

## **Bowing to vested interests will block progress on climate change.**

Fr. Seán McDonagh, SSC, December 4, 2008, Pozan, Poland

In the light of the dire consequences which scientists predict if the increase in the average global temperature rises above two degrees Celsius, one would expect that every sector in society would support initiatives to reduce carbon emissions.

Regrettably, this is not the case as was demonstrated conclusively on December 1, 2008, when the EU negotiated a deal with the automobile industry on the very day that the UN Conference on climate change opened here in Poznan. It is ironic that it only required car manufacturers to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in their new cars by 18% by 2015, not 2012 as originally proposed by the European Commission as part of a Europe-wide commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. Furthermore, the introduction process is going to be staggered over three years, with 66% of cars mandated to reach that target by 2012, 75% by 2013, 80% by 2014 and 100% by 2015.

The car makers also won on another front. The penalties faced by their companies will be lighter than originally planned. Fines for companies exceeding the target that were to have kicked in at €20 have been reduced to €5. However, the fines could rise, as originally suggested to €95 per gram/kilometer, if a car model's emissions are 4 grams higher than set.

Both at the UN Climate Conference in Bali in 2007, and even here in Poland, the EU likes to portray itself as the most progressive group of wealthy countries when it comes to dealing with climate change. Unfortunately, the EU also serves the vested interests of others, such as the automobile manufacturers. The provisional deal, which was reached behind closed doors, needs to be approved by the European Parliament and all of the 27 member countries, before it becomes law.

In the light of its financial and political clout in Germany, France and Italy, the car industry expects that the deal will be passed without any major changes. In Germany, car makers BMW and Mercedes fought hard to be allowed to produce their luxury line of gas-guzzling vehicles until 2014. Italy won similar concessions for Fiat and for Maserati and Ferrari sports cars, as did the French for Renault. The British also got a special deal for their luxury cars, Aston Martin and Jaguar. Smaller niche car manufacturers that produce only high emission vehicles, such as the UK's Jaguar and Land Rover, will be able to ask for special "derogations" exceeding the mandatory targets as long as they reduce emissions by 25%.

Environmentalists criticized the deal, claiming that it was tailored to the needs of the car industry which has put profits before energy conservation and climate change. Environmentalists had managed to persuade European lawmakers to throw out previous compromises which they deemed were too soft on the car industry. According to Franziska Achterberg, a Greenpeace campaigner on climate change, in the recent round of negotiation, "the car industry has been driving the negotiation all along and EU politicians have been happy to sit in the passenger seats."

On this occasion, short-term economic arguments took precedence over long-term environmental ones. The financial argument claimed that the slump in year-on-year car sales was affecting jobs. Finally, it was claimed by the industry that the technology needed to reduce emissions could add as much as €1,300 to the price of an average European-built car. But, as the British Liberal Member of Parliament Chris Davies points out, that economic calculus is stacked in favor of companies, which should have delivered more efficient engines a decade ago, rather than helping the consumer. "Tough targets would have led to lowering driving costs, but the consumer seems to have been largely forgotten."

The other troubling factor is that, regardless of all the fine talk about investing in Green technology, when difficult circumstance arise, countries revert back to supporting their carbon-dependent industries. This does not bode well for a carbon-free future.

Friends of the Earth International, "Climate Change: Voices from Communities Affected by Climate Change," November 2007. pages 24 to 27.: