

All coal is dirty coal - The Brayton Point power plant (USA)

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Chris Mastrangelo reports on a protest to shut down the pollution-spewing Brayton Point Power Station.

FOUR HUNDRED activists from across New England marched in Somerset, Mass., on July 28, demanding the shutdown of the Brayton Point Power Station, the largest coal-fired power plant in the region.

Chanting “all coal is dirty coal, leave it in the ground” and “green jobs, union jobs, justice for Somerset,” protesters called on Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick to close down the largest single source of greenhouse gases in the northeast and provide a just transition to clean, renewable energy for the area’s residents and workers.

Represented at the rally were activists from a host of organizations, including 350 Massachusetts, the Better Future Project, Occupy Fall River, Fossil Free Rhode Island, and System Change Not Climate Change, the Ecosocialist Coalition. In an act of civil disobedience, a contingent of protesters at the head of the march walked onto the power plant’s property to be arrested by police while hundreds of activists behind them chanted “Shut it down! Shut it down!” By the end of the march, 44 protesters had been lead away by police.

Had the police been interested in protecting local residents from a genuine threat, they could have turned their attention to the power plant towering above them. Over 13,000 tons of coal are burned at Brayton Point every day. The plant regularly spews toxins and carcinogens such as mercury, arsenic, cadmium, sulfur and lead into the surrounding water and air; on more than one occasion, entire neighborhoods in Somerset have been blanketed with coal dust.

Unsurprisingly, this constant pollution has lead to dramatically elevated rates of asthma, lung disease, and cancer in nearby Somerset and Fall River. In 2000, a Harvard School of Public Health study found that pollutants from Brayton Point were responsible each year for 28,900 asthma attacks, 1,140 emergency room visits and 106 premature deaths.

“Make no mistake about it—this plant kills people,” said Craig Altermose of the Better Future Project. “It kills people in Somerset and Fall River, where they have higher rates of asthma and lung disease and cancer. It kills people in West Virginia where they’re blowing the tops off of mountains and turning people’s lungs black. And it kills people through climate change.”

BRAYTON POINT is the largest single source of greenhouse gases in the region, producing over 6 million tons of carbon emissions a year. And in the summer after Hurricane Sandy—a summer that has seen record-breaking heat waves, droughts and wildfires spread across the globe—the price of

powering a world economy on carbon has become far too high for far too many.

But the plant's corporate owners, energy giant Dominion Resources, have little interest in the environmental destruction caused by burning coal—not as long as they can make a profit off it. The operation of Brayton Point, and dozens of plants like it, has made the company billions of dollars in profits, even as it destroys our health and our environment through the burning of fossil fuels—to say nothing of that fuel's extraction.

Much of the coal burned at Brayton Point is mined through mountaintop removal—literally, by dynamiting the tops off of mountains, a process that destroys vast tracts of critical wildlife habitat, pollutes air and water with a slew of toxic chemicals and heavy metals, and has resulted in high rates of cancer, lung disease and birth defects in surrounding communities.

“We're losing our history, our culture, our everything,” said Chuck Nelson, a retired West Virginia miner and an activist with Keepers of the Mountains. “And the only reason they do it is that they went from deep mining in the seventies and eighties when we had 130,000 miners, to mountaintop removal, where we're producing just as much coal with 17,000 miners. That's what it's all about. It's about maximizing the industry's profit.”

The fossil fuel industry has crassly exploited its workers as readily as it has the natural world—a fact that stands in stark contradiction to Dominion's claims that plants like Brayton Point are valuable for the jobs they provide. As protesters erected model wind turbines and solar panels outside the plant, speakers called for both the plant's shutdown and its replacement with clean, renewable sources of energy that could provide both a sustainable future for the planet and good union jobs for the community.

“My union has long rejected the choice between jobs and the environment,” said Peter Knowlton, an organizer with the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America. “We have the capability and the capacity for the mass production of renewable and life-sustaining generation of electricity. Hire community residents for renewable energy projects. Provide them with the support and sustenance necessary to maintain a decent union standard of living.”

To make that transition will require more pressure applied by protests like these, which in turn will require greater organization and cooperation between activists, workers and affected communities. But the July 28 action, the largest protest by far in years of organizing against the plant, is a promising sign in the growing fight against an industry—and an economic system—that would burn the world for profit.

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P.S.

* <http://socialistworker.org/2013/08/06/all-coal-is-dirty-coal>