



The Brief

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Challenging NB Power’s use of “blood coal” from Colombia

By ABRAM LUTES



St. Thomas University social work students working on refugee solidarity highlighted NB Power’s use of blood coal at their Social Action Fair in 2016.
Photo by Rebekah Reid.

New Brunswick’s economy has long centered on resource extraction. Timber, mining, and oil and gas, significant contributors to the province’s GDP and exports, are all industries heavily supported by the public through provincial and federal tax breaks and direct subsidies.

While social movements and creative thinkers around the province are strategizing alternative means of economic life, generations of Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments and industry leaders have tied the New Brunswick economy to an extractivist model of development, especially in rural areas. To support this model, governments prioritize mining, drilling, quarrying, clearcutting and transporting natural resources over other forms of economic activity such as community-based local development initiatives.

The community of Belledune in rural northern New Brunswick, which boasts a lead and zinc smelter, a phosphoric acid factory, a coal-fired power plant and a large port for exporting resource products, is exemplary of this model. The NB Power Belledune Generating Facility is the last coal-burning power plant in New Brunswick. According to information received by Colombian solidarity activists from NB Power in 2016, it sources its coal from two mines in Colombia owned by Glencore PLC, a multinational company that also owns the smelter in Belledune through its subsidiary Glencore Canada. When workers at the Belledune smelter went on strike on April 24, Glencore locked them out.

Tracy Glynn, a doctoral researcher with the RAVEN project at the University of New Brunswick, has worked with mining-affected communities and solidarity networks for two decades. Glynn is part of efforts to end NB Power’s reliance on “blood coal” from Colombia.

Blood coal is mined in a way that is extremely harmful to the workers and communities near the mine. Social movement groups in both New Brunswick and Colombia have asked NB Power to join communities and workers to put pressure on its coal supplier to comply with environmental, labour and safety standards. NB Power has twice written letters to the President and CEO of Cerrejón, asking the company to comply with such standards.

“NB Power sources coal from two Glencore-owned mines in Colombia that are implicated in numerous human rights and labour violations and environmental degradation,” says Glynn. Glencore is a primary shareholder (along with the large mining multinationals, BHP and Anglo-American) and operator of the Cerrejón mine, the largest open-pit coal mine in Latin America. Glencore also owns La Jagua coal mine. The two coal mines in northeastern Colombia supply most of NB Power’s coal.

“Indigenous Wayuu children living in the vicinity of those mines are dying in the thousands because of lack of access

to clean drinking water, food, health care and housing,” according to Glynn, “Numerous human rights organizations blame the water and food crisis on the Cerrejón coal mine.”

Glencore employs Colombian paramilitary groups, local death squads, as security for the mine and supports paramilitary groups across Colombia with finances, equipment, and intel, according to the NGO Pax for Peace. A representative of the Wayuu accused Colombian paramilitaries, including those providing security for the Cerrejón mine, of forcibly driving the Wayuu off their land in a “massacre.”

“Glencore, one of the largest mining multinationals in the world, has a track record of harming workers and communities around the world,” says Glynn. Glencore has a history of bribery and tax evasion in the U.S. and Australia, and has been accused of practicing slavery in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and is considered by American intelligence services to have been a significant player in kickback schemes to acquire oil assets in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq during the UN oil-for-food programme in the 1990s.

Alain Deneault, a New Brunswick-based public intellectual, has analyzed Canadian mining companies and corporate tax avoidance. His book Imperial Canada, Inc. notes that Canada is a “legal haven of choice” for transnational mining corporations and that Canadian law and public policy gives them an incentive to register in Canada by providing protection from prosecution and taxation in the countries where their mines operate.

The NB Media Co-op has reported extensively on the situation around Cerrejón, including the strikes organized by the SINTRACARBON, the union representing the coal mine workers, as well as the Maritimes visits of Colombian union activists such as Francisco Ramirez and Jesus Brochero. Safety concerns have been important motivators for the worker strikes.

Similar to the communities near Belledune, the communities affected by corporate resource extraction in Colombia are rural communities, which often bear the brunt of the effects of climate change and environmental degradation. SINTRACARBON has worked to bring forward community concerns and interests in their bargaining with Glencore in Colombia.

