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HARPER’S INDEX

We are currently the fifth largest energy producer in the world. We rank third and seventh in global gas and oil production respectively. We generate more hydro-electric power than any other country on Earth. And we are the world’s largest supplier of uranium. But that’s just the beginning.

Our government is making new investments in renewable energy sources such as biofuels. And an ocean of oil-soaked sand lies under the muskeg of Northern Alberta—my home province. The oil sands are the second-largest oil deposit in the world, bigger than Iraq, Iran or Russia; exceeded only by Saudi Arabia.

Digging the bitumen out of the ground, squeezing out the oil and converting it into synthetic crude is a monumental challenge. It requires vast amounts of capital, Brobdingnagian technology and an army of skilled workers. In short, it is an enterprise of epic proportions, akin to the building of the pyramids or China’s Great Wall. Only bigger.

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That’s why Canada surpassed the Saudis four years ago as the largest supplier of petroleum products to the United States. And that’s why industry analysts are recommending Canada as “possessing the most attractive combination of circumstances for energy investment of any place in the world.”

—Prime Minister Stephen Harper, addressing the Canada-UK Chamber of Commerce
July 14, 2006
Tar Sands and the American Automobile
Crude heads south, keeps cars on the road

by Bianca Mugyenyi and Yves Engler

The following is an edited excerpt from a forthcoming book, tentatively titled Stop Signs: A road trip through the USA to explore the culture, politics and economics of the car.

Across the globe, sprawling auto-dependent development is pushing oil extraction into increasingly sensitive environments. Far from the “light sweet crude” of the Niger Delta, the heavy oil trapped in Alberta’s tar sands is among the filthiest sources in the world; with up to three-quarters of the final product destined for the US market, tar sands oil extraction has been labelled the most destructive process known to mankind. Viewed from above, the tar sands are as picturesque as a pair of dirty lungs and the stench of tar can be smelled for miles. Amid a tangle of pipes, waste ponds and smoke, an environmental demolition derby of 50-ft, 300-tonne monster trucks roam a wasteland riddled with 200-foot-deep open pits. Gouged out with dinosaur-sized claws, Athabasca oil is mined, not pumped.

Describing the tar sands as “hideous marvels,” Globe and Mail columnist Jeffrey Simpson writes: “They are terrible to look at, from the air or from the ground. They tear the earth, create polluted mini-lakes called tailing ponds that can be seen from space, spew forth air pollutants such as sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide and emit greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide.”

“They are voracious users of freshwater,” continues Simpson. Extracting the bitumen (crude oil) from the thick and sticky mix of clay, sand and water is no easy feat and for every barrel of oil extracted, somewhere between two and four-and-a-half times as much water is needed to thin-out the mixture and separate the bitumen from the sand. To obtain this staggering volume of water, whole streams and rivers in the region have been drained and diverted. We don’t need Erin Brockovich to tell us something is wrong with the water; sucked out for the extraction process and then spat out again, most of it ends up contaminated with acids, mercury and other toxins. This wastewater has left Northern Alberta studded with toxic dumping pools, better known as ‘tailing ponds.’ Not only are the tar sands being blamed for Western Canada’s first ever bout of acid rain, the residues pumped into the Athabasca River have increased cancer rates downstream, particularly among First Nations communities dependent upon the waterway. The history of oil extraction has always been the history of suffering and the tar sands are no exception.

To produce a single barrel of oil, the tar sands extraction process requires two tonnes of sand. In 2003, Alberta’s Environment Ministry reported that 430-square kilometres of land had been “disturbed” for the oil sands. By summer 2006, that number had reached 2,000-square kilometres, nearly a five-fold increase in three years (even though only two per cent of the oil sands—now hailed as one of the world’s largest reserves—had been developed).

Thousands of acres of trees have already been clear-cut to make way for tar sands mining and if current plans unfold, a forest the size of Maryland and Virginia will be eliminated. The decline in forests has led to a major reduction in both the region’s grizzly bear and moose populations, with oil exploration also harming prairie birds and other animal life.

The environmental mayhem so far described is the tip of the iceberg. The tar sands represent the biggest increase in Canadian carbon emissions, with every barrel of synthetic oil produced releasing 188 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere. Comparing the greenhouse emissions of a conventional barrel of crude to a barrel of tar sands oil, a New York Times article noted, “A gallon of gas from oil sands, because of the energy-intensive production methods, releases three times as much carbon overall as conventionally produced gasoline.” The oil sands are located in and around Fort McMurray (aka Fort McMoney), a region with a population of 61,000. By 2015, Fort McMurray is expected to emit more greenhouse gases than all of Denmark.

Describing “the rush into the oil sands” a Wall Street Journal analyst writes: “For years, environmentalists have argued that higher gasoline prices would be good for the Earth because paying more at the pump would promote conservation. Instead, higher energy prices have unleashed a bevy of heavy oil projects...”
Temporary Labour or Disposable Workers?
Foreign labourers are brought to the tar sands, but are easily sent home

by Tim Murphy

“So you believe in the free market?”

“Well, it’s not so much that I believe in the free market, it’s that I demand logical consistency out of those who demand the free market,” answers Jason Foster, director of Policy Analysis for the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL).

According to Foster, wages in Alberta’s oil industry have not been allowed to follow the basic laws of supply and demand. Companies have used various tactics to prevent the rise of wages. One such tactic, the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, is of special concern to the AFL.

Although he acknowledges the existence of a labour crunch in places like Calgary and Fort McMurray, Foster remains critical both of the Alberta government and of the oil companies, citing their inconsistencies in dealing with the problem. The AFL has gone as far as to accuse the government of causing the current shortages by its refusal to pace development in the tar sands. The glut of new construction, they claim, has led to the current scarcity of skilled tradespeople and the subsequent push to hire foreign workers.

“There are presently more TFWs [Temporary Foreign Workers] entering the province each year than there are permanent immigrants,” says Foster. “The entire strategy of the government has shifted away from bringing people to Alberta to allow them to have the full rights of citizenship and become members of our communities.

“They’ve now shifted it to say we want a revolving door of cattle to do a bunch of work and ship them back home again. They [the oil companies] have found that if you increase supply by bringing in a pool of workers from outside the country who are prepared to work for less and without benefits—you artificially suppress wages.”

The numbers seem to support Foster’s claims of an influx of foreign workers in Alberta’s oil patch. According to Murray Gross, a spokesperson for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), in 2006, Citizenship and Immigration Canada issued a total of 15,172 new temporary work permits for Alberta, bringing the total number of temporary foreign workers in the province to 22,392. By comparison, in 2005, 15,815 were working in Alberta.

Don MacNeil from the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union is equally critical of the government-run program.

“It’s a totally horrendous situation. We need them desperately, but once they come here, they have no rights,” says Yessy Byl, TFW Advocate.

“I’ve been pretty busy, it’s hard to pinpoint numbers, but I’ve got over 100 case files. I talk to even more people to give advice. I work with all foreign workers in Alberta, from fast food to the trades. Maybe a third of these are in the oil patch,” says Byl.

Byl mentions two identifiable themes to the types of cases she deals with. The first is that of labour brokers. The second is that of inadequate unemployment provisions.

TFWs usually get here by dealing with a broker in their home country. The broker offers promises of a job or even immigration status in exchange for a brokerage fee (reportedly between $500 and $5000). This practice is illegal in Alberta, but it is difficult to stop, since most of it is done from elsewhere, in places like California, or in the worker’s country of origin.

“The brokers charge outrageous fees, contrary to Alberta law. They mislead people as to what’s covered and what isn’t. They understate the cost of living. They bring them to Canada and dump them. Often, the job doesn’t even exist anymore,” adds Byl.

Employers interested in hiring TFWs must first apply for a Labour Market Opinion, which is basically a survey of the Canadian workforce designed to determine whether or not the job requirements can be filled locally and whether or not there is a real need to hire outside of Canada. In 2004, the governments of Canada and Alberta signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to help employers who need to hire temporary foreign workers to fill labour shortages on large

Workers’ quarters in a camp near Fort McMurray. Temporary foreign workers are often at the mercy of their employer.

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Oil Flows South, Impacts Flow North
The reach of the world’s largest industrial project

by Dru Oja Jay
based on cartography and files by Petr Cizek, for OilsandsTruth.org

Mackenzie Valley Pipeline
Multi-billion dollar pipelines are proposed which will transport natural gas from the Arctic Ocean to Alberta. That the gas from the pipelines is destined for the tar sands was once denied, but plans for a “North-Central Corridor” pipeline make the link clear. First proposed in the 1970s, the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline has been criticized for being a giant step in the industrialization and colonization of the primarily-Indigenous north. The development needed to keep gas flowing through the pipeline would affect a massive area of pristine wilderness. Maps projecting the impact of the rapid expansion of northern natural gas exploitation show a dense web of access roads, drilling locations and pipelines covering a vast area (shown in yellow on the map) around Deh Cho, or the Mackenzie River.

Alaska Highway Pipeline
The proposed 2,700 kilometre-long Alaska Highway Pipeline would link Alaska’s North Slope natural gas deposits with the tar sands. The project, estimated to cost as much as $30 billion, would cross several protected areas and First Nations lands covered by Treaty 8.

LNG Terminals
A total of 11 Liquid Natural Gas terminals are planned in Canada, on the west and east coasts. Several US cities have already rejected similar proposals, which have tankers carrying natural gas from Russia, Saudi Arabia and other overseas sources. Local opposition groups have cited the devastating effects of potential spills or explosions. Critics say that importing natural gas shows that Canada is burning through its own supply (over half of which is sent south) at a rate that is unsustainable.

Nuclear Plants
With rising prices and declining supply, natural gas may not be able to fuel energy-intensive tar sand extraction. So far, two nuclear power plants—Alberta’s first—have been proposed in Whitecourt and Peace River. However, Parliament’s national resources committee concluded that 20 nuclear plants would have to be built to meet expected production growth until 2015. Rising uranium prices have also led to several new proposed uranium mines in the north, including one near Fort Chipewyan.

Tar Sands
Of the estimated 175 billion barrels of oil hidden in Alberta’s tar sands, about 30 per cent is accessible via surface mining. The surface of the earth, including trees, rivers and dozens of metres of “overburden” are removed before the bitumen is trucked away to be processed. The remaining 80 per cent of the deposits are too deep to be strip-mined. Instead, a technique known as “Steam-Assisted Gravity Drainage” (SAGD) is used. Steam is pumped deep into the earth, which softens the oil sufficiently to bring it to the surface. While it does not result in the total destruction of life in the area that is mined, the process has been termed “death by a thousand cuts” by some environmental groups. SAGD covers the land with a patchwork of access roads, clearings and industrial equipment. The process also uses more water and natural gas than mining-based extraction, and leads to groundwater contamination, acidification of land and water, and vast increases in greenhouse gas emissions.

Heavy Oil
Just south of the main tar sands region are several deposits of “heavy oil”—oil that is closer in form to bitumen than normal crude oil, but still extracted via traditional means. Internal oil industry reports note that it is possible to extract far more oil if SAGD-like methods are used. However, one report notes, natural gas is necessary, and greenhouse gas emissions are far higher when these techniques are used.

Diluent Pipelines
Because most of the bitumen extracted from the tar sands will not be refined in Canada, and is too thick to flow through pipelines effectively, it is necessary to dilute it. For this purpose, proposed pipelines will bring in hundreds of thousands of barrels per day of light oil for the purpose of transporting the bitumen out of the region.

Oil Pipelines
In recent years, the tar sands have become a central component of US “energy security.” Proposals for increased pipeline capacity and new pipelines indicate where the extracted oil will end up. Three refineries in Canada will receive oil (via Chicago) from the tar sands, but the vast majority is destined for US refineries, automobiles and military equipment. Environmental organizations, Indigenous groups and labour unions have opposed several of the planned pipelines. Concerns about the environmental impact of potential oil spills, unsettled land claims, energy security, and accountability for impacts after the oil boom passes have been cited.

Sverdrup Basin
The Sverdrup Basin, says Nunavut Premier Paul Okalik, could contain as much as one trillion dollars worth of natural gas. Nunavut has been in a long fight with the federal government over rights to the Arctic region’s vast oil and gas deposits. In addition to 17.4 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas, the Basin is said to contain 334 million barrels of oil. Okalik says that the federal government drew on Inuit use and occupancy studies to establish sovereignty over the Arctic waters, and that the deposits are within Nunavut’s territorial waters. Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice has simply said that he disagrees.

Rivers
While energy flows from the gas fields in the Arctic to refineries in Texas, Chicago and California, tar sands excavation is using and polluting water that flows north. Doctors in Fort Chipewyan, for example, have reported high rates of cancer and other diseases, and fishermen have reported catching fish with boils and deformations. Experts warn that if tailing ponds were to break, the toxic effects could be felt in Great Slave Lake and beyond.
Tar Sands: Extent of proposed development

- Proposed Nuclear Plant
- Natural gas deposit
- Proposed LNG terminal
- Proposed oil pipeline
- Proposed diluent pipeline
- Existing pipeline
- Cities and communities
- Known tar sands deposits
- Pipeline flow direction
- River flow direction
- Mackenzie Gas Project impact area
- Heavy oil regions
- Labour migration

Based on maps by Petr Cizek for OilsandsTruth.org, Canadian Arctic Resources Council, Wikimedia, Total, and R. Vogel
What the tar sands need

**WATER**

For each barrel of oil produced from the tar sands, between two and 4.5 barrels of water is needed. The water is used in the process of extracting bitumen from the naturally occurring tar sand. The bitumen is later “upgraded” into synthetic crude oil.

In 2007, the government of Alberta approved withdrawal of 119.5 billion gallons of water for tar sands extraction, of which an estimated 82 per cent came from the Athabasca River. Of that, extraction companies were only required to return 10 billion gallons to the river.

Most of the water used ends up in toxic tailing ponds. As of 2006, tailing ponds covered 50-square kilometres of former boreal forest. By 2010, according to the Oil Sands Tailings Research Facility, the industry will have generated 8 billion tons of waste sand and 1 billion cubic metres of waste water—enough to fill 400,000 olympic-sized swimming pools. Today, the largest human-made dam by volume of materials is the Syncrude tailing pond, a few kilometres from the Athabasca river.

The waste sand and water contain naphtha and paraffin, which are used in the extraction process, and oil leftovers like benzene, naphthenic acid and polyaromatic hydrocarbon, among others. Chemicals found in the tailing ponds are known to cause liver problems and brain hemorrhaging in mammals, and deformities and death in birds.

It is difficult to estimate the volume of toxins that make their way into the Athabasca, but downstream communities like Fort Chipewyan have reported high occurrences of rare cancers, lupus, multiple sclerosis and other diseases in recent years. Local fishermen have reported boils and deformities in fish. One winter, an oil slick was discovered under the ice. Syncrude later admitted that there had been a spill about 200 kilometres upstream.

The Athabasca also feeds Great Slave Lake, Deh Cho (the Mackenzie River) and vast northern watersheds. Water from the Athabasca flows all the way to the Arctic Ocean, and plays an essential role in the lives of Indigenous communities and vast areas of boreal forest.

**ENERGY**

Between digging up the tar sand, separating out the bitumen, and subsequently upgrading it to synthetic heavy crude oil, the extraction process requires vast amounts of energy. Because the tar sand and bitumen must be heated, about one sixth of the energy provided by a barrel of oil is expended to extract one barrel of oil from tar sand.

Opponents of the tar sands say that burning a relatively clean fuel like natural gas to produce oil undermines any efforts to reduce climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions and transition to sustainable fuel sources. According to estimates from the Pembina Institute, the tar sands will account for 25 per cent of Canada’s emissions by 2020, if Kyoto targets are reached.

The vast amounts of natural gas needed to extract millions of barrels of oil per day are leading to an anticipated shortage of supply. As a result, several energy megaprojects have been proposed.

Perhaps the most contentious of the proposals is the $7 billion Mackenzie Gas Project, a 1,220 kilometre pipeline that runs along the Mackenzie River Valley, from the Arctic Ocean to Alberta’s northern border. The project would connect the estimated 82 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, with the Mackenzie valley route.

In part to make up for the natural gas supply taken up by the tar sands, Liquid Natural Gas terminals have been proposed in multiple locations on the west coast, east coast and along the Saint Lawrence Seaway. The terminals would receive natural gas from tankers incoming from the Middle East, Russia and other overseas sources.

Natural gas supply is still not enough to keep up with anticipated growth, leading industry to explore options such as nuclear power. Alberta’s first nuclear power plant has been proposed in the town of Peace River, though it has faced some local opposition.

