

# **On Sabotage and Pipelines: A Green Syndicalist Commentary**

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We are currently in what might be called an era or period of pipelines. New ones are developing frequently and already built ones are undergoing expansion or twinning. There is no continent that is not traversed by pipelines, which spread like arteries/varicose veins across their terrain. And these pipeline networks are all slated to be expanded. Most pipelines on the planet are currently situated in North America and Central Asia and not coincidentally these are the subject of much conflict and contestation. Highly contested pipelines in the North American context have not even been constructed yet, from the Northern Gateway development and Kinder Morgan twinning in British Columbia to the Keystone XL from Alberta to Houston to the Line 9 development across eastern Canada. Politics are waged on the basis of concern (about what a pipeline might result in) as much as, or more than, a basis of currently existing reality.

Much of the green movements, even some deeper green ones, pursue a politics of publicity, a politics of PR, which is largely the terrain of capital. The pursuit in such politics is positive public opinion. This differs greatly from a politics of sabotage (though sabotage must be properly contextualized and explained publicly). A politics of sabotage creates an intolerable situation that requires a positive resolution.

The flows of energy economies are subject to interruptions. This is done by business for the manipulation of prices, for example. But these flows can be interrupted for other uses by workers and/or their communities. For syndicalists, sabotage has typically referred to withdrawal of efficiency by workers. This brief commentary provides initial thoughts for a discussion of a politics of sabotage against pipelines and oil flows. Sabotage, from a green syndicalist perspective, poses direct challenges to capital flows and an impetus for rethinking green politics in the age of extreme energy.

## **Symbolic Politics**

Most pipeline struggles, despite the overheated rhetoric and postures, are predominantly constrained within a rather straightforward liberal democratic framework. The emphasis is on debate, discussion, and the contesting of propositions. Even the forms of “direct action” undertaken by pipeline opponents, reform and radical greens alike, are of the primarily symbolic non-violent direct action (NVDA<sub>tm</sub>) variety geared at drawing media attention and facilitating a venue for dialogue with an external (neither corporate nor protest) audience. This fits entirely unproblematically within a discursive liberal democratic framework. It proposes that pipeline developments occur because people are not informed (either of problems or of alternatives to fossil fuels) or because they cannot see that there is opposition.

At the same time they also play a rather perverse role in bringing police into the center of this democratic practice (as more than discourse). This is so because typically the presence of the police and their actions against protesters are an essential part of media mobilization (the media do not show up or report the event if police do not intervene against protesters) and play a part for protesters as the impetus to initiate the desired discussion.

What is crucial at present on the other hand is a material rather than a discursive politics. Such a material politics will exceed the question of democracy to move to address the issue of mobility (of fossil fuels, of capital, etc.). One might argue that there is something unique about the materiality of pipelines that makes their struggles unique from some other contemporary issues. And it partly involves the nature of this mobility.

Energy commodities are not only a staple—they are the staple. Timothy Mitchell, author of *Carbon Democracy* (2011), notes that “it is the movement of concentrated stores of carbon energy that provides means for assembling effective democratic claims” in the first place.

## **A Politics of Sabotage**

The term sabotage has several meanings. It signifies variously to mess, to botch, to ruin, to foul. Sabotage in a political sense is not reducible to isolated acts of property damage. Rather it is an expression of organized interruption. Sabotage is the organized disruption of the movement of a commodity.

Notably this is the same way capitalists wield power. This is something that capital does every day. And it results in direct, and extreme harm, to people, communities, and the environment. Critical sociologist Thorstein Veblen, in a too little read article “On the Nature and Uses of Sabotage” (1919), notes that sabotage is the ordinary condition of affairs in market economies. Notably, for Veblen, sabotage is undertaken regularly, as part of everyday economics, by workers and by capital. Veblen argues that business requires a properly running administration of sabotage. This can be used to manage prices or to circumvent labor actions. Thus the arguments against sabotage, but only when wielded by workers, is entirely ideological, that is based on adherence to the status quo.

Sabotage represents a direct disruption of extreme energy practices. It does not appeal to seemingly outside (but allied) actors to halt harmful practices. It does so directly and as determined by the needs of those engaged in the sabotage (and their communities). From a green syndicalist perspective sabotage by workers directly in the industry is a potent force against ecologically destructive practices.

## **Energy Flows, Pipelines, and Labor**

The value of any commodity is, of course, tied inextricably to its real, or potential, movement. And this is a material embodiment of value. It is linked to a physicality of, a geography of, value. It is in this movement, or circulation, that the location of production is linked to the location of consumption or use. Control over flows is gained by interrupting or capturing them.

