

Interview

Mobilizing against tar sands pipelines in Ontario (Canada)

Thursday 14 February 2013, by [RIDDELL John](#), [SERNATINGER Andrew](#) (Date first published: 22 January 2013).

The following interview with John Riddell was conducted by Andrew Sernatinger, an activist and journalist based in Madison, Wisconsin.

John Riddell - Can you explain what's happening in Canada with the tar sands pipelines, what they are, and what they're going to do?

Andrew Sernatinger - It really starts with Canada's rulers. They have a dream that Canada is going to become the new world oil superpower. The oil that is locked up in Canada's tar sands is greater in quantity than all the conventional oil reserves in the world put together. The tar sands could make Canada a rival to Saudi Arabia on the world oil market.

Now this is a wonderful dream for them. The reality for the rest of us is grim. What are tar sands? Tar mixed with sand that has the constituency of a very thick mud. What's required to extract the tar is boiling the mud, using a huge amount of energy and creating enormous pollution of the tar sands environment, which stretches over a large part of Alberta.

In addition to the pollution at the extraction site, and the associated ruination of the Indigenous lands, cancer and all the rest you can imagine, there is a problem of carbon emissions, which are three times higher than those from extraction of other kinds of oil. Given the quantity of the stuff, the implications for the world's climate if the tar sands were fully exploited would be disastrous, both in terms of emissions and of forestalling the option of developing climate-friendly energy resources. So there is an urgent need to bring the tar sands under control, which is widely felt in the Canadian population.

From the point of view of the rulers, their problem is that their tar sands product has to be exported. It's shipped out in the form of something called "diluted bitumen", or dilbit for short, which is the tar diluted by a toxic chemicals and then run through a pipeline.

Where to send it? Think of Alberta on the map: dilbit could go west, south, east, or perhaps in the future even north, given that global warming is melting the ice in the Arctic Ocean. Their plans to send bitumen west have been frustrated [to date - NSW] by a very successful resistance movement in British Columbia; so they're not sure they can do that. And as you know the plans to send it south through the Keystone Pipeline have faced active opposition in the United States and also the fact that demand for Canadian oil in the U.S. is declining [although the Canadian federal government and provincial governments are pressing hard for Obama to approve Keystone - NSW] .

And so the oil companies want to send the tar sands product east, through the settled heart of Ontario, Quebec, and New England, violating many Indigenous land claims in the process. The line that they are proposing to use to send the tar sands is called Line 9, owned by Enbridge Corp. The line already exists. Enbridge wants to reverse its flow and reequip it to transport the tar sands. Their plan has produced alarm and resistance, and it's in that context that I and my colleagues set out to build a teach-in around the tar sands problem in Ontario.

Can you explain what's being proposed now by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper? What's different from the past?

Oil has been pumped through Line 9 before; it's an old pipeline that is now unused. But diluted bitumen is different from the lighter petroleum pumped before. It's like pushing heated sandpaper through the pipe - an old pipe that may have suffered degradation. We had a very serious spill in 2010 in Kalamazoo, Michigan, under identical circumstances of shipping bitumen through an old pipeline. The environmental damage to the area of that spill has still not been repaired; the technology to clean up a spill of diluted bitumen is still not developed.

Pumping bitumen through Ontario will likely produce a spill at some time. There is an environmental review process in Canada, but the government has moved to take the teeth out of it.

Of course, Enbridge has not conceded that they plan to run tar sands oil through this pipeline. But they have proposed this in the past; their official application would permit them to do it; and there is no other convincing reason for them to go to all this trouble.

Another factor is Indigenous rights. Indigenous peoples, the First Nations, have been particularly alert regarding environmental problems. They are also in a different legal situation since their legal relation to Canada is by treaty, which gives them legal leverage to contest what is forwarded through their territory.

So let's talk about that action in November and the movement response. You helped organize a conference called, "The Tar Sands Come to Ontario: No Line 9," which brought in about 400 people for an all-day teach-in with workshops. Can you talk about that conference, what went into it and why was it such a success?

People had information about the tar sands pipeline movement in the United States and the West Coast. Our job was to inform people about the threat in Ontario. We organized a broad ad-hoc committee and invited a prominent leader of the Indigenous movement in British Columbia, Art Sterritt, to be a keynote speaker. We set about contacting and bringing in anybody and any group involved in the environmental movement in Toronto, along with our Indigenous allies in Southwest Ontario.