Much to the dismay of environmentalists, there is also discussion of building new coal-burning power plants into future tar sands upgrading facilities.

A Syncrude upgrader.

Dru Oja Jay
The Conference Board of Canada predicted in 2006 that Alberta would face a shortage of 332,000 workers by 2025. The figure has been dismissed as exaggerated (it is based on the current rate of growth continuing unimpeded), but it seems to be an accurate reflection of the concern Alberta’s industrial sector has shown recently.

That tar sands require a massive influx of labour is not disputed. Another estimate says that 20,000 new positions will be created in the tar sands over the next three years.

The signs of a labour shortage are already apparent in Alberta. Workers from Newfoundland and the Maritimes are offered flights to and from Fort McMurray for the duration of their work term. Grocery stores and fast food joints offer hourly wages in the double digits, and sometimes offer signing bonuses.

Increasingly, workers are brought in from countries like China and the Philippines. In 2006, Immigration Canada issued 15,172 new “temporary work permits” in Alberta, bringing the number of temporary workers to 22,392.

Temporary workers differ from immigrants in that they have no access to immigration services, and can be sent home. According to some reports, the workers’ temporary status leaves the door open to abuse. In one case, 12 men brought in by a trucking company were charged $500 per month to live in a three-bedroom bungalow.

The temporary foreign workers program has sparked a debate over the development of the tar sands.

“Most skilled workers would prefer to have twenty years of stable employment rather than seven or eight years of frantic development,” writes Gil McGowan of the Alberta Federation of Labour. If the pace of development was slowed, he writes, the need for temporary foreign workers would diminish.

Currently, development is heading in the opposite direction, with plans to increase production fivefold in the next twenty years. Labour regulations are being “streamlined,” and plans are in place to further increase the number of foreign workers.

Open pit mining of tar sands, according to the Government of Alberta, involves “clearing trees and brush from a site and removing the overburden—the topsoil, muskeg, sand, clay and gravel—that sits atop the oil sands deposit.” The “overburden” that is removed is up to 75 metres (about 25 stories) deep, and the underlying tar sands are typically between 40 and 60 metres deep.

After trees and brush are clearcut and either burned or sent to sawmills, the area is drained, and local rivers are rerouted. Giant trucks then remove soil, clay and sand to uncover the prized tar sands. The sands are then removed and taken to plants to be processed. In the end, an average of four tonnes of earth must be removed to render one barrel of oil.

In addition to tailing ponds (see “Water”), vast amounts of waste sand are generated. These sands, still containing traces of bitumen and other chemicals, are inhospitable to life. Near Syncrude’s extraction plant, for example, a vast desert stretches over the horizon. The expanse shows no signs of life, and carries the overpowering smell of asphalt.

The tar sands cover an estimated 141,000-square kilometres, of which approximately 3,400-square kilometres will be strip-mined if currently-approved projects go forward.

Government regulations require the strip-mined land to be “reclaimed,” and returned to a “stable, biologically self-sustaining state.” According to Syncrude’s web site, this means “productive capability at least equal to its condition before operations began.” Syncrude envisions “a mosaic landscape dominated by productive forests, wetland areas alive with waterfowl and grasslands supporting grazing animals.”

So far, Suncor says it has reclaimed 858 hectares, accounting for less than nine per cent of the land it has mined since 1967. Syncrude has mined 18,653 hectares, a little under a fifth of which it says it has reclaimed.

None of the land, however, has been officially certified as reclaimed by the government. Both corporations have billboard advertisements in Fort McMurray proclaiming the success of their reclamation programs. In the end, it is not clear that land will be fully reclaimed, and government agencies have been criticized as lax in enforcing regulations.
A vast plain of waste sand near Syncrude, about 40 kilometres outside of Fort McMurray. 

Dru Oja Jay
Passing Out in Upgrader Alley
“Industrial Heartland” developments rival those of the Athabasca tar sands

by Lori Theresa Waller

When the sirens go off at Shell’s upgrader near Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta, nearby resident Kathy Radke knows there has been another accident. As plumes of toxic vapour are picked up and scattered by the wind, she is expected to call an emergency hotline set up for the handful of families living in the immediate vicinity. The hotline is meant to tell residents the severity of the accident, and whether to “shelter in place” or to evacuate the area.

“Half the time, the info hasn’t even been updated when we call,” says Radke. She wonders why Shell doesn’t supply the nearby residents with air packs that they can put on as soon as the alarms go off.

Welcome to Alberta’s Industrial Heartland, a 78,550-acre area about a half-hour drive northeast of Edmonton. This industrial sacrifice zone, home to dozens of refineries, petrochemical plants and other industrial facilities, is where much of the bitumen pulled from Alberta’s tar sands operations will be upgraded. Some is already pumped here, through a 493-km pipeline, to the Shell upgrader. With two more upgraders under construction, and another 10 in various stages of proposal or development, the area is popularly known as “Upgrader Alley.”

A few decades ago, it was mostly farmland. Several families still live scattered on patches of land between the massive industrial facilities. The Radkes live and farm on land that was bought from Kathy’s in-laws in the 1980s by Atco Gas, which stores natural gas underneath the property in salt mines. When Kathy and her husband moved in, leasing their home from Atco, they were told they would be able to live and farm there safely for decades. With the rapid growth of industry in the area, the Radkes were soon surrounded by the clanking of machinery, heavy truck traffic and air pollution. Their house is two kilometres east—and downwind—of Shell’s massive Scotford operation, which boasts the existing upgrader, a second under construction and a refinery. To the north, BA Energy is also building a new upgrader.

Since Shell built its first upgrader in 2003, accidents have occurred at the rate of about four or five a year, says Kathy. Last September, there were two gas leaks in the space of one week. Nearby residents were instructed to stay in their homes for several hours. Some later reported sore throats and headaches that lasted for days.

Shell’s neighbours are exposed to routine emissions of sulphur dioxide and other toxic gases, which temporarily spike above regulated maximum levels on a regular basis. Over the past two years, Kathy’s family has lost 45 dairy cows out of a herd of 140 and she suspects that the air pollution has something to do with it. The region’s flurry of

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Oil Versus Water
Toxic water poses threat to Alberta’s Indigenous communities

by Kim Petersen

Alberta is replete with precious oil. Recovery of that oil from the tar sands, however, is putting another precious resource at risk: water. Dene and Cree First Nations people live close to and in the midst of the largest tar sand deposit in the Athabasca River region and oil extraction is harming their water supply.

The recoverable oil reserves in Alberta’s tar sands are so bountiful that they vie with oil reserves in Saudi Arabia and Venezuela for top status. Compared to Saudi Arabia, however, the oil extraction process is very expensive. What is extracted is bitumen, a form of crude oil, mixed with clay and silica, which must be refined to produce a barrel of oil. Current high oil prices make the extraction and refinement of bitumen very profitable.

Scientists at the University of Toronto and the University of Alberta have warned that the excessive water demand will result in the disappearance of the Athabasca River, having a devastating impact on the largest boreal delta in the world—a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

First Nations communities who live along and depend on the Athabasca River are also at possible risk from tar sands operations. There have been reports of increased illness and signs of toxic chemicals affecting wildlife.

Some elders with Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation (ACFN) are concerned with the environmental monitoring of the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA), an NGO that is supposed to represent “all levels of government,” First Nations and other stakeholders.

ACFN elder Pat Marcel said that CEMA was “dead” in the eyes of the elders because the Athabasca River is not being protected. “The corporations have to deal with us. We’ve got environmental agreements with every one of them,” Marcel said.

“If you’re not able to honour the treaty that we signed,” said Marcel, “we might as well do away with that treaty and you can get your scrap of paper back and we can get our country back.”

George Poitras, a member of the Mikisew Cree First Nation, also in Fort Chipewyan, explained:

“There’s been a de facto extinguishment of our treaty rights because the government continues to take up land without any consideration or consultation with the First Nations.” The treaty, Poitras told the Dominion, “obligates the government to consult with us any time there is a potential or adverse impact on our treaty rights—to hunt, fish, trap and so on.”

The government is not doing that.

“Historically,” said Poitras, “they attempted to colonize us through policies and legislation that are paternal, colonial, imperial and they continue that attitude...[the government is] simply not dealing with us as priority rights holders of these...
We Speak for Ourselves
Indigenous peoples challenge the fossil fuel regime in Alberta

by Clayton Thomas-Muller

Over the span of 38 years, Northern Alberta has changed from a pristine environment rich in cultural and biological diversity to a landscape resembling a war zone marked with 200-foot-deep pits and thousands of acres of destroyed boreal forests. Lakes and rivers have been contaminated and groundwater systems drained. The impact of the tar sands industry is what I am talking about. This industry has also resulted in the disruption to the Dene First Nations and their treaty rights, including the cultural disruption to the Cree and Metis communities.

The areas of concern fall under Aboriginal Treaties 8 and 11. These are treaties that ensure lands of First Nations not be taken away from First Nations by massive uncontrolled development that threatens their culture and traditional way of life.

The de-watering of rivers and streams to support the tar sands operations, and the destruction of the boreal forest, have threatened the cultural survival of the First Nations peoples.

An anticipated $25-billion expansion of the Athabasca oil sands in Northern Alberta is underway. First Nations leadership of the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) has begun partnering with the world’s largest corporations involved in tar sands development. Some of these giant developers are Mobil Oil, Shell, Gulf, Syncrude Canada, Petro-Canada and Suncor Energy. However, many First Nations and Metis grassroots people have not been part of these negotiations and are silently opposed to tar sands expansion. These people feel disenfranchised by a lack of knowledge and skills necessary for organizing policy for energy- and climate-related issues.

Most Canadian and American campaigns against tar sands development have been initiated by non-Indigenous groups or environmental non-governmental organizations (eNGOs). Although these tar sands lie within the traditional territories of First Nations and Metis peoples, these campaigns lack Indigenous involvement.

In the words of many elders and land-based community members living in the tar sands area, concerns for jobs, housing, income and economic development have taken priority over the traditional Indigenous values of respecting the sacredness of Mother Earth and protection of the environment.

“The river used to be blue. Now it’s brown. Nobody can fish or drink from it. The air is bad. This has all happened so fast,” says Elsie Fabian, 63, an elder in a First Nation community along the Athabasca River.

Some First Nations leadership, such as the Debcho Dene First Nations in the Northwest Territories and the Mikisew Cree and Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations in Fort Chipewyan have called on Canada and Alberta to support a moratorium on further tar sands development.

Organizations opposing the expansion of tar sands development must recognize the First Nations people that share that opposition. As a member of the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Chair of the IEN Native Energy and Climate Campaign, we are identifying, and will be working with, Dene, Cree and Metis community members who are concerned about the Alberta tar sands expansion, as well as the broader fossil-fuel regime in Canada.

The rationale behind this approach is that the government of Canada and the courts recognize treaties between the Crown and Aboriginal peoples. As Aboriginal peoples with long-standing use and occupation of the land, as descendants of the original inhabitants of Canada, we are not merely “concerned citizens.” Our Aboriginal title and treaty rights in Canada legally supersede the rights of the province of Alberta and corporations and their operation in the region.

Dene, Cree and Metis communities and their leadership must look beyond a dependence on a fossil-fuel regime and be visionaries and doers, supporting the development of clean production and clean renewable energy within their lands. There needs to be a clear strategy to motivate First Nations leadership and their grassroots communities to get active in energy and climate change policy, at the provincial, federal and international levels. Capacity development must be strengthened. There is a need for informed Aboriginal and Indigenous organizations to take the lead in organizing strategy, advocacy and training for First Nations. Our Dene, other First Nations communities and Indigenous support organizations must be more visible locally and in national campaigns.

Information is power. This is the reason that there must be a major focus on “building the base” with members of the First Nations and the Metis settlements, on starting with the grassroots. The Indigenous Environmental Network (www.ienearth.org), an Indigenous-run environmental justice non-profit organization based in the States, along with our Canadian allies, is working on this level. IEN will be launching the Canadian Indigenous Tar Sands Campaign (CITSC). This campaign aims to develop mechanisms for Dene, Cree and Metis grassroots peoples to have meaningful participation in decision-making, to make informed decisions, to speak for themselves on energy and climate issues and to link frontline climate and energy impacts to policy development.

The CITSC campaign will work towards the establishment of a sustainable energy and economic platform for First Nations and Metis. The platform will include both a moratorium on “new” fossil fuel development, large-scale hydropower and nuclear energy and, as an alternative to the tar sands, a call to prioritize the development of clean, renewable energy on First Nations and Metis land in Alberta. The campaign will build a broad-based regional coalition of First Nations and Metis grassroots—made of provincial-, regional- and community-level First Nations and Metis organizations and Band Council leadership—which will advocate for, and realize, sustainable energy and climate policies. The IEN recognizes, supports and promotes environmentally sound lifestyles, economic livelihoods and healthy, sustainable communities. As Indigenous peoples, we have a sacred responsibility to protect our human rights and to practice our cultural and spiritual beliefs.

Clayton Thomas-Muller, of the Mathais Colom Cree Nation (Pukatawagan) in Northern Manitoba, is an activist for Indigenous rights and environmental justice. He has worked with grassroots Indigenous communities to defend their Inherit, Treaty and environmental rights against unsustainable energy development and transnational energy corporations.
Gateway to Solidarity?

Pipelines and Indigenous communities in northern B.C.

by Carla Lewis

Two years ago, pipelines were the furthest concern from anyone’s mind. But today, most Indigenous communities in British Columbia have heard of the proposed pipelines and company names like “Enbridge” and, to a lesser extent, “Pembina” are tossed around like Kleenex.

The Enbridge Gateway Project was the first of the proposed pipelines to capture the attention of Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia, as this proposed project would directly impact unceded traditional territories. If carried forward, the pipeline would transport oil from Alberta’s tar sands to the coast, where it would be loaded onto tankers for transport to the US and China. A second, parallel pipeline would transport diluent, which is needed to enable heavy crude oil to flow from the tar sands to overseas refineries, from tankers originating in Russia to Alberta. Enbridge is just one company planning to take their lines across the province; others plan to follow and each will require separate right of ways, albeit on similar paths of economic gain.

Communities already dealing with a chronic lack of funding, time and personnel are now being forced to use scarce resources—rerouted from education, social services and other community portfolios—to try to stay ahead of the wave of large-scale industrial development and pressures resulting from the insatiable advances of industry.

For the past two years, our communities and respective tribal councils have struggled to keep up with various assessments, studies and communications. We eventually found ourselves in the courts.

In October of last year, the Carrier Sekani Tribal Council (CSTC) filed a provincial court challenge against the Ministry of Environment’s decision to establish a joint review panel regarding Enbridge’s pipeline application. The CSTC made multiple requests to be involved in the review process and were essentially ignored. Since then, a First Nations Review Panel has been formed consisting of the CSTC, two other tribal councils and seven other First Nations across the province who would be directly impacted by the proposed pipeline and oil tankers off the coast of British Columbia.

The First Nations Review Panel proposes to conduct a review that takes into consideration First Nations’ interests over and above the position of other stakeholders, and is based on the necessity of “prior, informed consent” from First Nations people when exploiting their unceded territory.

The wanton destruction of territories without Indigenous input is no longer the way to do business. The present review process fails to give weight to Indigenous perspectives, perspectives that often will not fit into a neat formula. The prospect of jobs and “economic gain” should not trump the health of a river that has been the life water of people for millennia, according to the worldview held by many Indigenous nations and peoples.

It’s not that First Nations are against all development, but non-renewable resource proposals that meet minimum environmental standards for maximum economic gain are often the only options put on the table. Development that offers sustainable solutions doesn’t seem to fit into the discussion, despite the oft-stated commitment to “sustainable development.”

Throughout this battle, the role of mainstream media has been to portray First Nations as “trouble-makers” who are trying to halt a booming economy and, as a result, are creating economic uncertainty. This relationship continues to be dysfunctional at best.

In reality, blockades are used as a last resort when the laws and policies of the Canadian state fail to take into consideration constitutionally protected Aboriginal rights and title. In fact, Indigenous people in Canada have a relationship of solidarity must be undertaken between Indigenous peoples and the rest of the population. We must all cast a glance forward and look beyond the boom to the eventual bust to decide if oil and pipelines are the best option for the next seven generations. Or is a more suitable form of sustainable development attainable?

So where are we to go from here? Sit idly by as pipelines cut new borders and deep wounds in the earth, disturb hundreds of watersheds and leave us the possibility of a spill? Aboriginal rights and title are possibly the brightest hope that Canadians have to combat pipeline developments in B.C. And of course, this is not just of concern to First Peoples; this is a dire situation for all Canadians and a relationship of solidarity must be undertaken between Indigenous peoples and the rest of the population. We must all cast a glance forward and look beyond the boom to the eventual bust to decide if oil and pipelines are the best option for the next seven generations. Or is a more suitable form of sustainable development attainable?

