

Pipelines, Pandemics and Capital's Death Cult

A Green Syndicalist View

Jeff Shantz

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A central position of green syndicalism is that ecological destruction, labor exploitation, dispossession of commons, and colonial violence are all interconnected. That is, the health and wellbeing of nature and the working class (most broadly), the dispossessed, are undermined, threatened, and destroyed by capital's pursuit of accumulation, property, and profit. The drive by capital for profit renders all—human communities, individuals, and elements of nature (including entire ecosystems)—as means to accumulation—up to a planetary level. Inhabitants of the planet are reduced to means to an end, their destruction assured in a system that affords them value or purpose on the basis of capital's desires and calculations.

We can see this within any industry, within any capitalist enterprise. It is perhaps most clearly apparent, in an unadorned fashion, in extractives industries like mining, logging, or oil, where the consumption of nature (as resources) for profit leaves ecosystems ruined, where workers are forced to labor in dangerous, often deadly, conditions, and where it is all carried out through direct dispossession, invasion, and occupation of Indigenous lands and through processes of mass killing, even genocide. And when it is all done, little remains except the traces of profit that have been extracted and taken elsewhere.

These intersections have come to the forefront with particular clarity under conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. The death cult of capital on full display in all its variety of ways.

Extractives Industry Outbreaks

Over the Fall of 2020 and Winter of 2021 several Covid-19 outbreaks were confirmed at sites of some of the most destructive resource industry sites in so-called British Columbia, affecting dozens of workers and threatening entire communities, especially Indigenous communities, in remote northern areas. Almost the entirety of what is claimed as British Columbia is unceded (that is stolen and occupied) Indigenous lands.

Health officials declared Covid outbreaks at several project sites, including the Site C dam construction project near Fort St. John, the LNG Canada Project natural gas liquefaction and export facility in Kitimat (on the northern coast), the Coastal GasLink fracked gas pipeline being constructed from Dawson Creek to Kitimat, a tunnel being twinned near Kitimat for Rio Tinto's aluminum smelter, and the Trans Mountain Pipeline twinning to move tar sands bitumen from Edmonton to Burnaby. The baseline number of workers for all five of the projects is 1,460 with that number rising with construction schedules to 4,080 by mid-February, 2021.

Health officials declared Covid outbreaks at two sites along the Coastal GasLink fracked gas pipeline. Northern Health announced that it had found "evidence of Covid-19 transmission" among workers housed at the 7 Mile Lodge and Little Rock Lake Lodge accommodation sites. They also reported a third Covid outbreak at an LNG Canada Project site near Kitimat.

In their news release, Northern Health reported that 27 workers employed by the contractor Pacific Atlantic Pipeline Construction had tested positive for the coronavirus. They also informed the public that those workers had been working at and moving between the two construction sites.

Threats to Indigenous Health and Wellbeing

Extractives projects, by definition, represent attacks on Indigenous people and communities, on their health, safety, security, and sovereignty. They destroy homes, food sources, cultural sites, practices, and knowledge, relationships with the natural world, and ways of living. They are, as they have always been, central acts of genocide.

Indigenous people have raised the dangerous impacts on their communities as especially damning aspects of the Covid outbreaks at the work camps and work sites. Molly Wickham, an organizer of Wet'suwet'en land defense against Coastal GasLink has raised the extreme health problems Indigenous communities are dealing with as ongoing effects of colonialism. As she has put it: "Many Indigenous people have underlying health conditions because of all of the impacts of colonization. We have higher rates of diabetes and higher rates of heart disease. Our people are at greater risk of dying."

The BC Centre for Disease Control has identified the higher risks of Covid for Indigenous people near the extractives industry sites. In a guidance document prepared for industrial sites the BCCDC recommended that employers limit the interactions workers have in surrounding towns. Indigenous land defenders and local doctors alike have raised concerns about the presence of workers, most of whom are from outside locales. They note the substantial growth of out of town workers in the region as construction progresses.

As Molly Wickham, who lives near the work area, explains: "We have been concerned about not just the man camps, but the fact that a lot of the workers are living in our communities and hotels. They're going back and forth every day. The whole territory is just crawling with workers. They have helicopters flying overhead at least two or three times a day, both surveillance helicopters and industry helicopters slinging materials in and out of the territory. It's a warzone out there."

These industrial projects operate under a provincial jobs mandate to hire local and Indigenous workers. So local workers, who work along with workers who might be newly arrived from elsewhere, also come back to homes in their communities.

Workers Raise Alarms, Capital Disregards Them

Green syndicalists insist that workers, who deal with work processes directly every day, are uniquely positioned to identify ecological and health impacts of industrial operations. And that workers also have essential insights into transforming or ending production in ways that center health and wellbeing, for people and for planet. Workers are regularly at the forefront of raising alarms about harmful industrial practices.