Colombia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a labour or environmental organizer. Ramirez has survived at least eight assassination attempts since he helped unionize Cerrejón, and recent negotiations between the government and the communist FARC guerrillas have made the situation for social activists worse. Despite these deadly conditions, many social movements have mobilized for a fairer Colombia. In April, more than one million workers from the Central Union of Workers, SINTRACARBON’s national affiliate, went on strike for an alternative development strategy which would protect workers, communities, and the environment.

In addition to mounting ethical and labour concerns, the Conservation Council of New Brunswick stated recently that New Brunswick needs a viable plan to phase out coal and other carbon-intensive energy sources. NB Power has stated that it plans to phase out coal by 2030.

In the Belledune region, local communities are developing green alternatives for sustainable economic development, such as La Barque in Pointe-Verte, a community co-operative with more than 600 members. The RAVEN project is currently working with a video production company based in La Barque to explore how these kinds of local projects can be supported through research and the production of alternative news and digital media.

Abram Lutes is an environmental action reporter with the RAVEN project Summer Institute and a member of the NB Media Co-op board of directors.

Political action and inaction in New Brunswick on the climate crisis

By SUSAN O’DONNELL

Early on the cold and wet morning of June 14, a group of environmental and labour activists gathered outside the Saint John Convention Centre to protest the speech inside the building by Alberta premier, pipeline booster and union buster, Jason Kenney. Their political action contrasted sharply with the lack of climate action inside the New Brunswick Legislature on the same day.

The government moved to end the second session of New Brunswick’s 59th Legislature and only return in November. Their inaction on the climate crisis is two months after the release of the Canada’s Changing Climate report and six weeks after residents living near the Wəlastək (St. John River) experienced historic flooding for the second year in a row. The report confirmed that emissions from fossil fuels are creating the climate crisis and extreme weather events, while it urges Canadians to act immediately.

June 14 in the Legislature proved to be just as frustrating for environmental activists concerned with the spraying of glyphosate on public lands. Green Party leader David Coon attempted to extend the legislature sitting by calling for an emergency debate on the spraying of glyphosate this summer. Rather than extend the legislature for this debate, Daniel Guitard, the Speaker, a Liberal MLA, ruled that he did not view this as an emergency, and refused the request.

This week in June also provided many snapshots that together tell a story of inaction by most of our political leaders on the most urgent political, environmental, social and economic issue of our time: the climate crisis. They included: a defeated renewable energy bill, political debates about if fracking is part of a transition to renewable energy.

On June 12, the Green Party’s bill to revise the Electricity Act to allow communities and First Nations to develop community renewable energy generation that had passed its second reading, was voted down in committee by the Progressive Conservative government and its allies, the People’s Alliance MLAs.

On June 13, the government presented its carbon tax plan that was criticized for charging our largest industrial polluters only a fraction of what other industries are paying under the federal plan. In the Legislature, Megan Mitton, Green Party MLA for Memramcook-Tantramar, who earlier had called for a declaration of a climate emergency, said: “Imagine if we had leaders who focused on energy efficiency and solar energy, and worked with a coalition of premiers to ramp up renewable energy jobs.”

Premier Blaine Higgs repeated his assertions that fracking is part of his government’s plan to transition the economy to renewable energy sources and reduce carbon emissions. Mitton asked the Premier: “What if you are wrong?” and asked if he was getting his information from oil companies, stating that her information came from climate scientists.

Later that day, the government cut into the time for Opposition motions to introduce the Premier of Alberta Jason Kenney and allow him to make a short speech.



Labour activist Sharon Teare and environmental activist Ann McAlister join members of Unifor and CUPE at a rally to protest speech by Jason Kenney in Saint John on June 14. Photo by Martin Melanson.

Political action and inaction

When Kenney thanked Premier Higgs for his dedication to the dream of a national pipeline corridor, Mitton rose and left the Legislature. The other Green Party members, David Coon and Kevin Arseneau, were also visibly absent during Kenney’s presentation. The government and People’s Alliance members gave Kenney a standing ovation.

Earlier in the day, in his speech to the Saint John Chamber of Commerce, Liberal Party leader Kevin Vickers called Jason Kenney “my good friend” and spoke in support of the Energy East pipeline.

Given that the New Brunswick legislature is in recess until November, the main political movement for climate action in New Brunswick until then will be outside the arena of party politics. Last week, the NB Media Co-op reported on the resistance to fracking by Indigenous leaders. Earlier this week, the New Brunswick Federation of Labour released a statement supporting the moratorium on fracking. The next international student strike for the climate is scheduled for September 20, and this time adults are specifically requested to join the protest.