Carla Lewis, Wet’suwet’en First Nation

The coast near Kitimat will soon be a route for tankers carrying oil, diluents and liquid natural gas if the Gateway pipeline is constructed.

Jessica Johnson/Creative Commons 2.0
Sublime Tar Sands?
Edward Burtnynsky’s photography and Canada’s extractive industries

by Sylvia Nickerson

For over 20 years, Canadian artist Edward Burtnynsky has photographed some of the world’s largest sites of resource extraction and processing. He has documented uranium and nickel mines, stone quarries, oil fields, oil refineries, “urban mines,” including massive tire piles and compacted metal waste, giant factories, the recycling of single-hulled oil tankers and the construction of the Three Gorges Dam in China—the world’s largest hydro-electric project. As part of this quest, Burtnynsky has also documented the oil industry in Canada, including the Albertan tar sands. However, there is a noticeable difference between his work in Canada and his work overseas. When Burtnynsky takes his camera to Bangladesh or China, he reveals human labour as the driving force behind the landscapes of these industrial mega-projects. Human beings are what define these landscapes. In his photographs of the Albertan tar sands, however, the human figure is absent. Why did Burtnynsky choose to remove people from his portraits of Canadian industry?

The history of landscape painting and photography may help explain his choices. If people appeared at all in traditional landscape images, they served to show the overwhelming vastness of the subject. In Burtnynsky’s pictures of mines, mine tailings, quarries and urban mines from the 1980s and 1990s, he follows this tradition. People, or their residue in the form of tire tracks, parked cars, ladders, or abandoned backhoes, are used to reveal the vast scale of these extraction sites.

Burtnynsky has said that he aspires to create sublime landscapes for our time. The sublime landscape in the nineteenth century symbolized the overwhelming power of Nature over Man, represented by a vast and pristine vista of land. It reminded the viewer that Nature can be simultaneously threatening and beautiful. Burtnynsky has imagined the twentieth-century version of the sublime as a landscape transformed through human power into something equally beautiful and frightening. His photographs of mines and quarries shock the viewer with their otherworldly appearance, especially once one realizes that they are portraits of a land made unrecognizable through intensive industrial activity.

By eliminating people from the Canadian landscape, Burtnynsky shares something else with his nineteenth-century peers. When British painters came to Canada, literally removing Canada’s aboriginal people from the picture served the British agenda of colonization. In his photographs of other countries, Burtnynsky has put people back into colonized or capitalist landscapes, but by keeping them out of images of Canada, the agenda he is serving has come into question. In his Canadian photographs, the subject of the immense reorganization of land is the landscape, not the people. The images do nothing to challenge the prevailing Canadian ignorance about the enormous environmental and social consequences that will be the legacy of the Alberta tar sands project for generations to come.

For most of his career, Burtnynsky has studiously avoided politicizing his work and he has come under attack for his relentless pursuit to aestheticize his subject and render it ambiguous. However, this ambiguity is what draws viewers in again and again. It is both pleasurable and disturbing to see these transformed land-

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Works by Edward Burtnynsky: Oil Fields No. 23 (Cold Lake), Oil Fields No. 24, Oil Fields No. 25 (Fort McMurray)
Hard Times Sold in Vending Machines
Worker migration from Atlantic Canada to the tar sands

by Stuart Neatby

For Atlantic Canadians, the story of worker migration couldn’t be more familiar. Leaving the region for the "boom town" of the day has been a rite of passage since the 1970s. The successive waves of worker migration from east to west have been many—the last Alberta energy boom in the seventies, the construction boom in Toronto in the ‘70s and ‘80s, the collapse of the cod fishery in Newfoundland, followed by the collapse of coal mining in Cape Breton—and have always resulted in a particular pull for young workers away from the region. This regional story was immortalized by Donald Shebib’s classic 1970 film "Goin’ Down the Road," which follows two men who leave Cape Breton in search of a better life in Toronto, only to end up bouncing from one poorly paid job to another. The shock of rural life colliding with urban poverty was aptly captured in Bruce Cockburn's song of the same name, which he wrote for the film: "I came to the city with the sun in my eyes/ My mouth full of laughter and dreams/ But all that I found was concrete and dust/ And hard times sold in vending machines."

Today, it is difficult to exaggerate the impact that worker migration to the Alberta Tar Sands has had for Atlantic Canada. Although credible estimates for numbers of workers who have been moving west are difficult to gauge, few doubt that they are in the tens of thousands. One would be hard pressed to find anyone in the region who does not know someone working out west.

But the move by thousands of Atlantic Canadians to Fort McMurray in recent years differs from past worker migrations.

"The key difference," says Reg Anstey, president of the Newfoundland Federation of Labour, "is that in the other outmigrations of significance, like when the fisheries shut down, a lot of people took pretty lousy jobs."

According to Anstey, unlike during other times of economic collapse in Newfoundland, when workers took jobs in fish or meat-packing plants in Atlantic Canada and Ontario, Newfoundland labour is now a much sought-after commodity.

"This is the first time where almost everyone who’s working out there, their way up is paid and their way back is paid by the company," says Anstey.

As of 2006, the shortage of workers across the province was estimated by the Alberta government to be around 100,000 workers. Canadian National Resources Limited has begun offering three flights a week from Alberta to Newfoundland, while Air Canada has added a 'Fort McMurray Express.' The National Post reported in May that almost a third of the residents of Fort McMurray were believed to be from Newfoundland alone.

Anstey sees many advantages for Newfoundland from the oil boom. The province, like other regions of Atlantic Canada, is in the relatively early stages of developing its own oil and gas sector. Until the Lower Churchill Valley hydroelectric project and the Hebron offshore oil project are able to deliver high-paying jobs for Newfoundland's workforce, Anstey sees the migration of workers, whose return flights are likely booked in advance by their employers, as a method of training a generation of workers for these projects.

However, the pull of Atlantic Canadian workers travelling to Fort McMurray, the effects of this migration may not be fully known for years to come.

Steve Gaul, a resident of Halifax, worked various stints in the oil fields for a total of three years, most recently as a roughneck on a rigging crew. When asked about conditions on the job, Gaul says he discovered that exposure to harmful chemical agents was frequent.

“There’s lots of Benzene and substances that you’re...

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Working Full-Time
The work camps of Fort McMurray

by Lindsay Bird

Two mechanics from site picked me up at the Fort McMurray Greyhound station at 2pm. I had spent the uncomfortable six-hour bus ride from Edmonton beside a large, sweating man from Bathurst, New Brunswick, who worked at the same site to which I was travelling. When this connection was discovered, he excitedly phoned his sons, also on-site, to tell them ‘a girl was coming.’ My introduction to the alternate society of work camps had begun.

Of Wood Buffalo Region’s population of 80,000, over 10,000 live in work camps flung far and wide throughout the bush. Here, being female is akin to having a giant pair of antlers on your head and wearing neon clothing adorned with flashing, beeping lights -- all the time. In my camp, perhaps 30 or 40 of the 1400 people were women. The first time I attended meal hall, I made the mistake of wearing a mid-length skirt and, while trying to swallow incredibly inedible “food,” I overheard several conversations about the possible colour of my underwear.

Generally, work camps service the construction sector, with most contractors’ workforces living in trailers on or close to the worksite—anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours from Fort McMurray. The trailers each hold between 30 and 50 men, plopped onto a carved-out section of bush; these camps typically house 1,500 to 2,500 people. Like weird small towns, you see the same people over and over again, learning more about their habits than their personalities. Being a girl, this is naturally amplified. “You wore a red shirt yesterday” is both a brilliant observation and a good pickup line, in camp terms.

The camps are not trying to emulate small towns. Rather, they reinforce a sense of estrangement from the immediate surroundings; rules about what personal items are allowed are many and domestic comforts are few. Meal times are set, quiet hours are enforced and any unusual activities are investigated by the security guards. Most workers are on a rotational schedule, working six weeks at a time, before being flown— at company expense—to their home territory for two. Due to intense overcrowding, many camps have adopted what is known as “hotel-style service.” Employees check into a camp room for their shift and leave with all their belongings at the end, effectively forcing them to live out of a suitcase. Company policy states that “this emphasizes that our workers are on-site to work,” and not to establish any type of home within the camp.

This is exactly what makes camps successful in oil companies’ eyes. Workers living in camp are far more likely to have spotless attendance records than those living in town. There is not much point in missing work when all you can do with a day off is sit in an 8-by-12-foot bunk. The productivity of camp workers is therefore worth the expense of keeping them in camps, where the bill for a single day’s lodging can vary from $120 to $180 and is entirely picked up by the client or contractor. Oil company logic follows that by creating too plush an atmosphere within camps would lead to increased absenteeism and, at the very worst, a home away from home.

This institutionalized nomadism has contributed to the careless atmosphere most camp residents have towards Fort McMurray. It is not a pretty town and its air of neglect is palpable: as the saying goes, everyone works in Fort McMurray, but nobody lives there. Many workers avoid going to town altogether, preferring to wait in line to use the long-distance pay phones. Town nightlife is fraught with bar fights—especially between non-union and union members—centred on how much money one can spend at the strip club or casino. Outsiders would be amazed to learn that it is possible to throw $300 worth of toonies at a stripper over the course of an evening. The small upside of this testosterone fest: if you’re female, your drinks will always, always be bought for you.

These alive and alarmingly abundant stereotypes contributed to my thoroughly mixed reaction to camp. On the one hand, the camp functions as a refuge from these harsh elements of town life; but on the other, it subjects one to a totally unnatural way of living. Work is the focus of existence. As the “hotel-style” camps emphasize, life is something that happens when you’re away from camp. What exists in camp, then, is a society defined by work and routine, out of touch with larger civilization. As one camp resident of two years says, “Camp life is hard to describe to anybody who hasn’t been there. Even my family doesn’t get it.”

The drag of the daily routine, enforced always by rules, is indeed hard to convey to outsiders. In search of a small break in mid-December, my friend Dave bought a toboggan and brought it to go sledding on the hill behind the camp. We had talked about the possibility of sledding for weeks beforehand and the potential for an activity other than watching TV or getting drunk had us all excited. Three of us bundled up against the -30 degree weather one night and took the sled out—only to be stopped by a security guard after our first run down. “I don’t think there is a specific rule against this,” he said, “but you better stop anyway.” Minutes later, we were back in our rooms having a beer and the piercing disappointment we all felt could only be understood by someone else worn down by the monotony of camp.

The sense of mental isolation, compounded by geographic remoteness, means it takes a certain hardiness of personality to survive in camps. For those who can, there is the benefit of saving large amounts of money within short spans of time. The friendships formed in camps are close-knit, as people depend on their friends to stay sane in such an absurd environment. My camp life was positively shaped by the people I met there and they are the reason I look back at my time there somewhat fondly -- that is, until I remember the meal hall.
The Richest First Nation in Canada
Ecological and political life in Fort MacKay

by Macdonald Stainsby

The primarily Indigenous, mostly Cree (also ‘Chipewyan Dene’) community of Fort MacKay—just north of the internationally famous tar sand “boom” city of Fort McMurray—is said to be the “richest First Nation in Canada.” The alleged wealth is largely due to the fact that the community is surrounded by, and on top of, tar sand.

Home to about 500 residents, Fort MacKay is the only official community north of Fort McMurray on highway 63, and lies 40-odd kilometres down the Athabasca River. On a remote northern highway like this one, one would normally see car traffic every few minutes. On this particular road, cars go by every few seconds. When shifts at tar sands processing plants change over—the plants operate around the clock—the traffic is bumper-to-bumper and slows way beneath posted limits. Where two generations ago, there was nothing but muskeg forest, there is now sandy wasteland. Where there were rivers, there are now nine-storey-deep holes. Where there were lakes with fish, there are now “tailing ponds” filled with toxic waste left over from the extraction process—cannons are fired to prevent birds from landing in them and dying. Syncrude’s largest such “pond” is surrounded by one of the largest earthen-built dams on the planet.

“Every which direction you look, [tar sands extraction plants] all around us, they’re all around. And these two up above us here, those are the worst ones. These two are the worst polluters... that’s Syncrude and Suncor, they’re the worst ones because they’re so close to us too, you know?” Celina Harpe told us. An elder in Fort MacKay, Harpe has lived here all her life. When the mining operations began in the 1960s, they brought many changes, including serious health problems, to the community.

“People only died of old age in our days...very seldom—maybe the odd now and then, but other than that, few deaths, very few. But now? [Deaths] right and left, young people 37, 34, 43...in their forties, early fifties. People are dying here.”

“It’s got something to do with these plants, I’m sure of it myself because I’ve been here my whole life—in our day that’s not the way it was.”

After the plants began to operate, the water began to make people concerned for their health. Many locals who ran trap lines nearby lost their lines when the land was “scraped off,” in mining terms. Those whose trap lines were not destroyed describe the disappearance of many of the animals they depended upon for their food and their livelihood.

Blueberries and Saskatoon berries were once so abundant that everyone had more than enough to flavour their favorite recipes. Now, locals report, they are not scarce—they are simply gone.

Today, there is suspicion about the collusion of the Fort MacKay administration with Syncrude, Suncor and other corporations, companies that have been the driving force of the drastic changes in living conditions that have occurred in Fort MacKay.

The facts of the drastic changes visited upon Fort MacKay by operations like Syncrude and Suncor are not disputed. Few speak out as defiantly as Harpe. Whether because of the perceived inevitability of tar sands mining or the millions of dollars in “partnerships” offered by oil companies, the local Indian Act government—the First Nation—is going along with mining. (Under the Indian Act, the federal Minister of Indian Affairs has control over the funding of the Band.) While many others oppose the mining, they are less apt to go on the record in a small community like Fort MacKay.

Now, the Fort MacKay First Nation wants to begin a new joint venture with Shell in the tar sands themselves. This means that Fort MacKay will likely find itself opposed by the two First Nations of Fort Chipewyan, which is downstream from the tar sands. Fort Chipewyan has seen a drastic increase in rates of rare forms of cancer and other illnesses, but has not seen the millions in investment and “community partnerships.”

Perhaps as a result, its representatives oppose the expansion of the tar sands, and may find themselves in conflict with Fort MacKay in the approval process. However, it is an “open secret” that the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board review process is not much of a process. The board has yet to refuse a single application for tar sand mining.

Today, the problems of Fort McMurray have extended to Fort MacKay. There are many victims of random violence in the small community, violence often tied to drug and alcohol abuse. Downstream of the massive plant for Suncor along the Athabasca River, there is a collective sense of defeat to these “side-effects.” And when you cannot see the plumes rising out of the stacks, you can smell them in Fort MacKay’s living rooms—the smell of burning tar all day, every day.

A trip out to the Suncor plant by river can give one a sense of the size of the...
The tar sands industry now consumes 17 million cubic meters of natural gas per day.

It is enough natural gas to heat 3.2 million Canadian homes for a day.

By 2012, they will consume 57 million cubic meter of natural gas per day, enough to heat all Canadian homes for a day.

By 2030, the tar sands are forecast to consume over 142 million cubic meters per day of natural gas....

That's the combined capacity of both the Mackenzie Valley and Alaska pipelines.

From *Extraction!: Comix Reportage*, forthcoming from Cumulus Press in November 2007
For Many Women, Alberta’s Boom a Bust
Rising housing costs, lack of alternatives lead to precarious situations

by Maya Rolbin-Ghanie

Driven by the tar sands, Alberta’s white-hot economy continues to make headlines. But the gendered repercussions of the province’s boom are often neglected, understated, or altogether denied.

Alberta’s tar sands operations have made the province an attractive point of relocation for many in the last couple of decades. A large number of jobs have been created, many paying six-figure salaries. Other industries, most notably the service sectors, have had to compete with these salaries in a struggle to retain workers. As wages have been pushed higher in order to lure employees, rent has increased as landlords capitalize on the increases in income. Those without the resources or skills to tap into Alberta’s renowned boom and to profit from it are the most likely to have to deal with its negative consequences.

In the case of the tar sands, women have often been discouraged from pursuing the very resources and skills necessary to capitalize on the booming industry.

This is due in part to many female workers’ experiences with sexual harassment, gender discrimination and unequal wages. Sixteen years ago, Mobil Oil’s first female landman, Delorie Walsh, submitted a claim of gender discrimination, a poisoned work environment and unequal pay. She was finally compensated in October 2007.

Those benefiting most from the oil and gas workforce are male. For example, current male/female ratios are 79 to 21 per cent for geoscientists and 96 to 4 per cent for trades.

