

Sabotage & the Flows of Capital

Communities Resist Assaults on Nature

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According to all reputable climatologists, an immediate ninety percent reduction in material and energy production is required to meet the goal of limiting the average worldwide temperature increase by a disastrous two degrees Fahrenheit. At the current rate of fossil fuel extraction and use, the earth will experience a catastrophic increase of four to nine degrees by the end of this century.

The climate crisis and other broad, interlinked ecological crises—a crisis of capital really—long ago reached the point beyond which the manufactured process of state capitalist deliberation (lobbying, symbolic protest, appeals to regulation) could offer anything for life on this planet. As in other periods in the history of capitalist expansion, threatened communities have employed sabotage as a response.

Sabotage, as used by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the first years of the 20th century, was the organized disruption of the movement of a commodity. They defined it as the “conscientious withdrawal of efficiency”—processes and practices of obstruction, grinding down, slowing, slackening, or inefficiency that might impede, interfere with, or halt industrial production.

In the case of modern energy extraction, sabotage, or monkeywrenching as the Earth First! movement calls it, focuses on stopping the flows, either before they start or, failing that, after they begin through demobilizing equipment or machinery.

The IWW tactic of work stoppages, strikes, and slowdowns, has not taken on a mass expression in the modern era, but campaigners view this as a powerful tactic currently being organized on a small scale. No one in the modern earth defense movement advocates destroying operational pipelines or other facilities that would cause environmental damage.

Recent situations utilizing this approach are community/workers' actions at two Canadian sites. Especially the Unist'ot'en clan (C'ihlts'ehkhyu / Big Frog Clan, Wet'suwet'en Peoples, Yinka Dini—People of this Earth) camp built in the path of the proposed Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines, a project to build twin lines from Alberta to British Columbia (BC), and a second westbound pipeline to export diluted bitumen from the Alberta oil sands to a marine terminal for transportation to Asian markets by oil tanker.

The forces of the state mobilizing in support of extreme energy and extractives realize the potency and promise of sabotage in opposing such developments perhaps even more so than do the environmental movements still clinging to hopes for reform.

A recently revealed security document, "Critical Infrastructure Intelligence Assessment," written by the RCMP, Canada's federal police, shows the centrality of the state's concern with sabotage. The Mounties note both the effectiveness of sabotage in halting extractive projects and, perhaps as importantly, in building solidarity and support for opposition movements.

For those movements and communities that employ sabotage, it is crucial that it be organized and collective. There also has to be a capacity to collectivize the absorption of punitive reaction by the state and/or private security forces to the sabotage/saboteurs, as many practitioners have learned in recent years.

The building of alternative energy possibilities can also be understood as sabotage, as can local autonomy and physical assertion of the commons.

So far the largest saboterial obstacle and strongest opposition to extractives in the Canadian state context comes from indigenous resistance. One can learn from the "Save the Fraser Declaration," a document of indigenous law banning the Northern Gateway pipeline, and the "Coastal First Nations Declaration" statement of opposition. This is talk of sabotage by people who know how to do it and are prepared.

Indigenous communities bear an assumption of "infinite responsibility" for the land. The Unist'ot'en Camp is an indigenous re-occupation of Wet'suwet'en territory in northern B. The camp, with dug-in structures, presents an ongoing blockade against several proposed pipelines, including the Pacific Trail and Enbridge pipelines. Blockades, such as the camp established by the Unist'ot'en on traditional lands, represent a potent form of sabotage of flows while also an affirmation of community life. Not surprisingly, the extractive companies and the state view this blockade with utmost seriousness.

In other places, community activists and workers have been known to come together around acts of eco-defense. In some cases, this has included individual (or a few) workers in oil, transport, or shipping engaging in saboterial acts based on their own special knowledge of the workplace and job tasks to disrupt the work.

Many workers in those industries have both concern over industrial practices and insider knowledge of how to do something about it.

The work of building connections with worker-saboteurs in industry happens on a one by one and two by two basis, at least initially. Often the workers will know better than anyone else how to engage in such acts in ways that obscure the cause or source of the stoppage.

One case that has already occurred involves a small group of anarchists in Canada who have built relationships with dock workers at a major port by showing up at shift changes and speaking directly with rank and file workers. Anarchists bring leaflets dealing with various issues related to the climate crisis, both as conversation starters and for information distribution. These conversations have proven fertile in building ongoing relations, and help foster work stoppages and disruptions against oil related work on the docks.

Another informative instance involving elements of direct sabotage was the interference with surveyors and engineers for Kinder Morgan, the fourth largest energy company in North America, on Burnaby Mountain in British Columbia.

During the company's first attempts to survey the proposed Mountain West pipeline route across the mountain's nature preserve to the refinery on the Burrard Inlet, community opponents interfered with, obstructed, and annoyed surveyors to the point where the work could not be completed. This included people chaining themselves to survey vehicles, but mostly consisted of walking alongside and in front of surveyors making efficient, accurate work impossible.

The company's heavy-handed attempt to get an injunction against potential saboteurs sparked large rallies by a broad cross section of people (including indigenous groups, students from elementary to post-secondary, teachers, environmentalists, unionists, horticulturists, local residents, etc.) at the mountain survey sites, further impeding the pipeline company's efforts. It was an inspiring move from sabotage by a few to a broad collective saboteurial mobilization of effective interference and disastrous publicity for the company's actions). The large gathering and the police and media presence had the effect of further sabotaging the survey work.

However, anti-pipeline movements, outside of indigenous resistance and some rural landowners, have so far been a politics of dissent or publicity, a symbolic politics. They mobilize expressly to bring attention to concerns about and opposition to projects. Often there is a discourse that focuses on the undemocratic character of pipeline development and the lack of public input. These movements are generally based on the hope that the pipelines will be stopped once enough people hear about the environmental dangers or politicians are shamed into backing away from close relationships with developers.

However, stopping these mega-projects will require more than arguments. Oil companies and their government facilitators will not be dissuaded, nor will they be shamed (they have no shame). There is no hope that even growing public opposition will bring about a change in policy or practice in the fashion supposed by liberal democratic mythology. »

Oil companies will repeatedly try to go another way and build alternative routes. Can the publicity campaigns keep up their efforts to match this given the outlay of resources and energies required? Publicity is, despite the internet and social media, hard to sustain over multiple sites of struggle in a meaningful way.

One might ask what it would look like to ally publicity and sabotage politics. Can publicity enhance saboteurial acts or legitimize sabotage within broader public discussions? There is a necessity for sabotage to be adequately contextualized, indeed, grounded in broader community understandings.

Just as important, we must get beyond seeking a compromise resolution within a capitalist and state context. There is no proper end that sees the extreme extractive industries still in operation.

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