Susan O’Donnell is a member of the NB Media Co-op Editorial Board and a researcher with RAVEN - Rural Action and Voices for the Environment.

Send us your letter from the future

In the optimistic spirit of the Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s Message from the Future, RAVEN and the NB Media Co-op welcomes letters that take a speculative and fictional look back from the future to imagine what New Brunswick could be like if we could meet our climate change obligations. It is fiction, but it need not stay fiction. Each letter offers a vision of what New Brunswick could be like in the future if the province is able to fight climate change and to achieve international climate targets. For more information, contact: info@nbmediacoop.org.

The NB Media Co-op is 10 years old! Celebrate with us

The NB Media Co-op’s 10th Annual General Meeting & Keynote by Chantal Richard

Every year, the NB Media Co-op chooses a newsmaker that has provided insight to a hot topic to deliver its annual keynote address. This year’s keynote will be delivered by Dr. Chantal Richard, a professor in the Department of French at the University of New Brunswick. Chantal will speak about the erasure and revival of Acadian identity, language and culture in the context of settler colonialism. Chantal’s talk will address how divergent narratives in French and English-language media have divided communities and undermined efforts to promote equality.

Thursday, Sept. 19 at 7:00 pm

Charlotte Street Art Centre, 732 Charlotte St., Fredericton

This event is co-hosted by the Societe de L’Acadie du Nouveau-Brunswick (SANB), French Studies at the University of New Brunswick, and the Journal of New Brunswick Studies.

*All are welcome to attend the NB Media Co-op’s Annual General Meeting at 5:00pm at the same venue. You must be a member to vote. To become a member, visit nbmediacoop.org or email info@nbmediacoop.org.

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Industry has captured New Brunswick environmental regulators

By LAWRENCE WUEST



Cheryl Johnson is one of many residents in Upham concerned about the environmental assessment process for the Hammond River Holdings gypsum mine. Photo submitted.

Controversy over the proposed gypsum mine/quarry by J.D. Irving’s Hammond River Holdings near Upham in the Hammond River Watershed in southern New Brunswick has evoked confused and contradictory comments from the Department of Environment and Local Government. This ongoing drama has been the subject of several recent NB Media Co-op articles. The current situation is only the latest example of an entrenched history of industrial capture of New Brunswick’s provincial regulators, ostensibly mandated to protect the province’s people and environment.

In 2014, the provincial Ombudsperson Charles Murray issued a scathing report on the failure of the government’s Department of the Environment to implement one of the vital regulations protecting the province’s clean water, the Water Classification Regulation of the Clean Water Act. Murray observed that the “complete ineffectiveness” of the regulation was and is “in some respects worse than having no regulation at all” and “like a smoke detector without batteries, [the regulation] provides no protection and may induce less vigilance. It appears to address and remedy a problem when in reality it does nothing of the sort.”

And so it is with too many of the province’s so called “regulatory safeguards” of the public interest and the environment. We have regulations on the books that give the appearance of regulatory vigilance, and we the taxpayers employ, at great expense, civil servants whose job it is to enforce those regulations. Yet, when push comes to shove, inevitably governments find ways to ignore, manipulate and abuse the very safeguards the public perceives as defending its common interest.

The responsibility for regulation primarily falls to specific departments depending on the act, e.g. the Department of the Environment has primary responsibility for enforcing the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Environment Act, and various incarnations of departments of natural resources and energy regulate Crown forests, and mineral and petroleum extraction. However, multiple departments ultimately hold collective responsibility for regulation through obligatory participation on technical review committees (TRC) that review all projects undergoing environmental impact assessment.

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process is designed to identify all possible negative impacts to the environment that will result from a proposed industrial development, and to ensure that proponents will have the ways, means and will to mitigate those impacts. Given the TRC oversight, when the regulatory system fails, it is a systemic failure.

Exhibit A: Regulator employs double-speak to skirt EIA requirements

The aforementioned proposal by Hammond River Holdings to develop a gypsum mine in Upham is hampered by a troublesome “designated” or “regulated” wetland as re-defined in 2011. A fraction of a regulated wetland intersects the proposed project location. In typical fashion the province has seen fit to truncate and exempt the portion of the wetland that lies on the Hammond River Holding property. Unfortunately, the government cannot keep up with all its manipulations and some government documents contradict others on the state of affairs with regard to this wetland. Meanwhile the citizens of the Upham area are forced to contend with government doublespeak on whether an EIA is required or not.