The significant gendered imbalance of access to jobs means unequal access to housing. Observers say this has led to a steady decline in quality of life for women. “The boom is great if you’re a CEO in downtown Calgary,” says Edmonton NDP MLA Ray Martin. “Saskatoon is now experiencing a mini-boom too. But this means that more and more people are falling behind.” The “successful” economy has created an urgent lack of affordable housing, transitional housing, and shelter spaces, particularly for women.

Women tend to be more susceptible to losing their homes due to abuse or conflict with a spouse or caretaker upon whom they are financially dependent. Because women are more likely to have children to look after, and are less likely to feel safe on the street or in shelters where men are also present, many return to abusive relationships when there is no alternative shelter available.

This is one of the reasons men make up the more visible segment of homeless populations, says author Susan Scott. Earlier this year, Scott interviewed over 60 homeless women across Canada about their lives. She is critical of the limited definition of the term “homeless.”

“If a woman is sleeping with her landlord to maintain a roof over her head, then she is homeless,” says Scott. “Other women will do it for money for drugs, to medicate a trauma that they’ve suffered which has gone untreated—they are also homeless. Others will hang out in a bar, hoping for a bed and a safe place—they are also homeless.”

The Women’s Emergency Accommodation Centre (WEAC) in Edmonton is the most well known of the few women’s shelters in the city. It can accommodate just 75 women per night, and there are generally 25 to 30 women staying there for a longer term, which means fewer beds available for those seeking emergency shelter.

Amy Gillis, an inner-city physician in Edmonton, says there are few other options for women seeking shelter. “There’s the George Spadie Centre, but you usually have to be intoxicated to go there. There’s the Hope Centre, but they have far fewer spaces available for women than men. There are not enough absolute spaces for women, and there is little stability in these places.”

The shelter situation in Fort McMurray is grimmer still. Currently, no shelters accept minors. A report released this month by the region’s Homelessness Initiatives Steering Committee found that some teenagers are resorting to prostitution in exchange for a bed or couch for the night.

Jan Reimer, Provincial Coordinator of the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters and a former mayor of Edmonton, says the need for spaces far outstrips supply. “Last year, we served 13,000 women and children. On top of that, 25,000 could not be accommodated and 15,000 simply could not find a place to stay. Only four shelters in Alberta have all of their beds funded by the province. The capacity really needs to be increased.”

Part of the reason there are so many more women and children in need of shelter than there is shelter space is that Alberta has no transitional housing program. As a result, there is often nowhere for them to go from the shelter, except back to the street. Establishing a good transitional housing program would help women dealing with trauma or legal issues, but more importantly, it would buy time, which is what many need most. “A lot of women can’t find a place to live, due to a lack of references, or a bad history with landlords. What they need is physical support in the community,” says Gillis.

Affordable, quality child care is one indication of a community’s support of women. Lack of child care can result in women’s inability to access social services necessary to get out of shelters. Alberta is the

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What in Tar Nation?
Life among the tar sands

by Maya Rolbin-Ghanie

We leave Fort McMurray and hitch a ride to Fort MacKay, a Native community 40kms north, where we stay for three days.

Celina, the elder with whom we stay, speaks of the trap lines from which she and her husband Edward once gleaned a life, and of the bushes teeming with berries that tickled this land before the tar sands plants opened, and stole their land, along with the health of the fish and animals. She lists the kinds of berries: raspberries, high bush cranberries, Saskatoon berries. She lists them off in circles, repeating the names, once, twice, three times, drawing attention to the abundance that she has no pictures to prove. She pauses after each name, breaking in remembrance to taste each one.

We talk about quality of life. About how apples and tomatoes, rumour has it, aren’t as robust, tasty or nutritious as they were in our parents’ generation and that our parents’ apples and tomatoes didn’t measure up to those of previous generations either. Oranges and celery; mangoes and carrots; fish, moose; the vitamins of life. I read an article about it that recites percentages, that recaps our parents’ generation and that our parents’ apples and tomatoes didn’t measure up to those of previous generations either.

Since the Alberta government implemented its Mineable Oil Sands Strategy in 2005, its priorities have been easier to justify and enforce: the area has been declared a “co-ordinated zone within which mining has the highest priority; policy is in place that specifically stipulates wildlife in the tar sands zone will not be protected before or during mining,” according to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Young people, old people and people in-between are dying of cancer. The air here is laced by unrelenting stacks.

Oil and water meet but refuse to coalesce in harmony. Like Celina, the people of Fort MacKay who live upstream from the plants get their drinking water from a source other than the river. Celina doesn’t trust the water anyway and has met with oil plant representatives and observed for herself their own unwillingness to drink tap water. As a result of one such meeting, Syncrude agreed to provide and pay for all the bottled water that she and her husband can drink. She smiles when she tells us that they hate her big mouth. The people living downstream from the plants, most notably in the isolated Native community of Fort Chipewyan (farther north and only accessible by plane), draw water directly from the Athabasca and are the most affected. Five cases of a rare cancer of the bile duct, cholangiocarcinoma, have occurred in Fort Chip’s population of 1,200 in the past five years. Normally, only one in 100,000 people contract it. Years ago, Celina tells us, white, non-native people in the neighbouring town of Fort McMurray complained of difficulty breathing, and of green-black, deadly smoke being emitted from a Syncrude plant. As a result, the plant was closed down.

She shows us pictures, not of high-bush cranberries, but of people she’s known, and some she’s loved. She tells us about her eldest son, who died six years ago. She speaks of how good-looking and kind he was. The neighbouring town of Fort McMurray, where he died, seems almost entirely populated by oil rig workers, or by those in close association. The town has seen massive growth in recent years: more people, more trucks, more drugs, violence and money. Before her son was stabbed to death, her eldest son, who died six years ago, she speaks of how good-looking and kind he was. The neighbouring town of Fort McMurray, where he died, seems almost entirely populated by oil rig workers, or by those in close association. The town has seen massive growth in recent years: more people, more trucks, more drugs, violence and money. Before her son was stabbed to death, Celina knew it had happened.

Our last morning in Fort MacKay we wake up to find that Celina has not returned from Bingo the night before. Just as we’re beginning to worry, she arrives. She has spent the night in the hospital with her youngest son, Murray. “I think he ate a bad hamburger,” she says. “Maybe food poisoning,” she seems to hope. I find myself hoping as well. How serious can food poisoning be? White people who eat in fancy restaurants get it, so it can’t be fatal.

“The barbecue was brand new,” she says. “You can’t just cook meat on a brand-new barbecue. There are toxic chemicals all over these things—you have to get the factory off of it before you use it to cook with.” She shakes her head at the floor and places her hand on the kitchen table to steady herself. “I don’t trust other people’s cooking. I don’t trust it unless I’ve cooked it myself. I just don’t trust it at all.” She continues to shake her head, sadly. “A lot of people don’t have a clue. They don’t know how to cook a burger right. The woman who cooked it didn’t even know that you can’t just buy something from the store and use it right away. She probably had no idea. Half the time people have no idea they’re eating poison,” she says.

We meet Billy in the only restaurant in Fort Chip. He works for Parks Canada as a firefighter, away from home. On days off, he has a few drinks. He drinks and has a lot to say. He tells us of his job at a tar sands plant, how it lasted three months. “They clear cut these huge areas,” he says, “but instead of giving it to the elders for firewood or something like that, they just bury it all underground with their huge machines.” He raises his voice in anger. “They’ve taken fish from this river with sores and puss all over them. They’ve even found fish with two heads.” He says, eyes wide. “Indians are supposed to live to 100,” he smiles, “but I know sooner or later, I’m going to catch something.” He is well-built, athletic, and seems healthy to me. “These plants know exactly what they’re doing,” he says. “They don’t care if they kill us all off. If we survive, it’s a bonus, but if some of us die of cancer, oh well.” I find myself wanting him to become the community activist, the one who makes the

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by Tim McSorley

Chantal Desharnais is no stranger to the outdoors or manual labour. Still, the 24-year-old Quebecker, who had previously worked in construction and spent a summer living on the banks of a B.C. river picking fruit for income had reservations about going to Calgary to work in the natural gas industry for the summer. It was the moral dilemma of working in an industry she has ethical disagreements with, not the physical labour, had her concerned, says the student in international relations at the Université du Québec à Montréal. As many before her, the lucrative work provided an opportunity to make enough money over the summer to cover her tuition fees and help with student loan debts.

She was prepared for the physical rigour of the work, but she never expected the sexism she would face—or the serious injuries she would sustain. After one month on the job, Desharnais would need to be transferred to an office job in Calgary after suffering a concussion, receiving five stitches to the back of her head, and a severely spraining her shoulder.

Despite what seems to be an ample need for workers in the Alberta oil and natural gas fields (the natural gas industry in Canada alone employed 151,327 people in 2006 and is growing), Desharnais found it difficult to get hired once she hitch-hiked her way out to Calgary. Company after company refused to grant her an interview.

Company after company refused to hire anyone—especially women. While she outright if they had a policy of not hiring women. Eventually, however, she started asking companies coy about the reasons why, she says it was clear that they were only two women on the crew, she was once again unexpectedly reassigned, this time as a shooter’s helper.

Despite the tough day, Desharnais stuck with it and was eventually transferred to work with someone a little more easy-going. Then, towards the end of the month, she was transferred back to line crew. While the work atmosphere was still far from comfortable, she felt the worst had passed, but after three more days on line crew, she was once again unexpectedly reassigned, this time as a shooter’s helper.

According to Menchuk, there was another reason for her constant reassignment. “I didn’t want to tell Chantal this to her face, but I’ve been told that she just couldn’t handle the work out in the field. She isn’t very big and it’s tough work carrying 30 pounds of equipment through the field and up mountains. I was told she just couldn’t keep up. Transferring her to shooter’s helper was to give her a chance; she would just need to follow

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The Tar Sands and Canada's Food System

Are beans the only cure for natural gas?

by Dru Oja Jay

Tar sands opponents point out that burning natural gas, a relatively clean fuel, to extract oil will result in massive increases in greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, some experts say the implications of using natural gas go far beyond global warming.

North American agriculture is deeply dependent on natural gas. Nitrogen fertilizer is chemically produced using a process that—currently—cannot be conducted efficiently without large amounts of natural gas. This fertilizer, in turn, is an essential nutrient in North America’s food production system. “In a fairly direct way,” says Darrin Qualman, Director of Research at the National Farmers Union, “natural gas is a primary feedstock for our food supply.”

While “peak oil,” the point at which global production of oil begins to decline, is subject to speculation, natural gas peaked in North America in 2003. Since then, more wells have been added, but production has declined slowly, while prices have increased sharply.

As a result, says Qualman, fertilizer companies are closing up shop and are moving their operations to places like Qatar, Egypt and Trinidad, where natural gas is cheap and plentiful, for now.

Canada has thus begun to import natural gas. At least 10 Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) terminals are planned in Quebec, British Columbia, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, where liquified gas will be brought in from Saudi Arabia, Russia and other producers.

It is, he says, a cause for concern in the coming decades. “If you’re farming in Saskatchewan or Manitoba, using a fertilizer supply based on natural gas from Alberta looks workable,” says Qualman. “But if tomorrow our fertilizer is made from natural gas sourced in Russia or the Middle East, we in effect become dependent on offshore, highly unstable supplies for our food system.”

In terms of fueling the current food system, there are few compelling alternatives to natural gas. Coal is a possible source of nitrogen but is not nearly as efficient. In some scenarios, nuclear power plants can be used to produce fertilizer.

A more fundamental alternative, says Qualman, is to begin restructuring the food system. Traditionally, nitrogen fixing is performed by crops like beans and chickpeas. Or, it is recycled to cropland from animal manures. Using crop rotation and natural sources to provide nitrogen and reducing energy inputs to agriculture requires changes to diets and far more intensive use of human labour.

Says Qualman, “Given the industrial food system and given a meat-based diet, nitrogen and natural gas are absolutely essential.”

This basic fact has global implications.

Vaclav Smil, a professor of Environment & Geography at the University of Manitoba, estimated in his 2004 book Enriching the Earth that 40 per cent of the protein in human bodies worldwide could not have been produced without the use of synthetic nitrogen. He concludes that roughly 2.5 billion of the world’s 6.7 billion people could not exist without synthetic fertilizer.

The number of people who depend on synthetic fertilizer for their existence will increase as the world population increases by an estimated two to four billion by 2050.

For Canada, the problem doesn’t stop at the food system. “When you think about the Middle East using up its gas supplies,” says Qualman, “that’s a non-recoverable resource, but those places aren’t cold. Canada depends on natural gas for heating. It’s going to be cold here for thousands of years and we’re using up our natural gas supply in decades.” According to Natural Resources Canada, nearly half of all Canadian homes—over six million households—are heated with natural gas.

Climate change—propelled by industrial projects like the tar sands—is also slated to have an adverse impact on agriculture. “Climatologists will tell you that evaporation trumps rainfall,” says Qualman. Small increases in temperature could mean much drier growing conditions on Canada’s prairies, even if rainfall increases.

The decision to invest huge amounts of natural gas into the tar sands will have ripple effects through the Canadian food system, says Qualman. “As North America becomes natural gas short, as we pass peak and become net importers, we’re going to set up a competitive trade-off between the uses of natural gas—tar sands, food, heating, and power generation among them.”

“We really should have a long-term plan around fertility and food before we even think about ramping up production in the tar sands...we have to look at the next 100 years of agriculture and the next 100 years of heating.”

“We should be saying: ‘Show us the 100-year plan for agriculture and then show us you’ve got a surplus left over that can be used for the tar sands.’”

In theory, some of the business world seem to agree that “letting the market decide” may not be the most sound energy strategy. A January 2005 article in Canadian Business asserts that “with no long-term guidelines and no surplus capacity, the only thing the market can deliver is ‘volatility.’”

The article concludes by quoting the president of a Calgary-based LNG company, saying “Economics 101 will solve the mess, but the trouble is it will do so with a machete...It will hurt.”
A new wave of exploitation
Canada, Alberta defy UN, sell off rights to disputed Lubicon land

by Kevin Thomas

United Nations officials were visibly perturbed when the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights met in a conference room in Geneva last year to consider the longstanding land rights dispute between the Lubicon Lake Indian Nation and the governments of Canada and Alberta.

Just seven months earlier, the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) had reaffirmed a 1990 ruling that found Canada was violating the Lubicon people’s human rights and told the Canadian government to negotiate a land rights settlement with the Northern Alberta based First Nation. The Committee had also ruled that Canada “should consult with the Band before granting licences for economic exploitation of the disputed land, and ensure that in no case such exploitation jeopardizes the rights recognized under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights].”

In the seven months following the October 2005 UNHRC decision, the Alberta government ignored the ruling entirely. Without so much as a courtesy call to the Lubicon Nation, Alberta sold conventional oil and gas leases and exploration licences to over 65,000 hectares of Lubicon traditional Territory, approved 50 new oil and gas wells and approved almost 50 new pipelines on Lubicon lands.

Then, as UN officials gathered in May 2006 to review the Lubicon case, Alberta announced over 50,000 hectares of Lubicon territory would be put on the auction block for new tar sands exploitation without notifying or consulting the Lubicon people.

Upon wrapping up the hearings, the UN officials issued a sharply-worded ruling again, pushing Canada to resolve the dispute and consult with the Lubicon people before issuing new leases or licenses on their lands.

The Canadian and Albertan governments have done neither.

The Lubicon Lake people are an Indigenous Nation of approximately 500 people living near Peace River in northern Alberta, Canada. They have never surrendered their rights to their Traditional Territory in any legally or historically recognized way. When a treaty was negotiated with other Indigenous peoples in the region in 1899, treaty negotiators never travelled inland to Lubicon territory and they were therefore left out of the treaty process. Even by its own Constitutionally-enshrined process, Canada has never secured rights to the lands in dispute.

Despite the unresolved land rights—which in any society that valued the rule of law should have given pause to further encroachment—Lubicon Traditional Territory has been ravaged by multi-billion dollar resource exploitation activity including logging and large-scale oil and gas extraction. Over $13 billion in oil and gas resources have been taken from their lands. By 2002, over 1,700 oil and gas well sites and countless kilometres of pipelines were situated within Lubicon Traditional Territory.

These massive resource exploitation activities have decimated the traditional Lubicon hunting and trapping economy and way of life, and threaten the very existence of the Lubicon Lake People as a distinct Indigenous society. With the onset of resource exploitation there has come terrible social and health problems which the Lubicon people never had to face before, such as asthma and other respiratory problems, cancers of all kinds, skin diseases and miscarriages.