In the months before the Covid outbreaks at the industrial sites in BC, numerous workers raised a range of serious concerns about cleaning procedures in common areas, rooms, and workspaces, and how these could make workers vulnerable to Covid. Their efforts brought inspections by WorkSafeBC (the provincial occupational health and safety agency) in both August and October of 2020.

Health documents also showed that an earlier inspection by WorkSafeBC, under prompting by workers, of the Site C dam work camp's sewage treatment facility on March 19 found that that

facility did not have a plan to sufficiently protect workers from pathogens, body fluids, human waste, or mould, in addition to Covid.

Workers have also pressed their concerns about inadequate Covid measures at LNG Canada sites. Industrial janitors working at the LNG Canada site for a subcontractor, Dexterra, raised numerous complaints about unsatisfactory and inefficient Covid protocols over the course of several months. They reported that their work teams were not provided with adequate personal protective equipment, including basics like masks and gloves.

Workers are transported between different facilities on the project sites, with six or seven workers squeezed into small vans. They spend 10 to 11 hours cleaning each day. One worker retired and brought Covid home to his family.

Calls to Shut it Down

Health care workers have also come forward to raise their opposition to continued development on the extractives projects. With the Covid numbers growing, more than 180 frontline health workers signed an open letter to the Provincial Health Officer Dr. Bonnie Henry. The letter called on the provincial health authority to immediately shut down all industrial work camps on Indigenous territories. The letter read, in part:

“To put the interests of economy and industry ahead of Indigenous lives is not public health. To put Indigenous Elders and youth at further risk in the midst of a pandemic is to say quite clearly that Indigenous lives still do not matter in BC.

As health professionals, we have a responsibility to uphold the current and future health of these communities, which are now under threat from the continuing of Coastal GasLink (LNG) work and man camps.”

These calls to stop the developments came shortly after a detailed report by an independent review panel that documented deep and widespread racism against Indigenous people within health care in British Columbia. The substantial report filled 224 pages with evidence of racism and its profoundly negative impacts on treatment and health outcomes for Indigenous people. It also detailed the greater health risks facing Indigenous people as intergenerational and ongoing results of systemic racism, trauma, and poverty resulting from colonization and genocide.

A former chief medical officer for Northern Health added his voice to these calls. He pointed out the absurdity of designating inessential industrial activity as essential. He concluded:

“I think we’re in for a rough ride. The worry about our local hospitals and our local staff being overwhelmed, burned out and having difficulty coping, that’s becoming a pretty clear reality. Our communities need help.

Is it industry first, or the health and safety of the population in the north first? They need to rethink the essential designation and say it’s not that essential, certainly not at this price.”

Of course what governments view as essential is whatever capital tells them is essential. And they have acted accordingly.

Green Syndicalist Hopes for Solidarity

The Covid outbreaks at the extractives sites bring together shared interests (and shared identities) of the diverse working class—blue collar and white collar workers in various industries, Indigenous people, including site workers, and local farmers. There are several examples of solidarity, or possibilities of solidarity, in the responses to these outbreaks.

They are confronted not only by a virus but by forces of capital and its drives for extraction and accumulation of value. And by a compliant state that knows the projects are attacks on human and ecological health and wellbeing, as confirmed by its own medical officers, but which refuses to act to shut them down because capital demands they continue.

Indigenous land defenders have, of course, long been at the forefront, the only ones on the frontlines, of resistance against extractives industry developments. These include Secwepemc Tiny House Warriors who have built moveable tiny houses in the path of the TransMountain pipeline expansion. It includes the Wet'suwet'en checkpoints and camps blocking the path of the Coastal GasLink fracked gas pipeline construction. They have innovated important strategic and tactical examples in the face of extreme state violence, including assaults by militarily armed RCMP.

Some would argue that the construction workers have interests opposed to other workers and Indigenous communities. And it is true that companies have been effective at sowing divisions. Yet, construction work on pipelines and dams are very short term. As organizers (albeit on a reformist basis) with Iron and Earth, who are workers in the tar sands of Alberta, have long pointed out, there is more work and longer term work for extractives industry and construction workers doing cleanup and environmental restoration and care in areas that have been damaged by these sites. Care and nurturing work could provide a basis for ongoing mutual work based on knowledge, insights, and leadership of Indigenous communities on whose historic lands these projects are located.

One example in 2020 saw miners walk out at Hudbay's Lalor mine in northern Manitoba over their COVID-19 concerns. This after contractors were flown into town following a request by the town council that the company suspend air travel into the region.

We see some hopeful actions coming from workers in the context of the northern British Columbia industrial sites as well. The industrial janitors voted 84 per cent in favor of a strike over safer working conditions. Discussions have been undertaken with Dexterra.

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