

USA, Canada: Keystone and Humanity's Fate

Saturday 4 May 2013, by [Against the Current](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2013).

WITH DECISION DAY looming for the Keystone XL pipeline, what's really at stake for climate change, for human civilization, and for the environmental movement that's fighting to save the future? That tar sands development may determine "game over for the climate," in the phrase of NASA scientist and climate researcher James Hansen, is illustrated by data provided by environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben.

The "carbon budget" for future emissions to prevent global warming from exceeding two degrees Celsius or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit — which many scientists think is too high for safely avoiding catastrophic climatic impacts — is calculated at 565 gigatons. But five times that amount — 2795 gigatons — is already figured into the calculus of the fossil fuel industry, as McKibben explains:

"Think of two degrees Celsius as the legal drinking limit — equivalent to the 0.08 blood-alcohol level below which you might get away with driving home. The 565 gigatons is how many drinks you could have and still stay below that limit — the six beers, say, you might consume in an evening. And the 2,795 gigatons? That's the three 12-packs the fossil-fuel industry has on the table, already opened and ready to pour.

"We have five times as much oil and coal and gas on the books as climate scientists think is safe to burn. We'd have to keep 80 percent of those reserves locked away underground to avoid that fate. Before we knew those numbers, our fate had been likely. Now, barring some massive intervention, it seems certain.

"Yes, this coal and gas and oil is still technically in the soil. But it's already economically aboveground — it's figured into share prices, companies are borrowing money against it, nations are basing their budgets on the presumed returns from their patrimony. It explains why the big fossil-fuel companies have fought so hard to prevent the regulation of carbon dioxide — those reserves are their primary asset, the holding that gives their companies their value. It's why they've worked so hard these past years to figure out how to unlock the oil in Canada's tar sands, or how to drill miles beneath the sea, or how to frack the Appalachians." [1]

Global temperatures have already risen by 0.8 degrees Celsius, bringing alarming swings in the climate. The Alberta tar sands, fully exploited, all by themselves would produce a further 0.4 degree increase, not even counting the extra emissions (roughly 17% more than average drilling) involved in extracting this "resource." [2]

The lesson is clear: The "logic" of the fossil fuel market is suicide for civilization. To begin stabilizing the climate, the extraction of these so-called "resources" must be prevented — needless to say, a massive rupture with the demands of corporate capital. The most encouraging fact is that popular pressure and resistance has so far delayed approval of the tar sands pipeline — showing that market "logic" doesn't have to reign supreme, even if this is only the beginning of the truly massive and global movement that's going to be needed to fundamentally break with it. New methods of extraction have only added to the emergency. These include mountaintop removal, deep sea drilling and fracking along with extraction of tar sands.

The tar sands pipeline in particular is a national issue in both the United States and Canada — unlike fracking for example, which must be fought at state-by-state level. Tar sands lie beneath vast boreal forests in Alberta, Canada and in Venezuela. These forests are important as sources of carbon sequestration but are now seen as resource-rich oil deposits. It is necessary to clear cut the forest, and strip mine its soil by using massive quantities of water and natural gas, in order to separate the oil from the tar.

This processing leaves behind huge toxic ponds that have been linked to high levels of cancer in the surrounding communities, impacting the land, culture and health of First Nations peoples. The crude oil has the consistency of soft asphalt and must be mixed with condensed gas condensate in order to be transported by pipeline.

Tar sands oil is already being refined at the Marathon Oil Refinery in Southwest Detroit. In fact, a 2010 oil spill in the Kalamazoo River (in the western part of Michigan) was tar sands oil bound for Detroit. More than two years later, the river is still contaminated with toxic glop that sank to the bottom (it can't be skimmed off like a "normal" spill). Now, to accommodate their expanded production, the Big Oil companies — primarily U.S. and Canadian — that have developed the tar sands face the problem of transporting and refining it.

Alberta is a landlocked province, so the companies need pipelines to take the oil to refineries to the east, west and south. British Columbia, the province to the west, doesn't want the pipeline because of environmental risks and because the Alberta government doesn't plan to share the royalties. Furthermore, considerable land in Canada is owned by First Nations peoples who are opposed to the pipelines. This helps explain why the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper government — whose entire economic and political strategy depends on expanded tar sands production — is pushing legislation that basically ends Indigenous sovereignty and undermines long-term treaties.

The fight over communally-held lands, and the introduction of this legislation, on top of already disastrous living conditions for First Nations peoples, have sparked the youth-driven Idle No More upsurge (see for example <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3794>).

The Pipeline Battle

The Keystone XL pipeline would run south from Alberta, crossing the U.S. border and ending in New Orleans where the oil can be refined and shipped mainly to China (essentially nothing to do, incidentally, with "U.S. energy security"). It has run into difficulties as Native Americans, farmers and small towns have opposed its construction. Initially the pipeline was to cross the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest freshwater aquifer in North America supplying irrigation water for one-third of the country's agriculture.

After massive protests, the proposed pipeline route has been rerouted and is 500 miles shorter. Still, it would directly impact 4715 acres of prime farmland, and cross 56 rivers and streams as well as more than 25 miles of floodplain. More than two dozen species, half already listed as endangered, would be affected.