Although the Lubicon people have fought for years to establish a modern treaty with Canada that would provide them with reserve lands, basic amenities like running water and decent housing, a new economy and some control over environmental and wildlife matters in their Traditional lands, Canada has let the situation deteriorate further. Canada has not sent a negotiator to the table since December 2003.

The Alberta government, for its part, has further exploited the lack of a land rights settlement by opening up the area for “heavy oil” exploitation in recent years.

“Heavy Oil” is a nicer-sounding word for tar sands that, when heated, can be extracted through oil wells rather than strip-mined.

Since the province of Alberta began promoting the exploitation of tar sands in the area, huge operations have sprung up downwind and downstream from the Lubicon community despite Lubicon objections. And beginning in 2004, a number of companies proposed to begin large-scale “heavy oil” extraction projects on 63-square miles right in the heart of Lubicon Territory immediately

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Smoking in the Greenhouse
Tar sands growth makes meeting Kyoto targets unlikely

by Yuill Herbert

The Kyoto Protocol is a legally binding agreement to the international treaty called the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Its objective is “the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”

The Kyoto Protocol aims to reduce global emissions by five per cent by 2010. The UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that reductions of 50 to 85 per cent by 2050 are needed to stabilize the climate at safe levels.

Under the Kyoto agreement, Canada is committed to reducing emissions to 563 megatonnes. At current trends, Natural Resources Canada projects Canada’s emissions will exceed this level by 36 per cent—or 265 megatonnes—by 2010. By international law, countries that exceed their targets are required to make up the difference, plus an additional 30 per cent, in the next commitment period.

In a detailed analysis, the Pembina Institute concluded in 2005 that oil sands are the single largest contributor to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions growth in Canada, with a rapidly increasing share of the country’s total emissions. Emissions from the oil sands are projected to increase between 450 and 560 per cent between 2003 and 2020.

Commercial development of the oil sands began in 1967. In 1995, the Alberta Chamber of Resources laid out a strategy that envisioned tar sands production doubling or tripling by 2020. This timeline was exceeded by 16 years—oil sands production more then doubled by 2004 to 1.1 million barrels per day. Current projections range from the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers’ estimate of 2.7 million barrels per day by 2005 to the government of Canada’s estimate of six million barrels per day by 2030.

Greenhouse gas emissions projections for the oil sands are complex. For example, high pressure steam is used to melt the bitumen so it can be extracted from the sand—for this reason, producing oil from bitumen results in three times the greenhouse gas emissions compared with the equivalent barrel of light or medium crude. While relatively clean-burning natural gas is currently used to provide the steam, proposals for coke or bitumen could double the emissions, while nuclear power would lower greenhouse gas emissions but produce nuclear waste.

The federal government has not publicly released its projections of future GHG emissions from the oil sands since December 1999. However, the rapid growth of the oil sands corresponds with the dramatic increases in the government’s estimate of how much Canada will overshoot its Kyoto target. In 1997, Canada anticipated its emissions would exceed its Kyoto target by 137 MT, whereas the most recent estimate in 2005 was 270 MT, a one hundred per cent increase.

Pembina Institute offers the only concrete numbers. In 2003, emissions from the oil sands accounted for 3.4 per cent of Canada’s total. As the oil sands continue to grow, Pembina projects that by 2010 they will account for 7.5 to 8.2 per cent of Canada’s total emissions, under current trends.

Between 2000 and 2020, the Canada Research Energy Institute anticipates that development and production activities in the oil sands will lead to an increase in GDP of $885 billion, reaching three per cent of the country’s total GDP by the end of 2020. As Stéphane Dion famously stated in an interview when he was environment minister: “There is no minister of the environment on Earth who can stop this [oil sands development] from going forward because there is too much money in it.”

At the UN emergency meeting on climate this October, Stephen Harper stated, “The core principle of Canada’s approach to climate change is balance. We are balancing environmental protection with economic growth.”

Harper’s greenhouse gas emissions strategy is based on carbon intensity. This means that instead of reducing overall GHG emissions, oil sands projects can successfully meet the Harper government targets while, reports Pembina, quadrupling output with the end result of tripling emissions. The regulations also give new oil sands projects a three-year grace period from any emissions restrictions, with an unknown impact.

The Pembina Institute is calling for the oil sands to be carbon neutral by 2020 by using a combination of offsets and carbon capture and storage. Such a strategy has its detractors; organizations such as Carbon Trade Watch argue that offsets encourage a business-as-usual approach, when in reality dramatic changes are required.
Impacting Unimpaired

SPP and TILMA are aimed directly at unimpeded tar sands extraction

by Macdonald Stainsby

Demonstrations against the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) began in the Summer of 2007, but several of the issues raised by anti-SPP organizers invoked déjà vu for many observers: informal agreements, secret talks, plans to do away with layers of national sovereignty in favour of corporate rules of engagement set to supersede labour organizing, environmental regulations or human rights. The laundry list of rule changes sounded a lot like debates of years past—the FTA, MAI, APEC, FTAA and NAFTA.

However, a deeper look at the driving force behind the new acronyms tells a different story, one of a world with new dynamics like peak oil, tar sands and the extreme measures that North American governments are attempting to use in the tar sands to keep an oil-dependent economy going.

Before the SPP became a larger issue nationally and continentally, the Trade, Investment & Labour Mobility Agreement (TILMA) had already been passed in British Columbia and Alberta. The agreement, having passed as legislation and set to be “phased in” by April 2009, plays a role complementary to the SPP and continues to be similarly criticized by many organizers for the anti-democratic way it has been implemented.

According to an analysis published by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, TILMA “encompasses provincial and local governments, regional districts, school boards, health and social services.

“Nearly every action by a government, now and in the future, is potentially constrained unless expressly excluded in the agreement. Measures are defined broadly and include any legislation, regulation, standard, directive, requirement, guideline, program, policy, administrative practice, or other procedure.”

CUPE also describes the SPP as “another attempt of corporate America, in partnership with their political and corporate allies in Canada and Mexico, to reduce the power of government to protect citizens from profit-hungry business.

“Their intention is to scale down government regulations and controls that try to protect our society, culture and environment. Specifically, the SPP will minimize controls in areas like immigration, food and agriculture, natural resource exploitation, public services and entertainment.”

TILMA is a new set of limitations on government’s ability to regulate and the SPP is the removal of a pre-existing set of regulations. Both TILMA and the SPP have specific aims that go beyond the usual attempt to enshrine investors’ rights and protect corporations from government regulations.

Both agreements pave the way—in many cases literally—for the largest industrial project in history to move forward: a project that calls for the extraction of over 170 billion barrels of recoverable oil from the tar sands of Alberta’s Athabasca, Peace and Cold Lake regions.

The SPP and TILMA have anticipated popular resistance and preemptively removed the ability of governments to control the massive supply of energy, land, water and labour needed in the tar sands. They similarly preempt governments’ ability to regulate the destruction and pollution that the “gigaproject” will create.

The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP) is concerned.

“As energy workers, we are compelled first of all to respond to the SPP energy agenda,” the CEP said in a statement. “Through the SPP and the North American Energy Working Group, the governments of Mexico, United States and Canada have formed an unprecedented collaboration with energy corporations to promote the continental integration of our energy industries and infrastructures.”

The result has surprisingly few benefits for Albertans or Canadians. A massive, ecologically rich region will be reduced to an industrial sacrifice area. The synthetic crude that it renders will go south to the US. Royalties for Albertans and Canadians are minimal, and communities living in the vast area that will be strip-mined—Indigenous and settler alike—will be dismantled.

The “Oil Sands Experts Working Group,” a part of the 2006 SPP meetings in Houston, calls the tar sands “a significant contributor to energy supply and security for the continent.” According to the group, it was founded “when the three countries agreed to
collaborate through the SPP on the sustainable development of the oil sands resources.” The working group includes the US, Canadian and Alberta government representatives.

What does “sustainable development of the oil sands resources” consist of? The same SPP report says that it requires expanded “integrated long distance pipelines,” plans for which are “already in place” to accommodate “the certain doubling of oil sands production to two million barrels per day by 2010.

“The five-fold expansion anticipated for oil sands products in a relatively short time span,” the report says, “will represent many challenges for the pipeline industry.”

To accomplish this, the report concludes, “Governments are encouraged to streamline the regulatory approval process and better manage the risk to both pipeline and energy projects.

“Canadian governments have already gone a long way to co-ordinating and streamlining the environmental and regulatory approvals, but more needs to be done.”

TILMA sets up a free trade zone between Alberta and B.C. that “breaks down barriers” for all industries. April 2007 saw the official beginning of the TILMA agreement, sold as giving Alberta and B.C. a “competitive” way to deal with Ontario’s vast size advantage. In reality, TILMA turns the provinces into locations where corporations can sue any person or entity that tries to legislate or otherwise invoke regulations that would make investment more “troublesome.” The agreement bans measures which “impact or impair” investment and allows even an individual investor the right to sue governments to knock down such “impediments” and receive compensation for loss of revenue.

What can be seen as an impediment under TILMA is extensive. Under NAFTA, corporations can “challenge” legislation that affects their profits. A third party then rules on the “dispute” at hand. This has seen Canada paying to maintain some of its legislation around tobacco and environmental regulations, for example.

TILMA, however, starts on the assumption that the investor is correct. Unlike the resolution process seen in Chapter 11 of NAFTA, the current agreement includes an automatic up-to-$5 million penalty for a government body (at any level other than federal) that violates the rules of “free access” for capital. For example, if a city blocks the construction of a building for reasons of heritage, costing a corporation a projected $4 million, then the governing body that invokes the regulations “impacting or impairing” owes that corporation $4 million.

Article 3 of TILMA reads, in part: “Each Party shall ensure that its measures do not operate to restrict or impair trade between or through the territory of the Parties, or investment or labour mobility between the Parties.” The agreement has specifically designed protocols for hearings to be held if one or more of the signatories are in breach of the agreement.

These secretive deals and agreements are taking place during the single largest energy policy shift in North America since the peaking of US domestic oil production in the seventies.

Internationally, the US is in a scramble for remaining oil reserves. Chinese demand for oil continues to grow. Disasters such as hurricanes and war—and the fact that only one barrel of oil is discovered for every nine that are used—have brought oil prices to record highs since the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. With an economic and military structure that needs vast supplies of hydrocarbons everyday, North American policy will be when Chinese investment in Canadian tar sands and Venezuelan oil development make it increasingly difficult for us to get access to the resources.”

That hypothetical situation has come about more quickly, since the Iraqi resistance has cut off access to “stable” flows of petroleum and Venezuela has reduced its contribution to US energy markets by one third. The US has shifted their boom from Baghdad and Kirkuk to Fort McMurray and Grand Prairie. Many Venezuelans who oppose their country’s socialist government have re-settled in Alberta.

Whether led by Liberals or Conservatives, Canada has been more than willing to help this shift. Approvals for tar sands operations and newly designed agreements help to take Tar Sands development to unfathomable levels of expansion.

The industry that extracts bitumen and then crude oil from tar sands was once aiming to get to production levels of one million barrels per day (bpd) by 2012. Last year, the average already surpassed 1.3 million. The swiftly rising price of oil and the near-impossibility of a long term drop in price has suddenly allowed a major shift towards producing this oil, which is only profitable at a barrel price of at least $30.

The production process of the synthetic oil is unlike anything else: there are huge labour and energy needs currently unavailable to the producers, needs that are being drawn up and planned through TILMA and the SPP.

The US Department of Energy and Natural Resources Canada had another secret meeting, along with US energy corporations, in February 2006. Some details of the meeting were leaked earlier this year to the CBC. The agenda: to reduce labour and environmental rights in order to ramp up production from the Athabasca, Peace and Cold Lake tar sands to five

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Can Pew’s Charity be Trusted?
US foundations give millions to Canadian environmental groups

by Dru Oja Jay

Since major foundations in the US began funding environmental groups in the late 1980s, many grassroots environmental activists have sounded the alarm about the rise of the “Big Greens.” Featuring six-figure salaries and foundation funding, critics say the large environmental NGOs coopt grassroots movements and exercise control over what issues are brought up.

Recently, some activists are warning of a similar shift in Canada. In 2006, land-use planner Petr Cizek wrote an article for Canadian Dimension, calling attention to millions of dollars from US foundations being given to Canadian environmental groups.

The money comes from the Pew Charitable Trusts, which is endowed by the fortune of Joseph Pew and his heirs, as well as more recent donors. Joseph Pew founded Sun Oil, now Sunoco, a US oil company with revenues of $36 billion in 2006. Under Pew, Sun Oil also founded Suncor, a Canadian counterpart to Sun Oil and currently one of the two largest operations in Alberta’s tar sands. Suncor has been independent since 1995.

Sunoco’s US refineries process synthetic crude oil from the tar sands. According to a 2004 Philadelphia Inquirer report, a Sunoco-run Ohio refinery processes 100,000 barrels of synthetic crude per day.

The Pew foundation’s original mission reflects on “the evils of bureaucracy, the paralyzing effects of government controls on the lives and activities of people, and the values of the free market.” Pew money has funded many right-wing Christian groups and conservative think tanks, including the Heritage Foundation, the John Birch Society, and the American Enterprise Institute.

In the early 1990s, the Pew Trusts began funding environmental groups.

Since 2003, Pew has spent about $41 million on programs on the Canadian boreal forest. Much of this money went environmental and aboriginal groups, and came into Canada via through the Canadian Boreal Initiative (CBI). CBI is technically a project of Ducks Unlimited, a conservation group operating in the US and Canada, though this relationship is not stated in materials on CBI’s web site. CBI has no board of directors, and no official status as an organization other than its affiliation with Ducks Unlimited. Critics point out that there that this leaves no mechanism for holding CBI accountable for how it uses its money.

According to Executive Director Larry Innes, CBI gives out approximately $2 million per year, though the figure varies. The money is disbursed in roughly equal measure to conservation NGOs and aboriginal groups. Suncor, among others, is listed as one of CBI’s “industry partners.”

Does the money have an effect on the groups’ agenda? “Our role is convener and talent scout,” says Innes. CBI’s aim is to be “in a position to advance conservation objectives.” In many cases, CBI sets up meetings between industry, aboriginal groups and conservationists in order to establish common priorities.

Lindsay Telfer, director of the Sierra Club’s Prairie Region, which has received CBI funding in the past, says that groups need to be careful with funding sources.

“Is there a risk that some environmental groups are going to go down a more conservative path because they get funding? I don’t doubt that,” Telfer told the Dominion. “We have to keep our eyes on our mandates and our goals.”

“I believe I’ve lost funding because of our positions on the tar sands, but where I’ve lost it, I’ve picked it up in other places,” says Telfer. “It’s a difficult debate, because in some ways all money is dirty money.”

“The question to ask is, ‘Are there ties to how that money is being spent?’”

Cizek says his critique of Pew funding “doesn’t have to do with whether money is tainted, but whether a funder directly interferes with the agenda of an environmental organization.”

“The Pew Charitable Trusts have consistently set up front groups” that act as a drag on the overall demands of environmental groups, Cizek says.

He sees a “pattern of funding from CBI” corresponding to “a pattern of incredible timidity among the mainstream environmental organizations, who don’t seem to be able to take a principled stand on anything.” Cizek notes that Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) and the World Wildlife Federation (WWF), two major recipients of CBI funding listed as “partners” in CBI’s TV ads, have taken a “low-hanging fruit” strategy of lobbying for protection of areas that are of little interest to industry.

Innes says CBI was founded to address a “tremendous opportunity to do development differently in Canada.” The opportunity, Innes says, is the culmination of a series of trends in conservation work: the recognition of treaty rights, continued on page 46 »
Environmentalism in Alberta?
Activists say communities are beginning to stand up to tar sands

by Samantha Power

In Alberta it’s easy to forget what political change looks like. Still, in a province coated with deep blue Tory promises of a stable economic future, the paint is beginning to wear thin. In three consecutive consultations Albertans have clearly stated that they desire government intervention, whether it’s to create housing, to slow the pace of growth, or to increase the royalties collected from tar sands extraction.

Following his 1992 election victory, Premier Ralph Klein declared the province ‘open for business,’ and Albertans, fearful of growing debt, accepted a vision of stable growth after years of economic depression. As natural resources were opened up to massive exploitation, however, the result has been an overheated economy, and a crumbling infrastructure unable to handle the influx of workers and families.

Today, Albertans are beginning to stir. Leila Darwish, Associate Prairie Chapter Director of the Sierra Club, sees change afoot. “In Alberta, for the first time in a long time we’ve been hearing more and more from impacted communities that the government they’ve supported no longer supports their interests. As an environmental movement we have to be ready to act on that.”

