

Toronto event targets tar sands criminals

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The historic confrontation now shaping up over plans by Enbridge Corp. to build a new pipeline across the Canadian Rockies to export dirty tar-sands oil was discussed at a protest meeting in Toronto, February 16. The meeting, attended by almost 100 activists, was organized by Toronto Bolivia Solidarity and Common Frontiers around the theme, "Stop Canada's Environmental Injustice: Building for the Future."

The lands of eighty First Nations block Enbridge's pipeline plans, said Ben Powless, an activist in the Indigenous Environmental Network. "As far as we're concerned, this project is not going anywhere. And with thousands of activists involved, we won against the Keystone project," which was to ship tar sands oil to Texas.

Canada - colossal fossil

First Nations in British Columbia have been crowding environmental hearings and demonstrating along with hundreds of supporters against the Enbridge pipeline venture. But the Canadian government, headed by Stephen Harper, is determined to push the pipeline through Canada's most ecologically sensitive lands come what may.

At the Durban governmental conference, Powless noted, Canada was notorious as the "colossal fossil" pushing for more of the carbon emissions responsible for climate change. "It was the worst of all, and won a special award" for crimes against the environment.

"Close to the tar sands [in Alberta], it's like a war zone. Air cannon on all sides fire to scare away the birds. There is a constant rumbling of machinery crossing the landscape. Gigantic trucks run 24 hours a day holding 400 tons each trip, in a constant war with Mother Earth. They scrape away the land, hundreds of feet deep," Powless said.

Giant machines "pump high-pressure steam, using more energy than the extracted oil releases." Tar sands extraction poisons the land of First Nations in the region. "The atmosphere makes you sick; indigenous children are born with respiratory illnesses," Powless said.

"Often they cannot hunt or fish because the animals are gone or are too sick and deformed. And they depend for subsistence on hunting and fishing." For First Nations, "the legacy of our forefathers and our ability to transmit culture are compromised."

First Nations in the lead

First Nations are "all on the front lines" of resistance to tar sands, Powless said. "I was protesting in front of the White House" against the Enbridge Keystone pipeline project, "and indigenous people getting arrested there said we have to disrupt their system and shut down the tar sands."

Dave Vasey of Environmental Justice Toronto told meeting participants that we have a major pipeline fight close at hand, in Sarnia. "Enbridge wants to build a pumping station so they can process more tar sands bitumen [asphalt] there."

Ron Plain of the Ammjiwnaang First Nation, south of Sarnia, reported on his people's efforts to combat chemical and tar sands pollution.

Vasey called on activists to protest at the Enbridge Annual General Meeting in Toronto May 18.

Andrea Peloso of Code Pink voiced the feeling of the meeting: "Support our First Nations in fighting the Keystone, Northern Gateway, and Kinder Morgan" pipeline projects.

Harper claims the tar sands provide "ethical oil," Vasey said. But tar sands production is "based on perpetual war in the Mideast, and Canada's role as the main supplier of the world's main warmaker."

"Oil companies say they produce the energy we need," said Peloso. "The Pentagon uses five times as much oil as the U.S. people. War is the biggest world polluter. The war makers use this energy to undermine our rights and democracy."

'Green Economy' menace

Brent Patterson of the Council of Canadians, presenting an outline of council activities in the coming months, said the Council will be part of the Rio+20 protests. "We're focusing on the 'Green Economy' program, which aims to expand capitalism in its current state of crisis by commodification of nature."

Raul Burbano of Common Frontiers, just returned from an international conference of social activists in Porto Alegre, Brazil, elaborated on the "Green Economy" menace, which "would be devastating for communities of the South." The "Green Economy" offers a "nice sounding general document," he said, "but underneath it is a sinister policy to be imposed on the world that has nothing to do with the environment," he said.

"Nature is to be commoditized; even the forests and cycles of nature like pollination," Burbano said. Regulatory bodies and the UN will protect investments by large corporations" - trillions of dollars spent to "preserve the growth model and the present distribution of wealth and power ... and provide the next boost for the capitalist economy."

Burbano invited participants to join the protest activities at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, known as Rio+20, to be held in Brazil in June. "It's not that the conference is so great," he said, "but our activities there are a way to challenge their policies."

Tar sands challenge

Speakers from the audience tried both to explain specific environmental projects and to identify overriding goals for the movement. Suzanne Weiss of Toronto Bolivia Solidarity spoke for many participants, insisting, "We have to focus on the tar sands, the most threatening thing to the world. We have to unite the movement against the tar sands." She proposed inviting a leader of the indigenous west-coast anti-pipeline protests to head up a Toronto rally on this issue.

Dave Vasey outlined an ambitious plan of protests at major corporate events in the Toronto area this spring, plus a major conference on Canada's mining injustice on May 5-6.

John Dillon of KAIROS and several audience members presented "Ball of Yarn," a popular-education project with a climate justice theme.

Climate justice renewal

The February 16 meeting took only the first steps toward unifying a fragmented environmental movement around common projects.

The movement against global warming in Canada was dealt a sharp defeat in December 2009, when hopes for governmental action were dashed at the Copenhagen climate change conference. Environmental movements in the Global South have pressed forward, notably at the 2010 Cochabamba conference, but this has not been enough to reverse a downward trend in activity here.

There are now signs, however, that the tar sands controversy is helping to reinvigorate the movement. Full exploitation of Canada's tar sands, to which the Harper government is pledged, would be a deadly blow to efforts to rein in carbon emissions.

Stopping the pipeline construction plans provides activists with a tangible goal, which is widely supported. Leadership from indigenous peoples has spearheaded an effective movement, which has won an important victory in the United States and gained ground in Canada's western provinces.

The challenge is now to build this movement into an effective force across the country.

John Riddell

For two other accounts of the Toronto meeting, see:

"Indigenous Leadership Vital to Stopping Tar Sands and Pipelines," by Erika Del Carmen Fuchs - <http://www.mediacoop.ca/blog/lacsn/>

"Movement Report Back: Environmental Justice and Solidarity," by Megan Kinch - <http://lacsn.weebly.com/whats-new--lo-actual.html>

For further information:

Toronto Bolivia Solidarity - <http://t.grupoapoyo.org/>

P.S.

* From <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/02/21/toronto-event-targets-tar-sands-criminals/>