

# Canada: Street-level organizing against tar sands threat

Thursday 28 March 2013, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 27 March 2013).

I've spent time recently at literature tables on streets here in Toronto's East End explaining the tar sands threat to neighbours for whom this topic is quite new. I meet every conceivable response, from tar sands enthusiasm to determined opposition.

Let me explain how this developed.

The challenge in engaging with climate change is to find ways to relate the overall global crisis to immediate, specific issues that visibly affect people's quality of life and security.

In North America, such a link has been forged during the last few years around the issue of tar sands pipelines. Canada's tar sands are an environmental disaster both when extracted and when burned off as fuel. The biggest protests, however, have focused on the pipelines that take tar sands oil to market. Projected tar sands pipelines across British Columbia (Northern Gateway, Kinder Morgan) and the U.S. (Keystone XL) have run into massive opposition, and it is far from certain that the oil companies can force these pipelines through.

With the western and southern routes in trouble, oil companies are pushing plans to ship tar sands eastward to the Atlantic, including through an existing Enbridge conduit, called "Line 9." [1] This pipeline runs through highly populated areas from Sarnia, Ontario, to Montreal. There has been almost no mention of this project in the major media, but as word gets around, concern has grown.

This concern is expressed on two levels.

- First, a tar sands pipeline rupture could spread toxic gases through heavily populated areas and also poison water supplies. It represents a threat to residents' security that many take very personally.
- Second, the present massive expansion of tar sands extraction and shipment poses the deeper issue: what kind of energy future do we want: one that destroys the environment and ultimately threatens human society, or one compatible with social and ecological sustainability?

Last November, I helped organize a day-long teach-in on Line 9 here in Toronto, which drew close to 400 participants [2]. Afterwards, many participants moved to set up community-based committees to sound the alarm outside the radical Left, among working people in general. So far, there are six such committees in and around Toronto, plus a coordinating committee uniting about a couple of dozen No Line 9 groups.

As a socialist, my first responsibility with regard to the tar sands is not to insist on socialism as the only solution but to help build a campaign that can draw in a broad range of working people and enable them to confront the government and corporate barons on this issue. Marxists call this building a campaign along class-struggle lines.

I'm a member of East End Against Line 9. We have contacted a wide range of political, religious, and

ecological groups in our district, and we set up tables, hand out literature, circulate petitions, and build our mailing list. We have called a public meeting on Sunday, April 7 (2 pm, at East York Civic Centre, Coxwell and Mortimer, Toronto). Our featured speaker is Ron Plain, an indigenous activist from Sarnia who is facing a legal suit for his role in Idle No More protests for environmental justice and indigenous sovereignty.

We persuaded our local community newspaper to publish an article by me on our campaign. It's a short item, but it gives a bit of the flavour of our efforts. Here it is, as edited by *Beach Metro* [3], and with their headline.

## **Enbridge pipeline would have effect on all of Toronto**

(From the March 19, 2013 issue)

**By John Riddell. Beach residents have joined in a committee to oppose a plan for a tar sands pipeline running across Toronto.**

Toronto city council has already sounded the alarm, voting unanimously on Feb. 22 to get the facts on Enbridge Inc.'s proposal to equip its 'Line 9' pipeline to carry tar sands oil across the city. Toronto will intervene later this year in the National Energy Board hearings on Enbridge's Line 9 application.

The East End Against Line 9 committee, formed in February by Beach and other eastern Toronto residents, has called a public meeting to consider the dangers posed by Enbridge's project and discuss how we can make our voices heard.

The meeting will be held at East York Civic Centre (Coxwell and Mortimer) at 2 p.m. on Sunday, April 7.

Tar sands pipelines carry hot and pressurized bitumen (tar sands) diluted by toxic chemicals. The corrosive mixture could rupture Enbridge's 37-year-old Line 9.

Line 9 crosses every major Toronto waterway, including the Don and Rouge rivers. "If a pipeline bursts, oil could be carried down to the lake, polluting the source of our drinking water," says Beach resident Sabrina Bowman, climate campaign co-ordinator of Environmental Defence.

A City of Toronto report notes that a pipeline break "is a potential threat to City of Toronto water treatment plant intakes" (Toronto Star, Feb. 23).

"In case of a spill," Bowman adds, "the diluting condensate evaporates, creating a toxic cloud whose effects include rashes, headaches, and long-term carcinogenic effects."

A similar tar sands pipeline in Michigan ruptured in 2010. A waterway was fouled for 40 km. Toxic fumes could be smelled up to 50 km away. Health providers reported 145 residents with symptoms associated with the spill (National Nurses United, Feb. 5, 2013). More than 7,000 people have joined a class action lawsuit against Enbridge (testimony at Enbridge hearings in Vancouver).

And that was in a sparsely settled rural area. Toronto's 2.8 million people, by contrast, all live within 20 km of Line 9.

"The Line 9 project is tied to a bigger conversation about Canada's energy future," Sabrina Bowman explains. "The tar sands are Canada's biggest source of greenhouse gases, and that has major

implications for climate change. Mining the tar sands is tremendously damaging.”

And all signs are that Line 9 tar sands will be pumped through the city for export abroad, Bowman says. “It adds nothing to Canada’s energy security. The risks are huge – for little reward.”

Canada’s federal government will make the final decision on whether to approve the Line 9 project, Bowman says. “There is no channel for citizen input except through the National Energy Board, where you have to be approved to get the right to make a comment.”

East End Against Line 9 (eastendnotar gmail.com) aims to make sure the voice of Beach area and nearby residents will be heard by the National Energy Board and the federal government.

**John Riddell**

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**P.S.**

\* March 27, 2013l:

<http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/street-level-organizing-against-tar-sands-threat/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See “Ethical Enbridge?”:

<http://rabble.ca/news/2013/01/mcethicaltm-enbridge-line-9-and-tar-sands-gigaproject>

[2] See on ESSF (article 27155), [Toronto conference lays basis for tar sands pipeline challenge](#).

[3] <http://www.beachmetro.com/bottom-right-items/letters-to-the-editor/>