“For years and years environmental activists and scientists have been raising the problems of all these issues and for years they have just been completely ignored. The community has lost a lot of that sense of success about moving that environmental agenda forward,” says Bill Moore-Kilgannon, Executive Director of Public Interest Alberta. But as a long-time Alberta activist, Moore-Kilgannon believes the environmental message is finally getting through. “We’re now hearing sentiments saying, yes we produce oil here, but ultimately we are living here and we want to have clean water.”

After 10 years in the environmental movement, Darwish says it’s about mobilizing communities. “There has been a lot of negotiating with government. It’s one thing to sit at the table if you have power and a big stick, but if you don’t have any power, you can’t negotiate.”

With recent threats of nuclear power stations in the communities of Whitecourt and Peace River, local activist movements are growing. The Tipping Point project in Whitecourt is composed of parents and concerned community members—exactly the composition growing movements need to see. They’re not alone. The Sierra Club is in these communities providing training and information on political action. Holding workshops for activists and public forums for the larger community, Darwish says the Sierra Club is attempting to put power back in the people’s hands. “We need to be mobilizing communities and people,” says Darwish, “as a movement not just reaching out to join us on our big campaign, but to help people in a local fight and empower them to step it up in their own communities.”

Valerie Langer, a campaigner with B.C. ForestEthics’ Great Bear Rainforest campaign, thinks Albertans are on the right path. “The population of Alberta is in the right place, they’re getting angry and getting wise in how their land is given away to corporate interests.” Working to save the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia, a campaign that was ultimately won, Langer credits Greenpeace’s success opened a new office in Alberta.

Darwish’s hopes remain with the people. “We have a government that thinks people are pretty complacent and can get away with doing whatever they need to do and we need to show that people are willing to fight, and to fight hard.”

“Stop the tar sands man” and other demonstrators appeared outside a stampede breakfast hosted by Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach. Activists say Albertans are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of oil development.
Sustainable Tar Sands Development?
Government is responsible, say experts

by Rachel Penner de Waal

Alberta’s current royalty regime has likely cost the province more in lost revenue than Trudeau’s National Energy Program did, according to a senior policy analyst at the Pembina Institute.

Dan Woynillowicz, who works with the environmental think tank, says the September 18 provincial review of the royalty system proves that Albertans aren’t getting their fair share from tar sands development. The review advises increasing the royalty rate from 25 per cent to 33 per cent.

Alberta Energy spokesperson Tim Markle says the province will respond to the review’s recommendations toward the middle or end of October.

“The royalty system was developed a long time ago as an incentive to produce our oil up north,” Markle explains. “While oil sands are certainly the future, the majority of what we receive now is the result of natural gas.”

The oil industry has said an increase in royalties will scare off investors and ruin the economy. Woynillowicz says the industry’s reaction, while expected, is disturbing.

“It is overstated, full of rhetoric and not grounded in reality. Producers are looking to their own interests and doing so in a way that is deceiving Albertans.”

Woynillowicz points out that while producers claim the review panel didn’t use the right data, they were using a 10-year-old report to substantiate their claims. He also notes that over the past 50 years, “an incredible amount of money” from the federal and provincial governments facilitated technological innovations that private corporations needed to develop the tar sands.

Woynillowicz says the oil industry has been able to create fear over the review because the sector plays such a significant role in job creation and government revenues. If the province’s economy were more diverse, one industry wouldn’t have so much leverage over the government.

“The government is responsible to protect Alberta from boom and bust,” says Woynillowicz. “It needs to diversify the economy so we are not so dependent on energy resource development and a global supply and demand market.”

Woynillowicz says the Pembina Institute doesn’t advocate government intervention in oil sales or foreign investment in the tar sands, but says the province needs to manage the rate of development.

As for the royalties the province does collect, Woynillowicz says they need to be better managed. Considering that petroleum is a non-renewable resource, the province should be saving a portion of revenues to ensure future Albertans can continue to have a high quality of life, he says.

The Alberta Liberals advocate taking almost one third of annual non-renewable resource revenues and dividing it among four areas, including the Heritage Fund, the province’s savings fund. Kevin Taft, leader of the provincial Liberal party, also believes the province needs to create a long-term strategy for tar sands development. His approach would include partnering with other western provinces.

“If I were the premier, I would be calling a meeting of the other provinces to sit down and look at ways we can work together to determine our own destinies. Right now, the Alberta government is just shrugging its shoulders,” says Taft. “One million barrels of unprocessed bitumen are leaving the country every day. We can’t handle it all in Alberta. Think of what we can do together as a team.”

According to the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers, production from the tar sands is expected to reach four million barrels a day by 2020.

However, Markle says the province doesn’t have a strategy for developing the tar sands. That is left up to producers.

“Industry is the driver of it,” says Markle. “The government is basically here to ensure the resource is mined in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way. We are stewards of the resource on behalf of Albertans.”

Woynillowicz says the tar sands are being “mismanged” and the province has been unwilling to address the rate of development. The Pembina Institute advocates a moratorium on new tar sands projects, something the majority of Albertans support, says Woynillowicz.

The rapid development of the tar sands is the root cause of economic inflation, neglected infrastructure and environmental damage, he says. But oil producers are responsible to their shareholders and won’t voluntarily decide to slow down development.

“This is a matter of public land. The government has the responsibility for creating the playing field,” says Woynillowicz.

He points out that the federal government also has clear areas of jurisdiction, such as in the area of greenhouse gases and global warming. However, Ottawa is not living up to its job of representing all Canadians due to many reasons, including the support the Conservative minority government has from Alberta.

“When they do introduce new regulations that would impact the oil sands, they are creating large loopholes (for the industry),” says Woynillowicz. “To date, the federal government has been dodging their responsibility.”

He says if Canadians want the federal government to play a role in tar sands development, they can communicate their wishes through a variety of ways, including a federal election.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers did not return calls.
different kinds of cancer, as well as what we call auto-immune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, various skin rashes,” O’Connor told the Dominion. “The malignant—the cancerous diseases have been the biggest concern.”

One condition, Cholangiocarcinoma, normally occurs in one out of 100,000 people. But in Fort Chipewyan, “We’ve had two tissue biopsy confirmed cases...and possibly another three or four which didn’t actually get to tissue biopsy diagnosis.”

“In a population of between 750 and 1200, that’s very unexpected.”

“There are all kinds of sicknesses going on,” said Allan Adam, a councillor with ACFN. “The elders say that before, in the 70s, people weren’t sick like they are now. That’s when all the oil sands started developing.”

Warning signs of toxicity have also turned up in animals. “Some people say that they’ve seen spots inside the animals, that they won’t eat the moosemeat because there’s a different taste in it now,” said Adam. “Fish have different growths on them, that weren’t there before. Pusses growing out of their skin, and the gills are deformed on some of them.”

After O’Connor took his claims public and called for an inquiry into the effects of the tar sands operations on water, he became the subject of an official complaint by officials at Health Canada. He subsequently gained the support of the community, environmental groups and First Nations. The Alberta Medical Association unanimously passed a resolution defending his “professional obligation and his right to speak out when he observes something.”

Chief Roxanne Marcel of the Miskisew Cree First Nation has issued an appeal: “Our message to both levels of government, to Albertans, to Canadians and to the world who may depend on oil sands for their energy solutions, is that we can no longer be sacrificed.”

Toxins from tailing ponds aren’t the only problem on the Athabasca, however. Estimates have oil production at 3 million barrels per day by 2015. At this rate, the Athabasca tar sands are projected to last over 400 years. But along with the effects of climate change, water usage will exacerbate the drying of the Athabasca.

Because the Athabasca River is iced-over for long periods, it is susceptible to low oxygen levels from decomposing organic matter. Diminished flows could exacerbate low oxygen levels. This threatens high flows that flood shallow-side channels and perched basins in the delta, which are critical spawning grounds for fish like walleye.

“About the most positive thing I can say is that I’m glad I’m a human being and not a fish in Alberta,” said Schindler.

While Fort Chipewyan and other communities downstream from the tar sands are the first to suffer, scientists say Alberta is not far behind.

The 1900s, said Schindler, has been unusually wet in Alberta, but that is not likely to remain the case. “Any farmer will tell you that it was pretty borderline for agriculture here in the twentieth century, and a good part of the province had to rely on irrigation water.”

“If we get a return to those earlier conditions with the effects of climate change and with the high population and industrial growth here, we have the makings of a perfect storm with respect to effects on water.”

While oil companies pumping over 100 billion gallons of water out of the Athabasca every year will be the main problem for life downstream on the Athabasca, it is likely to be climate change—fueled increasingly by the tar sands—that will affect the water supply of Edmonton and Calgary.

“Alberta’s saving grace has been the water that flows out of the Rocky Mountains,” said Schindler. “The only reason we have developments like Calgary and Medicine Hat is because of that water. That water is drying up.”

“It’s a little bit ironic that the province that’s been opposing greenhouse-gas regulations the most is going to be the first to suffer, but that’s where we are,” said Schindler in May of this year.

That tar sands mining is the cause of toxins in the water and the recent upturn in diseases and cancers is a foregone conclusion for many residents of Fort Chipewyan.

Nonetheless, O’Connor says that the way forward lies in getting the government to investigate the problem and verify the source of the illnesses.

“I’ve asked for a baseline health study to be done in the community. This has been asked for before,” said O’Connor. “If the population south of here is concerned about the health of this community, I would expect further pressure for such a study to be done will result in it being done and will shed much-needed light on what is happening.”

Schindler says that the immediate solution is for the government to install a water treatment plant in Fort Chipewyan, to address the problem with the drinking water, and then investigate.

For George Poitras, the battle over the ongoing mining comes down to the fundamental right to exist.

“If we don’t have land and we don’t have anywhere to carry out our traditional lifestyle, we lose who we are as a people. So if there’s no land, then it’s equivalent in our estimation to genocide of a people.”

“Here, we’re living in a G8 country, fully developed, one of the most advanced countries as far as quality of life and as Indigenous people, we’re still fighting for our existence.”
“If a woman is sleeping with her landlord to maintain a roof over her head, then she is homeless. Other women will do it for money for drugs, to medicate a trauma that they’ve suffered which has gone untreated—they are also homeless.

Others will hang out in a bar, hoping for a bed and a safe place— they are also homeless.”

Women and housing, continued from page 20 »

only Canadian province that has not added child care spaces over the last 15 years. In fact, it is the only province that has seen a decrease; between 1992 and 2004, the number of spaces dropped by 7.2 per cent.

Despite a serious lack of child care spaces, Alberta’s population is growing at five times the national rate, and faster than anywhere in the Western world. The strong economy has encouraged migration to the province, which has contributed to a 10.4 per cent increase in total population since 2001, and a rental vacancy rate of 0.9 per cent—the lowest in a generation, and a third of the national average.

If current economic growth continues apace to 2025, the province could face an estimated shortfall of 332,000 workers, many of whom are expected to come from other countries, and will also need places to live. Already, housing formerly considered affordable has been purchased for “worker housing.” There now exists a new group of workers that cannot afford to pay rent. In Fort McMurray, for example, it is common to pay over $1,000 for one room.

“Not enough money is being spent on infrastructure to keep up with the speed of tar sands development,” says Ray Martin. “I think that there are just too many tar sands projects going on right now. There should be fewer projects.”

For example, a law stipulating the amount of legal increases, and a law limiting rent increases to only once a year, are complementary, whereas picking and choosing from the recommendations creates loopholes. “There is resistance to approving the whole package,” says Martin.

“One of the main arguments is that accepting rent controls would provide even less incentive for the government to create much needed affordable housing. But the fact remains that there are no limits on rent and I still haven’t seen more affordable housing being created.”

A tenancy law passed in May that promises tenants a full year’s eviction notice (when landlords plan to convert their apartments to condos) is being avoided in practice through a number of loopholes. The full year’s notice only applies to periodic tenants, whose leases are renewed without notice. For everyone else, the majority of whom are fixed-term tenants, the lease ends on the date indicated, and no notice has to be given by the landlord to end the tenancy.

Dania Kochan, an Edmonton resident whose lease had expired, had made an agreement with her landlord to rent on a month-to-month basis. In June, she was given one month’s eviction notice, and told by Service Alberta, the government branch that oversees and enforces tenancy laws, to “get a lawyer” when she complained.

Jim Gurnett of the Edmonton Coalition on Housing and Homelessness (ECOH) finds the situation tiring. “Poor tenants are not a high priority,” says Gurnett.

“Just as long as the government can point to a law that’s there to protect them,” they feel that’s enough. There were 4,100 condo conversions in Calgary between January and May of this year, and the number keeps rising.

Alberta’s housing crisis is massive and affects people across demographic boundaries. “Employees at Calgary women’s shelters are as in need of affordable housing as the women they serve,” says Reimer. “What’s worse, the salaries being paid in the oil industry are so high, they can’t find people to work in donut shops, let alone shelters.”

The province has resorted to hiring government employees from the service sector and has successfully recruited employees from women’s shelters. Women’s shelter workers see this as adding insult to injury. Reimer cites occurrences of workers from women’s shelters being lured from their jobs for positions at Dunkin’ Donuts, a company known to offer ‘signing bonuses’ of $1,500 to increase their chances of acquiring staff.

“What needs to happen immediately,” says Reimer, “is a government investment that will allow the [human services] sector to provide competitive wages and benefits that will attract and retain a workforce. Frontline shelter workers need to be respected by the government.”

Susan Scott says that there is no substitute for a real strategy for dealing with homelessness. The responsibility, she says, lies with the government and with the people of Alberta.

“Alberta is really good at band-aid solutions,” says Scott. “People will give at Christmas, and Thanksgiving, so you can see it’s really not a thorough process; we give, and we turn right around and blame the victims. No housing means that people will be homeless. Shelter is a right. Society has set it up so access is limited to those who can afford it.”

The Edmonton Small Press Association contributed information and contacts to this article.
A tar sands strip mine operated by Syncrude.
scapes. But the works cannot be labelled “eco-propaganda,” nor do they clearly glorify the industrial practices they present. Sometimes it is even difficult to tell what the subject is. The hundreds of black hills of processed earth that have been photographed with the same sensitivity one would expect from a postcard of the Grand Canyon turn out to be Oil Fields No. 24, Oil Sands, Fort McMurray, Alberta (2001). What looks like a vibrant river of fire is actually the enduring liquid waste of a nickel mine. In this way, Burtynsky masterfully presents the most distasteful industrial wasteland as one of the most spectacular places on earth. This ambiguity allows a myriad of different meanings to be read into his photographs: industry CEOs choose them for their walls; activists point to them as evidence of environmental catastrophe. This is both the potential power of his pieces and the largest point of political criticism of them.

Recently, Burtynsky has started to dispel some of the uncertainty of his environmental views by speaking publicly about the industrial processes he has spent his career documenting. He has collaborated with Jennifer Baichwal on the documentary Manufactured Landscapes, a poignant portrait of what industry is doing to the people and land in China, and he recently wrote an article for The Walrus, in which he decries the resource extraction taking place in Canada. In the article, he calls for the Canadian government to mandate sustainable practices in the extraction and sale of Canada’s natural resources, including the Alberta tar sands. However, a letter to the editor sharply notes that, despite his undisputed talent as a master photographer, “Alas, as an environmental activist, he is a failure.”

Indeed, while Burtynsky’s photographs of Canadian industry make for great art, they operate within the Canadian political mainstream and do little to shake up the consciousness of a public content to keep looking away from the social and environmental degradation that is taking place in its own backyard.

Edward Burtynsky’s photographic works can be viewed online at edwardburtynsky.com.

“Richest First Nation,” continued from page 18 »

intrusion. The plant is located approximately 12 kilometres from MacKay as the crow flies. There, huge volumes of water are sucked out of the river. Some of the worst effects are the various forms of pollution that are expelled into the air and the water in the area right at the plant. Suncor has colonized an island in the middle of the Athabasca River—turning it into a giant tailings island of waste material. The size of the dykes has been growing for 40 years. Some day, they may give way.

The speed of growth of the tar sands, the quantities of money that will be infused to develop them, and the vast influx of migrant workers from other parts of Canada and beyond trigger social breakdown in varying degrees. Alienated, unhappy workers will abuse drugs and alcohol, leading to violence, prostitution, elder and spousal abuse and children fathered by workers who are long gone.

Perhaps nowhere are the symptoms of this breakdown more acute than in Fort MacKay, where the niece of a top band council member was hospitalized after being beaten over the head days before our visit.