We had a day-long conference against Line 9 and for Indigenous land rights. It was diverse in the political and social currents involved and in the topics discussed. We linked up with our Indigenous allies: four of our five keynote speakers came from First Nations. It was a great getting-acquainted session, getting acquainted with the danger and with each other.

The event convinced people that there was a basis to build a movement around this in Toronto, and that's what we've been working on since.

As a result of that, has there been some kind of coalition or united front against the tar sands? What does the formation of the movement look like?

There are a great many environmental groups in and around Toronto, and they have no tradition of

joint action. So the conference did not take decisions; it awakened awareness.

The conference gave a boost to various kinds of No Line 9 initiatives, I'm involved in one myself to build a neighbourhood committee where I live. We're also having a meeting for all groups involved in Line 9 activity in Toronto to talk about how to coordinate our activities more effectively. There is also a Line 9 day of action on January 26, and we'll be participating in that. Things are now moving forward within a coordinated framework, and that is an enormous gain.

What is the movement doing or considering doing to stop Line 9?

Let me talk a little about the First Nations involvement in this and then answer your question. We had two speakers at our conference from the Haudenosaunee (sometimes called Iroquois) people who live close to Toronto, and also one from the Aamjiwnaang First Nation near Sarnia, which is the main center of tar sands refining. Both of them are immediately affected by the tar sands plan for Ontario.

In addition to the parcels of land, which they have been allocated by the colonizing power, these peoples make broader claims to stewardship over the land in which they have lived for centuries. The Haudenosaunee claim stewardship over land granted to them but then stolen by the colonizers. They ask that development in this area be negotiated with them, and to some degree they have been able to establish this.

With respect to Line 9, Aaron Detlor, speaking for the Haudenosaunee Development Institute, told us that they were considering issuing a cease and desist order on Line 9. That is, the Haudenosaunee as a sovereign people living within Canada's borders would say, "We are not going to permit this to go ahead." And then he asked us, "If we order such a cease and desist order, what will you do to back this up and rally support around it and help make it effective?"

That is how it's been done in British Columbia. An initiative to stop the tar sands pipeline there, launched by an alliance of Indigenous peoples, now enjoys support from the majority of British Columbia's population. It may be that such an alliance with Indigenous forces can make our challenge in Ontario effective.

Many First Nations point out that they stand outside the framework of Canada's law: their relationship with Canada is through treaties. In BC there are very few treaties and so things need to be negotiated out government to government. Sovereignty is a radical stand that has won sympathy and also a degree of judicial support. Left activists in Canada support Indigenous peoples' claim to sovereignty.

The issue can also be approached municipally. Line 9 goes right through Toronto. The city government has little leverage to stop this; natural resources are not administered democratically. Still, City Hall has moral authority.

So we are entering a process of building a popular movement. In the process, we will do broad education around the underlying issues of climate change and our relationship to nature. If broad enough forces can be brought in, we may be able to win the Line 9 fight.

One thing is clear: neither Indigenous people nor the Left can do this alone. It takes a broad alliance and an appeal to the population.

Could you talk about the present explosion of the Indigenous youth movement? It's kind of an "Un-Occupy" movement that's been calling itself "Idle No More." Could you explain where this all fits in?

Idle No More is a movement of Indigenous people across Canada that burst into life late last year. Its focus is “Indigenous sovereignty to protect water, air, land, and all creation for future generations.” It protests Canadian government legislation threatening treaty rights. It has taken the form of actions, protests, and demonstrations across the country, often through blockades of railways or highways.

Underlying the protests is a long pattern of colonial and racist disregard for Indigenous needs. In my view, people in First Nations territory are essentially part of the Global South – their standard of living is a third or less of that for Canada as a whole. First Nations are routinely deprived of clean water, safe housing, educational and job opportunities, and so on. The federal government holds First Nations in tutelage and rides roughshod over their sovereign rights.

Recently, the government has arbitrarily moved to undermine Indigenous rights to question and to negotiate the development of natural resources in and around their territories.

