

Resistance at Standing Rock

Native Americans lead fight against gas pipeline for environmental justice

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The Standing Rock Sioux in the U.S. have been fighting against the construction of a major gas pipeline which would threaten their water supply and violate their sacred sites. They have organized popular direct action against the construction company and the state and inspired people throughout the country and the world.

For months, thousands of Native Americans and others have attempted to stop the construction of a monster gas pipeline. They have filed legal claims and lobbied politicians, but what has been especially impressive has been the attempted blockade of construction. Throughout the world, indigenous peoples have played an important role in fighting pipelines, oil drilling, fracking, and the overall destruction of the environment. Sometimes allied with local white farmers and workers, the indigenous have the advantage of legal rights which their white neighbors (and environmentalists) do not have. They also have special moral claims, based on centuries of oppression and treaty-breaking.

The Dakota Access Pipeline Project (also called the Bakken Pipeline) is a project of the Energy Transfer Partners. It plans to run a 30 inch diameter pipe 1,170 miles from North Dakota to southern Illinois. There it would join existing pipelines to the Gulf and the East Coast. It would cost \$3.7 billion and come on line at the end of 2016. The pipeline would cross many sources of water and pass under the Missouri river a half mile upstream from the reservation of the Standing Rock Sioux. The U.S. Army Corp of Engineers gave the project the go-ahead, with a cursory pretense of “consulting” affected tribes.

The Standing Rock Sioux have claimed that the pipeline violates their right to historically sacred land. They also claim that it threatens their water supply. They call themselves “Water Protectors.” The company argues that it is (mostly) building on private property which it bought, not on the reservation. Whatever the legalities of the case, it is well known how American Indian land became “private property.” The company also argues that pipes are safer for transporting gas than are railroads or trucks. This is irrelevant. No method of transport is perfect or can be without accidents. Sooner or later there will be leaks, minor or major, which must impact the water supply. (This is one reason there needs to be national and local programs for a transition to noncarbon, renewable, energy.)

Besides the Standing Rock Sioux, the project has been opposed locally by the Bakken Pipeline Resistance Coalition, which is made up of over 30 landowner and environmental associations. Meanwhile thousands of Native Americans from over 200 tribes have come to the blockade camps to support the Standing Rock Sioux. Solidarity demonstrations have been held all across the country, even though the media has tended to bury the dramatic events. There has been a support delegation from the Black Lives Matter movement.

Construction continues. So far the Sioux have lost all their legal challenges. The company’s agents and the police have attacked peaceful demonstrators with dogs and pepper spray—exposing the lie that the state is “neutral” between the people and the capitalists. On September 3rd, the police attacked the camp, spraying over 30 people with pepper spray; at least 6 people were bitten by dogs. This was the anniversary of the 1963 Whitestone massacre, when soldiers killed over 300 Sioux—which puts things in context. So far over 400 people have been arrested. They have tried to arrest journalists and photographers also.

Mekasi Horinek, a militant from the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma says that he asked police officers: “Don’t you drink water too? Don’t your children drink water? We’re here to protect the water. This isn’t just a Native issue. We’re here protecting the water; not only for our families and our children, but for your families and your children. For every ranch and every farm along the

Missouri River.” He adds, “No matter what they do to us, they’re not going to strip our dignity, our honor. These are things we hold in our DNA , and we’ll never lose.” (NY Times 11/2/16; p. A10)

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President Obama and his agencies have politely asked the company to postpone further work for now; the company has refused. Hillary Clinton has not taken a clear position and of course Donald Trump will not oppose the pipeline. Bernie Sanders has officially asked Ms. Clinton to oppose the project, to no avail. The presidential candidate of the Green Party, Dr. Jill Stein, went to the blockading camp and was fined for spray-painting a bulldozer.

The president of the building trades section of the AFL-CIO is Sean McGarvey. He sent out a letter denouncing the demonstrators as “environmental extremists” and “professional agitators.” Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO has also publicly endorsed the pipeline.

McGarvey and Trumka have bought into the false opposition of jobs or the environment. Supporters of the project cite the supposed creation of jobs, claiming that it would create 12,000 jobs. Others have estimated that it would only create about 1,500 jobs (mainly for out-of-state skilled workers who specialize in pipeline work). In any case, like almost all construction jobs, these would be temporary. Once set up, the pipeline would only need about 12 to 15 permanent workers! For this, they would tear up the landscape, poison the water, violate Native American’s sacred sites, produce more greenhouse gases which would increase global warming and threaten the survival of civilization. Is there no need for construction projects to rebuild the nation’s infrastructure, to create housing, to build renewable energy, to establish organic family farms, to reforest the countryside? Of course such projects would not be profitable for most of the ruling class, but this is all the more reason to demand that they be done publicly, democratically, and cooperatively.

Opposing this suicidal pro-pipeline and anti-environmental approach is the Labor Coalition for Community Action. It is an organization of AFL-CIO constituency groups. The pipeline has also been officially opposed by the American Postal Workers Union, the Amalgamated Transit Union, the Communications Workers of America, the National Nurses Union, and the Service Employees International Union. A rank-and-file workers group, Labor for Standing Rock, has set itself up at the Standing Rock campsite.

The confrontation at Standing Rock is far from over. However it comes out, it is an important point in the struggle for environmental justice. It has tied together the effort to save the planet with the historic struggle for justice to American Indians and the overall fight against white supremacy. It has used popular direct action to counter the forces of ruthless capitalist profit mongering. The biggest barrier to victory has been the politicians, especially the Democrats, and the union bureaucrats, who teach us to rely on the Democrats and to trust the corporations to provide jobs. The protestors at Standing Rock argue that we should rely on ourselves and our own resistance.

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