Today in Fort MacKay, there is a resignation of fate for many members of the community. Syncrude and Suncor make it known that they want to be seen as the companies who “take care” of the community and work in constant co-operation with the residents. Yet there are no open forums and holding a referendum or giving any actual decision-making power to the original owners of the territory is out of the question.

“Keeping you informed” is the slogan attached to a notice posted recently in the Band Council’s office building in town. The notice reads: “Suncor Energy Oil Sands would like to notify local residents that throughout June and July there is a potential for increased flaring and emissions for a scheduled tie-in event. Increased flaring may occur during the shut down and start up of Upgrader 2...If you have concerns, call Suncor's Community Consultation Office at...”

Elsewhere in Alberta, flaring is blamed for premature deaths and stillbirths in livestock and human beings.

Throughout the area, Syncrude and Suncor make their names as public as possible—on calendars, on booths at events, at parks and cultural happenings; their names even permeate annual Treaty Day celebrations.

The Indigenous peoples of the Athabasca region, in particular the community of Fort MacKay, have watched the water turn toxic, muskeg turn into desert. Some community members will no longer eat the fish or moose and many can’t trust the water flowing from their own taps. “You can’t drink oil to live. You can’t eat money to live,” said Harpe. “If you’ve got no water, you’ve got no life.”

Most residents of Fort MacKay aren’t as publicly outspoken. But when they get to talking, a transition sometimes takes place. Talk of the inevitability of the projects—of the “it’s bad, but what can you do?” variety—is briefly sideline, and anger shines through. Words like “crime against humanity” and “getting away with murder” issue from people who now make their living from the tar sands and related employment. In many cases, it surprises the person speaking as much as it surprises us. It seems that having the names “Suncor” and “Syncrude” attached to radio commercials, books, events and more has an isolating effect on believing what one sees with one’s own eyes.

It makes one wonder what prevailing opinion would be if it were not widely assumed that the unlimited expansion of the tar sands is inevitable and unstoppable. Perhaps that confidence will come in a small community if challenging the tar sands’ rights to operate starts first in larger centres.

Katie Beaton, www.katebeaton.com
Hard Times Sold in Vending Machines,” continued from page 16 »

According to WCB statistics, the WCB accepted 29 new claims for work-related cancer and recognized 38 fatalities due to occupational cancer in 2005. However, the Alberta Cancer Board estimates that eight per cent of all cancers in Alberta are work-related. This means over 1,000 new cases of work-related cancer are diagnosed and more than 400 workers die of occupational cancer each year. Fewer than one in 10 occupational cancer fatalities are recognized by the WCB.

In addition, Alberta currently has one of the highest rates of workplace deaths in the country, and the number of workplace accidents reported in the province in 2006 was 181,159—an increase of 7.4 per cent from the previous year. Stories of injuries and close-calls are not hard to come by. George Marshall, a 26-year-old PEI resident worked only a few days in 2006 as a labourer but “almost died twice” on the job. The first close call, according to Marshall, was on account of a fall, while the second was due to “a piece of the rig [that] disconnected and came hurtling toward me.”

Jason Fraser, a 24-year-old iron worker from Chester, Nova Scotia, recently spent six weeks working in Fort MacKay. During his last week on the job, there were two serious injuries at his worksite: a structural steel worker injured both heels after a fall and a platefitter sustained facial cuts from a piece of steel. He believes that some contractors deliberately undercount the number of workplace injuries.

Fraser had difficulty adjusting to life within the work camps, which he says resembled university dorms, aside from the fact that they “basically look like a bomb dropped [on them].”

Despite this, Gaul is quick to point out that his contractor instituted a “safety bonus” each hour for crews who maintained the safety of all members. Overall, however, he notes that rigging work is “a dangerous job by nature.”

The effects of such chemicals may appear long after a worker has left a job site. As pointed out in an April 2006 column by Alberta Federation of Labour researcher Jason Foster, cancer caused by workplace exposure to chemicals like benzene are not recognized, nor even recorded by the Alberta Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) or the Alberta government.

After work, there was little to do within the camps. “I’ve had problems with alcoholism and I just drank every night for five weeks.” Fraser also had a number of moral qualms with his work, which he believes may have contributed to his drinking. “Nobody ever thought about the environmental impact,” he says. “I had a lot of moral repression. I felt really bad for what I was taking part in.”

Gaul also points out that few workers showed regard to the ethics and sustainability of the oil projects, and recalls that the subject of climate change was laughed at by instructors and workers alike during one of his training courses. He also believes that the long hours of work, coupled with the boredom of camp life, often leads to a general feeling of isolation.

“As far as the social atmosphere in the camps, it’s not really the most healthy environment. There’s a lot of negativity and built-up misery being shared and communicated. There are a lot of people that are in the situation where they’re spending way too much time away from their family to have any kind of semblance of regular family life.”

It is likely due to these “quality of life” issues that many workers from Atlantic Canada view their positions in Alberta as being largely temporary. Fort McMurray, with its overwhelming growth rate and its infrastructural inability to cope with this growth, is an unlikely candidate for long-term settlement for Atlantic Canadian workers. East Coast workers, though perhaps as naive to the hazards of the oil industry as their predecessors were to the reality of life in Toronto in the 1970s, are by now no strangers to moving to where the work is. Many recognize the higher cost of living in the West, as well as the sky-high rate of inflation in Alberta and realize that their money will stretch further on the East Coast than it will in Alberta. Some, like Anstey, see the abundance of Atlantic Canadians in the Alberta oil patch as an interim gig, as workers tide themselves over in advance of the opening of the Hibernia and Lower Churchill Valley projects. These mega-projects are likely to yield their own environmental and social impacts as well in the years to come, as the East Coast as a whole shifts its economy towards the production of oil and gas resources for export.

Still, many expect to one day see a similar job boom in the east, one that they believe might break their diet of hard times sold in vending machines.
behind and clean up after him.”

According to Desharnais, she was constantly at the head of her group and was in fact told, along with one other colleague, to slow down so the others in her group could keep pace. And while working as a trouble-shooter or a shooter’s helper meant carrying less equipment, it definitely wasn’t easier when it came either to cardio or to the safety issues involved. “It was clear that they wanted to put me in a difficult position,” she said.

The job of a shooter is to detonate underground explosives sending out seismic waves to see if there are gas or oil deposits; a shooter’s helper is a kind of a sidekick, helping to set up the area, and clear away the wires after the explosion. Desharnais was assigned as a shooter’s helper in the morning, and, according to her, not given proper training except for one colleague who offered her some advice on what equipment to bring. According to Menchuk all employees receive internationally recognised training at the beginning of their employment and are updated in the field. While he wasn’t on the ground in Grand Cache, he says he couldn’t imagine someone being sent out without proper training.

“We always ensure our employees wear the proper safety equipment. Safety equipment doesn’t eliminate hazards, but it reduces them as much as possible.” Attempts were made to contact Desharnais’ on-site supervisor, but Menchuk said he is currently out of the country and not available for comment.

According to Desharnais, upon arriving on site she had to partner, the shooter, had no time to show her the ropes. After being dropped off by helicopter they walked half an hour into the bush to the site where they would be detonating explosives. When one of their two walkie-talkies died, the functioning one was given to her partner. She stayed back while he went to lay and detonate the explosives. All along, however, she assumed she would receive some kind of warning that the detonation was about to go.

“All of a sudden the explosion went off, with debris in the air. All I remembered was being hit in the head and the shoulder,” she says. While Menchuk says he was informed she was 30m from the explosion (the required distance) and behind a tree, Desharnais says she can’t really be sure how far she was because she was never signaled where the explosion was coming from. Upon returning to find her, her colleague radioed in that she had been injured. “But he would only say I had hurt my shoulder, and not that I thought I was hit in the head. He told me the blood on my neck was just from scratching it on branches when I fell,” she says.

“Even I didn’t really know the extent of my injuries until I got into the helicopter, but I knew I had hurt my head,” she continues. “It was only once I saw the look of the pilot when I took off my helmet in the helicopter and the blood started going everywhere.” The impact of the collision with the rock had cracked part of her helmet and cut her head badly enough that she would need five stitches once back at the base-camp, and would eventually be diagnosed with a severe concussion. “When we got back to base-camp, the medic even said that if he knew I had injured my head he would have flown out to get me instead of waiting back at the camp.”

According to Menchuk, the type of injury sustained by Desharnais is rare in general, and a first for a shooter’s helper. (Desharnais disputes this, saying she was told on several occasions of shooters and shooter’s helpers being seriously injured on the job.) “We do everything we can to ensure our employees’ safety,” he explained over the phone from Calgary. “But as I tell everyone, in the end you need to be aware of your surroundings. No one wanted Chantal to get hurt, and we’re sorry that she did.”

Desharnais sees something more troubling. “There was a constant diminishing of my concerns,” she says. Desharnais feels that if she was a man perhaps her co-worker would have paid more attention when she said she had injured her head and not just her shoulder. “They just seem to think you complain for nothing.”

Menchuk agrees that it is not always easy for women in the oil industry. “It’s both the work and the atmosphere,” he says. “You’re sending out a woman with a crew of 50 other guys. Issues come up, things like separate bathrooms and you need to share with the cooking crew because there are only three toilets on site.”

Diagnosed with a sprained shoulder and receiving five stitches to the back of her head, it was unclear for three days before she was able to return to Calgary, whether she had a concussion. While she was X-rayed in Grand Cache, there wasn’t a head trauma expert at the hospital who could tell her the extent of her injuries.

Desharnais’ troubles didn’t end with the injuries. According to Menchuk, Desharnais “declined” to go back out to the site when safety personnel went with her partner to examine the area in order to file an incident report. Desharnais remembers it differently. “They asked if I wanted to go with them, and I said yes. I wasn’t feeling well [from her injuries] and went to lie down. I found out later that they had gone without me.”

The ensuing reports, except for the one she wrote herself, were based mostly on the shooter’s account of the incident and downplayed the lack of training she received and the lack of communication on site. She still has copies of the reports she refused to sign because of her disagreement on the facts.

It is clear that many may think that Desharnais’ complaints are simply sour grapes because she was hurt on the job. Menchuk claims he isn’t sure why Desharnais is still pursuing the matter. “We treated her the way we would treat any employee. She decided to quit her modified work load [an office job in Calgary given to her at full pay after her injury] and go back to Grand Cache to try and convince her supervisors to change their reports. We’re sorry for what happened, but there isn’t much we can do now.”

In an industry that is continuing to grow in Canada, Desharnais feels stories like hers need to get out. It isn’t about the fact that the work is hard, she says, or even so much that she got hurt—even though she still suffers from headaches and concentration problems from her concussion and has mobility problems with her right shoulder. It’s about the fact she wasn’t properly trained and her safety wasn’t ensured in the field, and that in large part she believes this was because she is a woman. “I may keep looking into this and talk to lawyers. But really I just don’t want to see this happening to anyone else,” she says.
adjacent to proposed Lubicon reserve lands and surrounding two lakes upon which they rely for fish. These companies plan to drill 512 "heavy oil" wells in this sensitive area, ultimately producing an estimated 820 million barrels of oil.

The 50,000 hectares of tar-sands auctioned off while the Lubicons were at the UN were in addition to these prior developments. And this year another 15,500 hectares just north of the proposed Lubicon reserve lands have been sold to tar sands companies.

Liquefying the "heavy oil" so it can be pumped out of the ground is done with superheated water or steam and typically requires that three to six barrels of water be injected into the subsurface for each barrel of oil produced. Most, if not all, of this water is taken out of the natural cycle and lost forever. Where this huge volume of water will come from and the environmental consequences of injecting it in to the fragile boreal subsurface are unknown.

Some years ago, an experimental heavy oil/tar sands facility to the west of the Lubicons built a pipeline to a neighboring lake to obtain the water they required. Within a few months they had drained the lake so far that it froze solid in the winter, killing all the fish.

Until recently, it was also unclear how the huge energy needs of this process could be sustained by the companies in the area. Now a new company has announced plans to build a nuclear reactor near Peace River to power tar sands exploitation, claiming that 70 per cent of their power output will go to fuel a major tar sands project in the region.

This new tar sands boom in the Peace River area has the potential to be even more damaging than the first wave of resource exploitation in the early 1980s.

The Lubicon people suffered the full environmental, economic, cultural, social and health impacts of that first wave of conventional oil and gas exploitation in their unceded territory.

With a new wave of even more damaging resource exploitation arriving at their doorstep, the Lubicon people are bracing for the worst. Reckless water use, oil spills, further degradation of the groundwater, increased toxic emissions, further decimation of fisheries and wildlife, more roads, trucking, seismic lines and the spectre of nuclear waste haunt their future.

A better future is possible. The United Nations committee identified two easy steps towards that future—negotiations and consultation.

But that would require that Canadian governments listen to the UN rather than openly flaunting their rulings and selling off the very lands and resources that are under dispute even as the UN is hearing the matter.

Kevin Thomas is the Chief Negotiator for the Lubicon Lake Indian Nation.
The Christian Labour Association of Canada

by Stuart Neatby

Few subjects inspire more ire within the Canadian labour movement than the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC).

CLAC’s website presents the organization as an alternative to the “adversarial” relationship of other unions with employers favouring a more “co-operative approach to labour-management relations.” Although apparently not a Christian organization, CLAC’s approach to workplace organization is based upon the “Christian social principles of dignity and respect for all people.” This “non-confrontational” approach is evident in CLAC’s background; over the past 30 years, CLAC members have been engaged in only four strikes, the most recent of which (in 2002) lasted two hours.

CLAC was established in 1952 by Dutch immigrants, largely members of the Christian Reformed Church who were disgruntled with the Canadian Labour Congress and its member unions. Most of its locals remained in Ontario until CLAC won a breakthrough campaign to represent 2,500 workers at the Save-On Foods grocery chain throughout Alberta, through voluntary recognition by the employer. By the mid-1980s, CLAC had begun moving into the construction sector. They currently have 11 regional offices, 150 full-time staff members and a membership of 43,000.

CLAC has been roundly criticized as being a “company union.” The Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) website criticizes CLAC’s close relationship with management and questions the high rate of voluntary recognition by CLAC locals by employers. Under voluntary recognition, according to AFL President Gil McGowan, CLAC locals often organize within workplaces “with the full cooperation of the boss.” The AFL believes that CLAC has been used by employers to depress wages and discourage workplace disruption. About one in five of CLAC’s locals have been certified under voluntary recognition. In addition, CLAC has been criticized for its unwillingness to support employment and pay equity legislation, which they claim “undermine the foundations of such institutions as marriage and the family.”

Most recently, CLAC played a key role during negotiations for the Canadian Natural Resources Ltd’s (CNRL) Horizon Project, one of the biggest projects of the Athabasca tar sands. The Klein government granted this project “special status,” which exempted most labour relations rules in construction and allowed the CNRL to negotiate almost exclusively with CLAC. CLAC, in turn, has supported the rapid expansion of the Temporary Foreign Worker program on this site, which has resulted in a rapid influx of thousands of migrant workers. The AFL and the Alberta Building Trades Council claim that the ‘special status’ of the project is an open attack upon organized Labour in the province and is a direct attempt to depress wages and working conditions on-site, through the exploitation of temporary foreign workers.
Syncrude upgrader plant, offices (foreground), sulphur stockpiles (back left) and tailing pond (back right).

Dru Oja Jay
Syncrude tailing “pond” (foreground), a few hundred metres from the Athabasca River.

Dru Oja Jay
Temporary Foreign Workers, continued from page 5 »

construction projects including in the tar sands. The MOU also allows employers to enter into an agreement-in-principle with HRSDC that will facilitate and speed up the processing of Labour Market Opinion applications.

A “Regional Occupations under Pressures List” was established for Alberta, which speeds up the application process for hiring temporary foreign workers in certain occupations. The lengthy list includes many occupations that would be required for tar sands projects, such as construction managers, electricians and heavy-duty equipment mechanics, but also food and beverage servers, cashiers and even funeral directors and embalmers.

“They [the companies] came up with a pretty interesting method of justifying the access to the program. They would have job fairs, in my view very poorly advertised, in weird timing and weird locations and nobody would come. That’s one of the major hoops that they would dance through,” says MacNeil.

Temporary Foreign Workers are guaranteed a set number of work days as stipulated under the terms of their work permits. If a worker loses his job, or leaves it voluntarily, he may choose to seek employment elsewhere. According to Byl, this is not always as straightforward as it may seem.

“If you're not working, it's a minimum of four to five months wait, up to a maximum of eight months, to go through the process of obtaining new paperwork, including a new Labour Market Opinion. The lack of unemployment provisions drives people underground.

“Without a job and without employment insurance, workers can’t very well just sit around until they are able to legally work again. Instead, they work underground for less pay, or they go home.”

