are a great chance for those that want to take serious action on climate change to meet and try and make that happen. COPs are also a great chance for those that want to seem like they’re taking action on climate change to tout their wares.

After all, given the captive audience of environment journalists and climate policy wonks, what better place than a COP to greenwash your image?

Perhaps the highest-profile organisation partaking in a bit of creative marketing around their industry’s activity is the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative — a coalition of 13 of the world’s largest fossil fuel companies.

Each year, just before the COP, the OGCi puts out a statement about how committed Big Oil is to the COPs goal of tackling climate change. Generally, the announcement reaffirms the industry’s commitment to being part of the solution to tackle climate change, while falling far short of promising to stop production of fossil fuels.

Indeed, the industry generally backs a combination of massive new (government-aided) investment in technology to trap and store carbon dioxide emissions from its fossil fuel power plants, and a global carbon price — solutions that have been on the table for decades, but are economically or politically unpalatable for many countries.

Campaigners are generally unimpressed with such statements. They say that Big Oil backs solutions it knows have little chance of becoming reality, effectively entrenching the status quo, which is pushing the world towards run-away climate change.

A quick wander around the shiny stalls that pretty much any energy company worth their salt brings to COP tells you just how prevalent this kind of messaging is — Shell’s emphasis on solar over genuine soul-searching, BP’s emphasis on moving Beyond Petroleum despite doing no such thing, and Statoil’s strategic rebranding to Equinor to remove “oil” from its name but not its business model.

With the fossil fuel divestment movement gaining momentum and the oil industry

scrambling to formulate a response, it will be interesting to see how the industry defends itself this year.

Climate science deniers

As always, a fringe group of climate science deniers will be present at COP24. Every year, a small band rolls up, tries to cause a little trouble and get a headline or two before retreating back to the safety of the denier echo-chamber.

For instance, there was the time a widely discredited hereditary peer arrived in full “Monckton of Arabia” regalia and got banned from the Doha conference in 2012. And more recently when Marc Morano, a lobbyist with the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow, turned up (as he always does) wearing a Make America Great Again hat with a full-sized Trump cut-out the day after the US presidential election at the Marrakech conference in 2016.

Well, expect more of the same this year.

While President Trump’s climate science denial will be proffered as offering a veneer of legitimacy to this widely discredited group of lobbyists and PR merchants, much of their activity will continue to take place a long way from the actual negotiations.

On December 4, the Heartland Institute will host an event across the road from — but very much outside — the COP24 conference centre. At the event, the cannily named Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change (not to be confused with the UN’s scientific advisory body, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or “IPCC”) will present a new report, titled “Climate Change Reconsidered: Fossil Fuels.”

The report will claim to assess “the costs and benefits of the use of fossil fuels” by looking at research considered not to be credible by the hundreds of expert climate scientists that comprise the IPCC.

Event organiser, the Heartland Institute, is at the forefront of denying the scientific evidence for man-made climate change. It has received at least \$676,500 from ExxonMobil since 1998 but no longer discloses its funding sources.

The Union of Concerned Scientists found that “nearly 40 percent of the total funds that the Heartland Institute has received from ExxonMobil since 1998 were specifically designated for climate change projects.”

One of the main speakers will be Craig Idso, the Chairman and former President of the Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change .

The CSCDGC ranked at eight on a list of the “Dirty Dozen of Climate Change Denial” compiled by Mother Jones in 2009. According to leaked internal documents from the Heartland Institute in 2012, Idso was receiving \$11,600 a month from the Heartland

Institute. He has also worked for a range of fossil fuel outfits over the years — from Peabody, the world’s largest privately owned coal company, to the Western Fuels Association.

Also speaking at the event will be James Taylor, president of the Spark of Freedom Foundation, a senior fellow with the Heartland Institute and former managing editor (2001-2014) of the Heartland Institute publication Environment & Climate News. He also writes a regular column for Forbes magazine.

Taylor is fond of making the argument that fossil fuels remain integral to the economies of poor nations, despite a wealth of research suggesting dirty energy actually locks people into poverty.

The group already held a warm-up event in Munich last week, hosted by German group Europäisches Institut für Klima und Energie, which got precisely no media coverage.

EIKE’s slogan is “Nicht das Klima ist bedroht, sondern unsere Freiheit! Umweltschutz: Ja! Klimaschutz: Nein,” which roughly translates to “It is not the climate that is at risk, but our freedom! Environmental protection: Yes! Climate protection: No.”

In advance of the Munich event, Heartland’s Taylor said in a statement: “The scientific evidence and conclusions reported by climate scientists are far different than what the environmental left and their legacy media allies would like the public to believe.” Expect more such statements around COP.

Energy policies

Every year, the UN climate talks process gets more urgent as the remaining time to avoid catastrophic climate change runs out. And yet, in the midst of high-level negotiations and government diplomacy, there is little space for “real people’s” voices to be heard.

In many ways, there is a strong disconnect between the slow and compromising UN climate talks process and grassroots movements demanding immediate and radical solutions to tackle climate change.

As one member of the climate action movement Extinction Rebellion put it, “this is a 24-time-failed process” and one which growing numbers of climate campaigners have given up on.

And yet, expect a small delegation of Extinction Rebellion campaigners to turn up at the UN climate talks. After a fortnight of “economic swarming” in London blocking key road junctions and bridges and gluing themselves to government buildings, what these protesters have got planned at the UN level will definitely be one to follow.

Meanwhile, inside the negotiating rooms, this year’s conference is expected to debate how communities whose livelihoods have long depended on fossil fuel industries such as coal and

oil for jobs will manage a transition to a zero-carbon future without being left behind. This is the question at the heart of a debate about how to achieve just and fair transitions to net-zero societies and one which will be made a priority by the Polish presidency during the talks. But how this idea will be integrated within the talks is not straightforward. Although Poland may be keen to share stories about post-mining transformations, its coal industry still wields much influence on its energy policies and its labour market. A “social pre-COP” meeting in Katowice in August was dominated by Poland’s mining and industrial unions, who demanded thorough analysis of the costs and jobs impact of climate policies. The tension between the need for a rapid decarbonisation of society and ensuring communities continue to have employment opportunities is likely to be high during the climate talks.

While some groups might be tempted to use the key issue of “just transition” as an excuse to delay climate action, there is an urgent need from governments to start preparing this transition and ensure communities who depend on fossil fuel extraction can access work opportunities in the green economy.

Finally, this year’s climate meeting will see naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough telling people’s climate stories gathered from around the world through social media in a bid to bring the voices of millions of citizens to the UN process.

Known as “the people’s seat”, the initiative might be a symbolic gesture towards recognising the lack of voices from the frontline of climate change during the negotiations, but for many Attenborough’s celebrity voice will be far from enough to fill “the people” void.

Source: theecologist