

Resisting the tar sands: An ecosocialist approach

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Contents

- [Tar sands speed climate \(...\)](#)
 - [Building a movement](#)
 - [Independent, broad, militant](#)
 - [Neighbourhood committee](#)
 - [Tar sands and system change](#)
-

Canada's Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, has a dream. If he has his way Canada will be the new world oil superpower – a rival to Saudi Arabia. It's a wonderful dream for Harper and Canada's profiteers, but the reality for the rest of humankind is grim. Here in Toronto we are gaining experience in resisting this project.

What are the tar sands? They are a mixture of tar and sand that must be boiled to extract the tarry oil, called bitumen. The process of extraction, which covers a large part of Alberta, destroys and poisons the surroundings, causing cancer and many other illnesses. Indigenous peoples who live on this land and have treasured its bounty, denounce corporations and government for this destruction.

Tar sands speed climate disaster

Tar sands generate more carbon emissions than any other form of oil. If fully exploited, they spell climate disaster.

But Harper's tar sands scheme has a problem – getting the product to market.

Tar sands pipelines are notoriously prone to ruptures and spills, as in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2010, in Mayflower, Arkansas this year, and again this June in Alberta, where they mine the tar sands.

Piped bitumen is toxic, emitting noxious gases. When it spills, it poisons water supplies – rivers and lakes – and, potentially, the oceans. There is no known way of fully cleaning up the mess.

But more is involved. Tar sands pipelines build economic dependency on a product that is destructing the planet. They block the way to a sustainable green energy future. No wonder that all the tar sands pipeline proposals have met major opposition.

Building a movement

Proposed tar sands pipelines through British Columbia to the Pacific have been met by formidable resistance, initiated by the Indigenous peoples there. One of the proposed pipelines, called Northern Gateway, is now stalled by the immense popular outcry in B.C.

As you know, the oil barons also hope to send the tar sands south through the Keystone Pipeline to the Gulf. That project has been delayed by considerable resistance in the United States, as with the recent demonstration of 40,000 in Washington, D.C. – and the outcome is uncertain

The oil companies have now launched yet another project: to send the tar sands east, through a pipeline called Line 9 running through the settled heart of Ontario, Quebec, and likely New England, violating many Indigenous land rights in the process.

Quebec is hostile territory for the oil barons. A popular movement has stalled fracking in the populated part of the province. Fracking uses enormous amounts of water to break the rocks to extract gas and oil. The largest demonstration in Canada's history – 300,000 participants – took place in Montreal on Earth Day 2012. Quebeckers tend to view tar sands oil as foreign and don't see why they should prefer it to the oil they already receive from Venezuela or Angola.

I've been involved in building the movement against Line 9 in Ontario. We are the newest and smallest of the anti-tar sands movements, but we're picking up speed. Our movement in Toronto was kicked off by a teach-in last November initiated by Toronto Bolivia Solidarity, in which I am active.

Four hundred people attended; four of our five featured speakers were indigenous. Why did we make that choice? Because indigenous peoples, in Canada and elsewhere, have been the first victims and first opponents of environmental destruction. In fact capitalism's war on the environment is itself racist in character, striking hardest at racialized peoples, the poor, and the dispossessed.

Independent, broad, militant

At the November teach-in, the talk by Art Sterritt [[1](#)], a leader of the Indigenous nations that launched the British Columbia pipeline fight, made two points that we should bear in mind.

First, the Indigenous peoples cannot win fighting alone – neither can the Left. It takes a broad alliance and an appeal to the whole population – workers, farmers, middle class, students, immigrants, the religious communities, and trade unions. This is a movement that needs the support of millions in order to overpower the government.

In British Columbia this alliance embraced First Nations, unions, environmental organisations, social movements, municipalities. It's a movement that has won support from a clear majority of the population and is prepared if necessary to defy the bulldozers.

Second, Sterritt said we have to make these pipelines a personal issue. By that he meant that we must convince people that they have a personal stake in the outcome – in the case of British Columbia, a stake in the health of the great rainforests and heavily indented coastal inlets through which the bitumen is to be transported.