When an employer brings in a worker, it is also the employer's responsibility to find the employee housing. Foster claims that this too is done with minimal concern or respect for the well-being of the workers. He cites an example of 12 Indo-Italians brought in by a trucking company who were put up in a three-bedroom bungalow and charged $500 per month in rent.

“If you are an employer and you can hire a worker where you can get half of the wages back on rent, that’s a bonus...They find these ways to nickel and dime them. There are guys that come here, work here for six months, then go home without having earned a penny.”

I ask Foster whether the TFWs encounter racism and whether they are successful at integrating into their new communities.

“They're not and that’s by the design of the employers,” he answers.

Foster details how the TFW are picked up by a representative of the employer, driven to a camp exclusively for TFW and that is the last that anyone sees of them. Immigrant service agencies, he says, are forbidden under their funding arrangements with the government to serve TFWs. So if they come looking for language classes or information on how to set up a bank account, the agencies have to turn them away or risk losing their funding.

I ask him about credentials. He explains that workers have six months to pass an exam, part of which is practical, the other part being written. Foster says they usually fail the written part and excel at the practical component. Since the TFWs can work during the six months leading up to their test, employers generally do not concern themselves with helping them pass the test, since they can easily replace them with a new batch of workers.

“They don’t want to invest in training, they don’t want to increase their wages. It really is a case of disposable workers.”

All involved agree that there exists a wide range in the ways that companies treat their workers, and that not all companies resort to using TFWs. The basic existence of a labour shortage is another point of general agreement. However, the extent and the cause of the shortage remains up for debate, as does its use as a justification for hiring foreign workers.

“I’ll give some credence to those statements [of labour shortages], but I don’t think they’re all-encompassing. For example, if we look at the demographics of our First Nations people in Western Canada, if we look at the non-traditional, at women, at people with disabilities, there is a huge pool of workers that we’re not attempting to reach out to,” says MacNeil.

“There is a shortage, we don’t dispute that. It’s just a matter of the degree of the shortage and the solutions of the problem. We don’t think that the Temporary Foreign Worker Program is a real solution. We think it’s short-sighted and it’s ineffective. We believe there are many other ways to go and it should certainly be the last of the last choices.”

with files from Stuart Neatby
upgrader construction is linked to the fact that what comes out of the tar sands is not in fact oil or tar, but bitumen, a low-grade, heavy fossil fuel. Upgrading is the process by which the thick, tarry muck is turned into a synthetic crude oil that can be sent to refineries. This extra step is part of what makes the production of oil from tar sands so energy-intensive, with greenhouse gas emissions three times higher than those associated with conventional oil production. More natural gas is eaten up by bitumen upgrading than by the mining process itself.

The bulk of Alberta’s bitumen, however, is still upgraded in the United States—where the vast majority is also refined, sold, and consumed. Alberta politicians have been calling for a dramatic ramping-up of the province’s upgrading capacities. “If we insist on just sending raw product out of this province and adding value to that product in another jurisdiction, the taxes on the value-added product will be paid in that jurisdiction, not in the province of Alberta,” Premier Stelmach told reporters last December. Energy minister Mel Knight has been quick to reassure the public that Alberta should have the capacity to upgrade about 80 per cent of its bitumen within a decade or so.

Albertans face a paradox. With the havoc created by the mining and in-situ extraction of bitumen from the tar sands, they already shoulder the brunt of the pollution created by the process of upgrading. The tremendous energy required to bring the sand to the surface for separation is largely provided by natural gas. Oil sands consume about 500 million cubic feet of natural gas a day, an amount likely to increase to 1.25 billion cubic feet daily by 2016. The process is so inefficient that the natural gas required to produce one barrel of tar sands oil could heat a family home for two to four days. This process uses a relatively clean fuel to assist in the production of a dirtier one, prompting oil analyst Matt Simmons to describe the process as “making gold into lead.”

With over a hundred billion dollars projected in oil sands investments between 2006 and 2016, the industry is looking for a long-term, cost-effective energy source. High natural gas costs have the tar sands extraction operations—already overwhelmed by economic growth that most locals say is too big, too fast. The growing pains experienced by Fort McMurray include rocketing housing costs, a homelessness crisis and a severe shortage of health care and other services. “Our water treatment plant will be at capacity next year. Our recreational facilities are overtaxed. Our landfill site is full,” the city’s mayor recently told a parliamentary committee. Is this what Fort Saskatchewan has to look forward to?

“What we’re facing is a huge expansion to roads, infrastructure, sewer systems, water systems, bridges. How is that going to be paid?” asked Edmonton mayor Stephen Mandel in 2006. He estimated that the money invested in the last five years in Fort McMurray pales in comparison to what is proposed for the “Industrial Heartland.”

For now, the protests of Kathy Radke and the handful of other residents directly affected by the upgraders are largely overshadowed by the spectre of jobs and money rushing into the region. But if things go the way of Fort McMurray, it won’t be long until all of the area’s residents experience the ugly side of Alberta’s bitumen boom.

“Tar Sands and the American Automobile,” continued from page 4 »
Promote nuclear power for the Peace Region, where Sag-D has barely even begun to operate. The truly daunting reality is that the production level being proposed will have no other option: the only way to keep up with projected production rates is to bring in people from outside.

The guest worker programs keep non-status workers in camps where they are not allowed visitations by any union. The only means by which such a "guest" will be allowed to stay beyond the term of their contract (up to 24 months) is if the employer applies, not the individual. Figures on pay and to whom it is delivered are not available and have not yet been obtained by organized labour in Alberta—we simply do not know how much migrant workers in the tar sands are being paid.

The "guest workers" may not end up only in the camps. The proposed size of tar sands expansion is such that constructing infrastructure for vast new energy "inputs" will take thousands of workers as well. Two pipelines of various gas are needed "in" to the tar sands for every pipeline going "out."

The energy needed to go into the tar sands are slated to come from the natural gas in such places as Alaska’s north slope, coal-fired mega plants in Alberta, proposed nuclear reactors in the Peace Region and near Whitecourt, along with the industrialization of the Mackenzie Valley (and much more). The outward shipping of bitumen-sludge (later converted to mock oil) entails corridors across Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas and more, all the way to Texas and Louisiana. These schemes, in particular the one known as the Keystone Pipeline headed by TransCanada, is already causing the AFL to warn of dire consequences for job loss and deregulation of currently union-run operations.

The other corridor for sending sludge to refineries is slated to be across British Columbia, over the lands of...
the Carrier, Gixtsan, Haisla, Tsimshian and other unceded nations to a yet-to-be-constructed port to operate out of Kitimat, where oil could theoretically be shipped to California, Japan and China.

“We simply do not know how much migrant workers in the tar sands are being paid.”

The same port would serve to import “diluent” from Russia, a kerosene-like substance used to make the thick mud of bitumen flow like oil in a pipe.

“Pipeline ruptures happen, they’re inevitable,” says Gerald Amos of the Haisla Nation from Gitamaat Village on the Coast of B.C., where the construction of a Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) port is being planned.

“We just don’t know the location yet...All of the proponents of the Gateway project and all the other pipelines which would mean more tanker traffic here point out that we’ve had tanker traffic here, big ships coming in for about 40 to 50 years now. I think you are talking about a substantially different ball game when you talk about supertankers.”

This project, the “Enbridge Gateway,” is currently delayed due to lawsuits launched by seven First Nations, Indian Act-mandated governments and the China National Petroleum Company’s withdrawal from the project.

Other pipelines heading southward are the Alberta Clipper Project and the Spearhead Expansion Project, also led by Enbridge, a self-described “leader in energy transportation.” In June of this year, the first new refinery in the United States in decades was announced. The map shows only some of the refineries planning to receive tar sands bitumen.

Under the Alberta Energy and Utilities Board, every single project in the Athabasca, Cold Lake and Peace River tar sands region has been approved. TILMA will streamline the regulations in line with these projects across all of B.C. and Alberta. It will also mean the elimination of a long-time moratorium on oil and gas offshore tankers on the central coast of B.C.

Kitimat and Gitamaat Village, currently host to major Gray and Humpback whale migration, would see 330 super tankers of oil and gas a year migrating offshore, according to the Dogwood Initiative. Nations up and down the proposed corridor would see a loss of forest cover in areas where giant grizzlies still roam near ranchlands.

The oil and gas going to and from the tar sands would cross rivers and streams and the tankers will come near 1,000 salmon spawning areas. Upon completion, the entire 1,200-plus kilometre pipeline systems would provide 75 full-time jobs. Enbridge has quietly shifted gears towards building the infrastructure to send the current bump in oil production to Texas, promising to complete this project at a later date.

That later date may well coincide with the B.C. government’s other “Pacific Gateway Strategy,” designed to use TILMA, the SPP, the 2010 Olympics and vast tar sands export growth to make the West Coast of Canada a major hub of de-regulated trade with Asia.

“It could soon be illegal and not merely politically difficult to regulate how these constructions go ahead. Environmental regulation, revenue for nations who approve the use of their lands, taxation for reclamation purposes, requirements on unionization for the construction—all of these things are being legislated and signed away.

With TILMA, Alberta and B.C. have united to ensure that the oil dug out of the earth is sent south, at an incomprehensible rate. The primary legacy of the project will be run-away climate emissions, the second-fastest rate of deforestation on earth, the dismantling of previously won workers’ rights, a strip-mine in Alberta the size of Florida and the removal of meaningful democratic oversight at the community level.”

The SPP and TILMA are not inaccurate. Placing new developments in a global context, however, changes our understanding of what is driving this latest set of deals. Instability around the planet, dwindling reserves of oil, a collapsing American dollar and more are exposing imperial economic structures to a level of insecurity unknown in a generation. By lurching headlong in 2003 towards the Albertan tar sands, the US has made the rising price of oil work to their advantage, rather than its opposite; when the price of oil goes up, those who invest heavily in expensive, unconventional oil gain a larger foothold in market share.

The SPP and TILMA have been drawn up to increase and integrate this into a decades-long strategy for North American economic stability, a strategy that does not address our dependence on oil. Understanding the true nature of these plans allows people to make informed decisions about what to do during the rapid changes in energy politics—changes that will affect the entire population of North America (and the planet) for decades to come.
the willingness of some corporations to embrace “sustainable practices,” and the trend among conservationists to protect entire areas instead of chasing biodiversity “hotspots”.

“It’s one thing to walk in as an environmental group” and speak to policymakers, says Innes, “and another thing to walk in as an environmental group, shoulder to shoulder with First Nations and industry representatives and saying, ‘we’ve got a solution.’”

The CBI is “pretty up-front about wanting to protect at least half of Canada’s boreal, and do responsible management where development is going to occur,” says Innes.

It’s this industry-friendly approach to conservation that many activists object to. The problem with the consensus-building approach, critics say, is that avoiding conflict with corporations means that the fundamental problems with mining or logging that provoked popular resistance in the first place are not addressed.

“In the 1970s and 1980s a vibrant, truly grassroots public land protection movement emerged—first in the West and then nation-wide,” writes Felice Pace of Oregon’s Ancient Forest Campaign in a 2004 article. “During the 1990s Pew, with support from other foundations, moved decisively to control this movement.”

“Pew favors concentrating on ‘low hanging fruit,’” writes Pace. “That is, wilderness areas which local congressmen and senators are eager to support because they are not controversial.”

In his 1996 book Washington Babylon, US-based author Alex Cockburn noted that “the Pew Trusts’ endowment is wisely invested in the very corporations that a vigorous environmental movement would adamantly be opposing.”

“Initial National Forest Campaign, Pew demanded that recipients of grant money agree to focus their attention on government actions; corporate wrongdoers were not to be named. This extreme plan was modified after some recipients balked.”

Cockburn writes that just one of the Pew Trusts made $205 million in “investment income” in 1993 from investments in companies like Weyerhaeuser, International Paper, and Atlantic Richfield. Cockburn notes that at the time this was “six times as large as all of Pew’s environmental dispensations.”

Today, however, Pew is reportedly not as heavily invested in resources extraction.

A more recent attempt at co-operation between industry, First Nations and environmentalists in British Columbia has recently drawn the ire of grassroots activists. In 2006, Greenpeace, Sierra Club, Rainforest Action Network and ForestEthics celebrated a major agreement for the preservation of the Great Bear Rainforest.

A year later, however, logging companies have ramped up clear-cut logging to levels that are “unprecedented in 15 years,” in order to gather as much timber as possible before the agreement takes effect in 2009. To make matters worse, “ecosystem-based management” techniques named in the agreement have yet to be defined. Meanwhile, environmental groups agreed to stop the direct action campaign that had previously halted logging, enabling the sped-up clearing of forested areas.

“We’ve found organized, institutional environmentalism has failed over the last four years to accomplish anything,” Nuxalk hereditary chief Qwatsinas told The Dominion earlier this year. “The successes have come from individual grassroots efforts that have basically bypassed the entrenched, bureaucratic, environmental institutions that have been sucking up the enviro-buck and just not getting the kind of accomplishments we need.”

Cizek agrees. “In the US,” he says, “it has been pointed out that the organizations that are taking a principled stand are the community organizations, the ones whose neighbourhoods are being destroyed.” The “Big Greens,” says Cizek, often serve to tell local groups that they’re asking the impossible, but when proven wrong, take credit for their achievements.

“And they often win the biggest victories.”

“Victories,” says Cizek, “will not be achieved in Washington, DC, or in Ottawa. They will be achieved on the front lines. The people on the front lines are the ones who are under attack directly. They’re not policy wonks trying to figure out what public opinion will tolerate. For them, it’s a matter of survival, in many cases it’s a matter of life or death.”

When discussing the tar
sands, Cizek says that the groups receiving CBI funding have been extremely timid. CPAWS, WWF, Pembina, the Sierra Club and others signed a statement calling for a “carbon neutral” tar sands by 2020 through the purchase of “carbon offsets,” but said nothing about slowing down or stopping tar sands development itself. A short time later, the Sierra Club called for a moratorium on tar sands development. But it was only after arch-conservative former Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed called for a moratorium that CPAWS and Pembina followed suit. WWF Canada has remained silent, though its UK counterpart has recently called for a moratorium.

“...the organizations that are taking a principled stand are the community organizations, the ones whose neighbourhoods are being destroyed...”

To their utter embarrassment, the Big Greens found themselves trailing far behind the curve of public opinion,” says Cizek, “and had to scramble to catch up.” But the moratorium on new developments, according to Cizek, still does not address the damage that will be done to the water and land by operations that have already been approved.

CPAWS did not respond to an interview request, and a WWF representative declined to be interviewed.

“Do they actually believe in this insane program of the tar sands becoming carbon neutral by purchasing carbon offsets?” he asks, referring to a statement signed by several groups before Lougheed called for a moratorium.

Cizek sees a need for a “profound dialogue about the democratic and non-democratic aspects of environmental organizations.” Many environmental organizations are private non-profits with few accountability mechanisms. The WWF, for example, has only subscribers, no members. The Pembina Institute, he says, takes money directly from oil companies, to which it sells carbon credits. The Sierra Club is “one of the more democratic of these environmental organizations,” he says, and that is “perhaps why they were able to initially take a more principled stand” on projects like the tar sands and the Mackenzie Gas Pipeline.

“But he emphasizes that it’s not about quibbling about calling for a moratorium or a shut down,” but “what were the processes by which you came to this point, and how might your funders have influenced this decision? What do they actually expect to settle for?”

The CBI’s Larry Innes says that the issue of accountability is “an interesting question.” His response to it is candid.

“We’re accountable to those people who write us a cheque every year,” says Innes. “If we don’t achieve the kind of goals that they’re interested in spending their money on, the funding stops.”

For Innes, “a more interesting question is why we need US funding at all. Why is the environmental movement in Canada so small and poorly funded? Where is all the Canadian money? Why aren’t Canadian philanthropists (with a few notable exceptions) investing in Canada’s environmental and social justice movements?”

Depending on which explanation of foundation funding one finds more convincing, what CBI is accountable for accomplishing and why Canadians aren’t providing the same levels of funding to conservationists will have very different answers.
Everyone’s Downstream
Tar Sands Realities and Resistance
Conference: Nov 24-25, 2007
University of Alberta, Edmonton
WWW.OILSANDSTRUTH.ORG/CONF

A conference designed to explore the links between oppression and self-determination on many levels: indigenous land rights, gender, ecological rights, workers democracy, anti-racism and anti-border perspectives as they relate directly to the tar sands of Northern Alberta. Speakers from a multitude of indigenous nations, social justice groups, and environmental organizations will discuss the social impacts of the tar sands on workers, women, indigenous nations, ecology, migrant populations, homelessness, and the anti-war movement.