Pipelines are fundamentally mechanisms to circumvent labor and other restrictions on transportation. In relation to coal transport in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, workers used sabotage to win concessions. Workers in coal were particularly well positioned to disrupt the flows of coal through slow downs, tampering, etc., as the contemporary tar sands workers are well positioned to disrupt the flows of bitumen.

Their power came from the carbon energy they could slow, cut off, and/or disrupt, rather than from their organizing capacity. A lesson is that smaller, active numbers of workers can have a profound impact on value flows (carbon, energy, etc.) and wield a tremendous amount of power by their impact on those flows. Indeed, many of the gains made by the working class derived from the impact, and threatened impact, on these flows. And the industries developed as capital responded to, and anticipated, working class power in these areas and the potentialities for sabotage. The first pipelines in the United States, around 1865, were developed to circumvent the Teamsters and their power. Oil development in the Middle East was driven by a need to

undermine working class strength in North America and Europe. Pipelines themselves emerge as a voluminous running administration of sabotage. This is a point that too few green activists recognize. Even fewer strategize around this fact.

In the early shipping of oil there was more than one possible path, the flow could switch. Today oil movement mirrors distributed networks of the internet. They create multiple, redundant paths, to circumvent sabotage. The extensiveness and redundancy of the transportation network limits the effectiveness of sabotage. There are, of course, many routes developing beyond Keystone XL, for example.

This involves not only pipelines but railroads as well. This is why there is a substantial push for greater rail capacity by capital recently, even though this has flown under the radar including for activists fixated on pipelines and anti-pipeline campaigns. Indeed, in the present period, crude shipments are the fastest growing aspect of rail transport. These are the beginning stages of multiply routed distribution networks in the age of extreme energy. A real impact requires a level of disruption that the networks cannot go around. Sabotage on multiple levels and multiple fronts.

Pipelines are developed to reduce the role of human labor in moving and transporting energy (as over rail for example). Pipelines are labor intensive at the outset, in the building of them, but the labor input is vastly diminished after the pipeline is built. This is a point that opponents of pipelines need to bring more attention to in countering jobs blackmail by pipeline companies, extreme energy developers, and petro state politicians alike. In British Columbia, for example, jobs are trumpeted by companies and government alike as justifications for the Northern Gateway and Kinder Morgan pipeline developments. Yet the actual job numbers are much more limited (often involving only a few dozen permanent jobs).

## Potentials

So, who could stop the movements of materials? For too many activists the focus is on the state. Forms they expect this to take include regulation, licensing, environmental review, and assessments. National Energy Policies and OPEC policies in the 1970s provide examples.

From a green syndicalist perspective, organized rank-and-file workers, in alliance with indigenous communities, pose the most immediately effective impediment to material flows and the most promising source of future alternatives. Workers wield both the labor power necessary for energy developments and the technical expertise to sabotage the works in a way that can ensure limited harms. Both labor and technical expertise can be withdrawn and withheld (and directed toward alternatives such as cleanup or reconstruction. This is far more effective than a local blockade which is purely oppositional and easily constrained within jobs versus environment frameworks.

There are numerous examples of organized workers' actions against oil flows. On October 22, 2010, refinery workers at the Grandpuits refinery in the Port of Marseilles in France struck for a couple of weeks against Sarkozy's austerity policies. Their actions contributed to the defeat of Sarkozy and the repeal of some policies. While their goal was defense of pensions and retirement benefits and opposition to austerity policies rather than the product of their labor, the impact of the strike showed the vulnerability of oil flows to sabotage and the pressure to keep the oil moving, and the leverage of workers' actions to sabotage the flows.

The pressing question remains for many whether workers in North America are ready to strike against the industry itself (rather than against the employment of foreign workers or for job protections or against threats to benefits, for example). Of course, the real answer is that some are and some are not. Many recognize that more stable longterm employment would result from tarsands clean up, habitat restoration, materials treatments, etc. At present there is no meaningfully organized counterforce within their workplaces that might pose such alternatives in a material way, as a real, imminent, prospect. But such is in many ways an outcome of specific struggles (and alliances, or not, along the way).

## **Conclusion**

Because of the centrality of energy commodities in the age of extreme energy, sabotage occupies a place of particularly great possibility. Saboteurs could make great demands and achieve great things. If there is a strategically ripe time for sabotage it is definitely now. The pipelines are not yet built. There is a great urgency for states and capital to get the bitumen (tar sands substance) to market. Indeed, in the Canadian context, capital and states are pushing pipeline construction as nothing short of a national imperative.

This reflects what political economist Harold Innes referred to as the staples trap. Huge capital investment means they have to sell the commodity fast. They need transport networks quickly. Sabotage will have less potential after the network is more redundant. And, of course, capital is already pushing for multiple new routes, which have already been planned, as well as increased capacity on existing routes.

Thus the real emphasis is on the industry more broadly. Sabotage as industrial practice.

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