The U.S. president and State Department must approve the section crossing the northern border. President Obama delayed his decision during the 2012 election campaign, but it is expected sometime before June 2013. In an ominous sign, the State Department produced a lengthy report claiming, on very thin evidence, that oil sands development "will proceed with or without the proposed [pipeline] Project," thereby dodging the climate implications. In fact, alternative means of transporting the crude (rail in particular) are costlier. Given that mining the tar sands is already

more expensive, corporations may be less eager to invest.

Naturally, oil companies and the Harper government are lobbying very hard for approval. The liberal New York Times columnist Joe Nocera has also weighed in supporting the pipeline, contributing paternalist and condescending comments on Bill McKibben and the 350.org movement.

What's more unfortunate — and really says a lot about the challenge facing the environmental movement — is the support for the pipeline by much of the U.S. labor movement, although with some important exceptions. The unions opposing the pipeline are the Amalgamated Transit Union and Transport Workers Union, who call for a program of mass transit, and the National Nurses Union, which cites public health problems for its opposition. The Communication Workers urged its members to join the February 17th anti-pipeline demonstration because “climate change is a real threat.”

Building trades unions support the Keystone pipeline because of the prospect of jobs (actually, far fewer than advertised) or remain silent. The *New York Times* reported that the statement put out by the February 26, 2013 AFL-CIO meeting, indirectly backs the Keystone pipeline [3] Trying to work both sides of the street, the statement talks about the need to develop “a comprehensive jobs and energy policy” in such vague terms that the building trades unions applauded it as support to expand “our nation’s pipeline infrastructure, including the Keystone XL pipeline.”

In sharp contrast, Canada’s largest energy union, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) opposes the pipeline. As CEP president Dave Coles put it in a speech in New York: “My union believes we need to pause further development of Alberta’s bitumen sands. Additionally, the bevy of export pipelines being proposed need to be put on hold until we develop a national consensus around a sustainable energy strategy.

“Climate pollution from the the bitumen sands industry is already considerable and will only get worse by approving Keystone XL. The Canadian government’s aggressive lobbying in the US in favor of the pipeline is an embarrassment.”

Obama administration approval of the Keystone XL pipeline would further radicalize the environmental movement. Some compensatory crumbs would likely be thrown — perhaps restrictions on Arctic oil drilling and enhanced fuel standards for the future, all of which can be scrapped later — with the president assuring us that “all of the above,” including “safe fracking,” “clean coal” and the resumption of nuclear power plant construction will create our green and energy-secure future. Right.

The reasons put forward by the oil industry about why we “need” tar sands oil are that it provides “good” jobs and will insure that the United States is no longer “dependent” on oil from the “unfriendly regimes” of the Middle East and Venezuela. TransCanada claims that the pipeline will provide 20,000 jobs (although the U.S. State Department estimated 6,000).

Beside the dubious numbers, this begs another question: How “good” are jobs that kill our future?

Beyond the Decision

The 2011 Power Shift Conference attended by 10,000, the August 2011 civil disobedience action of more than 1250 in front of the White House, as well as the February 17, 2013 demonstration in Washington DC of 20,000 or more to stop the tar sands have all had an impact on U.S. public opinion.

Whatever the presidential decision turns out to be, what are the follow-ups from the highly

successful February actions to stop the tar sands? The movement has shown remarkable resilience and creativity, and will undoubtedly come up with new surprises, but here are a few of the main perspectives.

Indigenous people will continue to play in the struggle against the tar sands and the larger struggle to oppose the oil industry in its continued extraction, transportation and refining of fossil fuels.

Bill McKibben's project 350.org (<http://350.org/>) is working to coordinate campus campaigns for divestment from the fossil fuel industry. While the oil industry is much more central to global capital than South Africa was during the anti-apartheid divestment years, this is certainly a tool to expose its tentacles. Other direct action organizations include Rainforest Action Network [4], Tar Sands Blockade [5] and Rising Tide [6].

The environmental justice movement urgently needs to develop solidarity with working people. Programmatically, the movement needs to show how conversion to a sustainable economy would create millions of jobs. But daily solidarity also matters. What if environmentalists support the postal workers in their current struggles against wholesale downsizing of the postal system? What if environmentalists come out for teachers and parents in opposition to school closings?

The fight against climate change and moving to renewable energy sources is part of a larger perspective of breaking with a capitalist economy based on the endless expansion of production no matter the cost. Keeping the tar sands in the ground where they belong is part of the wider struggle against the destruction of nature — the plastic waste choking the oceans, poisoning of water from fracking and mountaintop removal, drug-resistant infections caused by stuffing livestock with antibiotics in industrial farming, and the war machine that kills ecosystems along with populations. In order to survive, another world is possible — and necessary!

The Editors, *Against the Current*

P.S.

* From *Against the Current* n° 164, May/June 2013. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math," <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719?page=2>

[2] For more on this point see Joel Wolfram, www.huffingtonpost.com/joel-wolfram/keystone-xl-pipeline-_b_2909468.html.

[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/28/business/energy-environment/afl-cio-backs-keystone-oil-pipeline-if-indirectly.html?_r=0

[4] <http://ran.org/>

[5] <http://www.tarsandsblockade.org>

[6] <http://www.risingtidenorthamerica.org/>