We must show people that the outcome will affect the quality of life for them, their children, and their grandchildren.

We want this movement to be:

- Independent of the capitalists, their politicians and their foundations.
- Broadly based among working people.
- Aware of the underlying stakes for climate change.
- Determined to block an arrogant government.

Whether or not we win this fight, it is a big step to building an effective movement against capitalist environmental destruction and for system change.

In Toronto, there are many environmental groups, but no tradition of united action. We have formed a coordinating committee representing 25 diverse groups to discuss actions and plans against Line 9. This unity in itself is a big step forward. We have a single demand, Stop Line 9, and a broader educational agenda to oppose the tar sands and demand an effective response to climate change: climate justice.

Neighbourhood committee

We have also formed five neighbourhood committees. I'm involved in one in the east end of Toronto where I live. This is a residential district, distant from the universities, with a socially mixed population. Most people have little or no knowledge of Line 9. We set up tables at street corners, attend community events, canvass door-to-door, and offer lawn signs to make this issue visible.

We held a neighbourhood meeting with 150 participants. Our planning meetings usually attract over 20 participants. We begin these meetings with an educational to raise the level of understanding. We appreciate everyone's talents and try to utilize them. At present, we have four sub-committees in which our members formulate policy and organize our work:

- *Media*: formulating statements, newspaper articles, and leaflets.
- *Educational*: planning internal and public events.
- *Street activities*: door-to-door canvassing, street-corner tabling, farmers' markets.
- *Outreach*: to schools and community groups.

Our committee includes members of three major political parties, several activists from faith groups, and a few socialists, of which I am one.

We are committed to defense of Indigenous peoples and their land rights and have raised several thousand dollars to support a frame-up Indigenous activist.

Most recently, a blockade and occupation shut down construction at the Enbridge Westover terminal near Toronto. A group of young people, with Indigenous participation, decided to stop Enbridge Corp.'s preparations to reverse and expand Line 9. Police closed it down after about ten days. However, it was a significant challenge to Enbridge and the government's plans.

We have a brochure which draws attention to the position on Line 9 of the National Farmers Union which we are distributing at farmers markets.

We also have several Indigenous women in our East End Against Line 9. They helped us design a leaflet focused on the defending water resources threatened by Line 9 – a good example of how to make the issue “personal.”

I help organize the canvassing, leafleting, community outreach. Right now our main focus is on lawn signs. Each lawn sign carries our email address, and that produces results.

Tar sands and system change

Many hear about Line 9 first through us. They are generally eager to learn more. Most people we meet have heard a little about the tar sands. A few are strident tar sands enthusiasts. They say, “It means jobs.”

Some are hesitant and say, “They are going to do what they please anyway,” meaning the government and corporations. I say, “Should we take it lying down?” That gets a positive response.

Some left politicians and funded advocacy groups are hesitant to make the link between Line 9, the tar sands, and climate change. But on the streets and going door-to-door, we find that people are quick to see these connections. We tell the truth about climate change and its implications, and this gets a hearing.

Often we are asked, “What is the alternative to tar sands?” Here is a challenge we must not evade. That’s why we invited Ian Angus of Climate and Capitalism to speak at our big April event. Our next public meeting in July is on the topic of alternatives. It gives socialist participants in the movement a chance to talk about the need for a different kind of society.

As socialists, we have much to give and much to learn. We know that the only answer to climate change is system change, which to me means socialism. But to most people, that seems remote or impossible. Movements for climate justice bring the need for system change to the fore, take steps toward building the working-class networks that can make it happen.

There are people who are already convinced of this. However, it is only through our consistent organizing that we can reach the many. An obdurate government focused on the drive for profits will help us convince the majority that there is no alternative but system change.

We know this is hard work, and it will take time to build this movement. But in the past year we have done a lot and learned a lot. We feel we are on the right road.

We don’t know if we can stop Line 9. But we are confident we are building a movement that can help us advance toward the system change we so urgently need.

Suzanne Weiss

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2013/07/13/resisting-the-tar-sands-an-ecosocialist-approach/>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 29214), [Standing up to Big Oil: How Coastal First Nations built tar sands pipeline resistance](#).