Exhibit B: Regulator fiddles with data to benefit the Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan

In 2006, University of New Brunswick researchers Wilson, White and Roulston documented the location of the Penobsquis fault line intersecting the Picadilly potash deposits south of Penobsquis in southern New Brunswick. Shortly after Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan registered in July, 2007 for EIA of the proposed Picadilly extension of the ongoing potash operations in Penobquis, the province’s Department of Natural Resources and Energy relocated the fault line north of the Picadilly potash deposit on provincial geologic map MP2008-186A. Consequently, the fault was not a factor in the EIA; the Picadilly Mine was approved without reference to the fault. Following EIA approval of the Picadilly Mine, Map MP2008-186A was subsequently revised in 2011 and the fault line was once again shown to intersect the Picadilly potash deposit. These questionable maneuverings were accomplished at a time when the province was already aware that domestic water wells in the Penobsquis area were likely being depleted by the potash mine operations.

Exhibit C: Regulator re-defines wetlands to benefit J.D. Irving

In 2011, J.D. Irving registered a proposed peat harvesting operation in Juniper for an EIA. The EIA was required because the proposed peat harvesting would impact a provincial wetland. Shortly after the EIA registration, the province undertook a re-definition of wetlands, redefining as “designated” or “regulated” only a fraction of all wetlands, and exempting all of the wetlands involved at Juniper from regulatory oversight. Subsequently, the Juniper peat operation was removed from the registry of scheduled EIAs, and the project was permitted to proceed without EIA. It is important to note that skirting EIA also allowed J.D. Irving to avoid a regulatory obligation for formal Indigenous consultation.

Exhibit D: Regulator fails to observe its own regulations in order to benefit Sisson mine development

This century has observed a litany of abuse of Indigenous rights, and abuse of the Clean Water Act and Clean Environment Act as the province has chased the elusive and illusive Sisson Mine project. The proposed Sisson Mine in the Upper Nashwaak Watershed involves a massive open-pit tungsten and molybdenum mine along with a tailings impoundment far more massive than the ill-fated pond at Mount Polley in British Columbia. Successive New Brunswick governments first procrastinated, and then ignored their obligations under the Classification Regulation of the Clean Water Act. Governments were, and continue to be intimidated by the regulation as it empowers the local watershed populace to weigh the pros and cons of the mine project, and to decide the project’s fate. Similarly, federal and provincial governments have abused and ignored their constitutional and treaty obligations with regard to Indigenous rights. As mentioned previously, in 2014, the provincial Ombudsperson chastised successive governments for their abuse of the Water Classification Regulation; all to no avail.

Subsequently, the province continued to ignore the Water Classification Regulation and to also abuse the Clean Environment Act by imposing time constrained EIA Conditions of Approval for the Sisson mine, only to subsequently fail to enforce those same conditions. All these government actions and inactions render these Acts and their regulations meaningless.

Exhibit E: Sacking of the province’s Chief Medical Officer of Health

The crowning glory of government abuse of regulatory oversight is the firing of the very competent Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Eilish Cleary in 2016. In 2012, Dr. Cleary and her team assembled an internationally acclaimed framework for Health Impact Assessment (HIA) of shale gas and other industrial initiatives. Although the Health Impact Assessment was not popular with politicians, the government of the day managed to live with, and to subsequently ignore the impact of Dr. Cleary’s Health Impact Assessment framework. But when the work of the office of the Chief Medical Officer threatened to constrain glyphosate herbicide spraying in the province, the Chief Medical Officer was summarily fired.

All of these actions reinforce the Ombudsperson’s warning that the illusion of safeguards without the necessary “batteries” is a disservice to the public. We are experiencing a period when politicians and civil servants increasingly exhibit a smug and loathsome air of superiority in their freedom to lie, delay and obfuscate the truth, and to hide behind time-wasting “Right to Information” requests when acting as industry hacks in dealing with the public. It is time for a new paradigm of truth, respect and transparency between the government and the people who employ them.

Lawrence Wuest is an ecologist and resident of the Upper Nashwaak Watershed.