The Idle No More movement challenges all that. It has thrown Canada into a political crisis. I’ll give you an example: we had a wonderful young First Nations organizer, Vanessa Gray, speak at our tar sands event in November about organizing among young people in the Aamjiwnaang community near Sarnia. She then went back and, with her friends, launched the Idle No More movement in her community. A blockade was set up across a rail line exporting petroleum products across their territory. This blockade held firm for thirteen days, getting national publicity; the municipal administration and police felt unable to stop it. Finally, there was a negotiated end to the blockade, and then another blockade was set up over the bridge going into the United States.

The success of these actions shows that the authorities are not just dealing with a small, isolated First Nation. They’re up against a big movement with support broad enough to shake the government.

The environmental dimension of Idle No More ties in directly with the Line 9 battle; Indigenous activists are insisting on their right to stop such irresponsible and dangerous extractive projects on their lands.

Here in the United States and especially where I live in Wisconsin, it seems like a lot of these new pipelines, mines and drills are being sold as providing jobs and boosting the economy through the crisis. Is that an issue in Canada, and, if so, how do you guys respond to that?

Working people have mixed feelings about oil extraction, and so do many Indigenous people. Many very poor workers, including Indigenous people, travel a long way to work in the tar sands.

But oil industry workers are also victims of the tar sands. They are harmed by the pollution, disease, cancer, the hardship of their jobs, the exploitation and the denial of rights. An increasing number of oil workers are essentially indentured labourers brought in from outside the country. They have no right to join unions, no right to bargain with employers – even as individuals, they have no right to live with their families or to settle in Canada.

We think oil workers deserve better than this. That is the meaning of climate justice: we’re working not only for the world environment but also for the people who live in it, especially those who are oppressed by imperialism and the oil barons.

All workers share an interest in human survival. It’s an issue of survival over profits. That makes it what Marxists call a class question – where workers’ interests are counterposed to those of the

employing class. It's part of the workers' struggle against exploitation and degradation by capitalism as a whole. Many unions have been attentive to these issues, and there are good aspects to their positions. There are also serious inadequacies. On the whole the unions affirm that social and environmental needs should take priority over oil industry profits.

In that framework, the oil workers' union in Canada offered to send their president to the anti-Line 9 conference on November 17. We had a panel on unionized and migrant workers, dealing with these two groups of workers together. And the Ontario Federation of Labour, with 700,000 members, endorsed our event. They have asked for an anti-Line 9 speaker at a big labour rally January 26. We have found that oil extraction is a question where a dialogue and alliances are possible with workers' organizations.

In the past socialists have had some difficulty interacting with and understanding indigenism. Do you have any thoughts about that? Does this come up in the tar sands work? Do you feel like there are any challenges to socialists, things that need to change in our worldview?

Many organized socialists seem to have a problem with environmental action in general. Few were involved in our action on November 17, and this deprived us of experienced political activists who could have affected the outcome of this event.

With regard to indigeneity, there's increasing understanding on the Left of the importance of the Indigenous struggles in Canada and internationally. As we work with Indigenous activists, we learn that their traditional world outlook, expressed through this activism, has a lot of resonance with core beliefs of Marxism. Note the work of John Bellamy Foster on Marx's ecology, for example, and compare this with what you hear from Evo Morales [1], the President of Bolivia. There's a lot of similarity.

The way that I've heard my Indigenous friends explain the human relationship with the natural world is that it's not one of "conquering nature" or "extracting wealth" but of oneness, a totality within which there are two-way interrelationships between what we do and how the natural world responds. This outlook could perhaps be called "dialectical materialism." It's worth reviewing Marx's thoughts on the environment and on Indigenous societies: he was alert to these considerations. (See Kevin Anderson's book *Marx at the Margins*). This is a field that socialists can investigate with great profit.

Some resources:

Dave Vasey, Sakura Saunders, and Sonia Grant have written up basic facts on Line 9:
<http://rabble.ca/news/2012/09/enbridge-line-9-other-other-pipeline>

Many ideas discussed in this interview can be best found at Climate and Capitalism:
<http://climateandcapitalism.com/>.

P.S.

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* John Riddell is a member of Toronto Bolivia Solidarity, the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly, and an organizer of the conference "Tar Sands Come to Ontario: Stop Line 9," held November 17, 2012. He's been active in the socialist movement in several countries since the early 1960s. He's also a translator of several documentary books on the Communist International, the latest of which is *Toward the United Front*. His website is johnriddell.wordpress.com

Footnotes

[1] <http://t.grupoapoyo.org/>