The Brief

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From Colombia to New Brunswick: What does a just energy transition look like for where "blood coal" is extracted and burned?

By CORTNEY MACDONNELL

The New Brunswick Environmental Network organized a tour of the NB Power coal plant in Belledune in 2019. The coal plant burns coal from Colombia. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

With New Brunswick planning to close its Belledune coal plant in 2030 as part of Canada's transition off coal, advocates for a just energy transition point to the need to include workers and communities in future economic planning. They say that includes people in the northern New Brunswick region as well as in Colombia where NB Power has been sourcing coal from the Cerrejón coal mine since 1993, when the plant opened.

Alvaro Ipuana is an Indigenous Wayuu leader from Nuevo Espinal, one of several communities forcibly displaced for the Cerrejón coal mine in Colombia's La Guajira region. Ipuana traveled to London, UK, in 2019 to denounce – at an annual shareholders' meeting – how one of the multinational owners of the coal mine, BHP, treats his community.

Latin America's largest coal mine, in operation since 1985, the Cerrejón mine is owned by a consortium of three of the largest mining multinational giants in the world: BHP, Glencore and Anglo American. The mine has forcibly displaced Indigenous Wayuu and Afro-Colombian communities from their land.

"We want to make it known that the minerals that leave our territory are stained with our blood," Ipuana told audiences in London.

Fourteen years ago, José Julio Perez, an Afro-Colombian man whose ancestors came to La Guajira as slaves from Africa, told a Fredericton audience that, in 2001, approximately 500 soldiers and 200 police officers forcibly evicted him and the residents of his community of Tabaco for a mine that supplies NB Power with coal.

In 2018, Colombia had 7.7 million people internally displaced persons, the highest in the world. While the civil war in Colombia is blamed for forced displacement and migration, mining is another cause.

Since the opening of the Cerrejón coal mine, 19 rivers have disappeared in the semi-desert region of La Guajira, driving a significant humanitarian crisis where child death rates have soared.

Javier Rojas, leader of the Indigenous organisation Wayúu Shipia, told *The Bogota Post* in 2016: "We estimate that in less than ten years, more than 14,000 members of our communities – children, adolescents, expectant mothers and the elderly – have died due to malnutrition."

Rojas, whose activism has led to death threats, blames Cerrejón's operations for drastically reducing the availability of potable water in the region.

COVID-19 has only intensified the drinking water crisis in La Guajira.

Earlier this year, anthropologist Emma Banks described the conditions in La Guajira: "Communities living near the Cerrejón open pit coal mine have precarious access to water. Mining companies have displaced communities and seized water sources for over thirty years. Thousands of families have to buy potable water, which is already becoming harder to find as people stockpile to prepare for COVID-19."

In 2016, the Supreme Court of Colombia ordered the country to take all appropriate and necessary measures to ensure that children and adolescents of the Wayuu Indigenous community have access to clean drinking water, food, health care, and housing. The order came after a 2015 decision of the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights that called on the Colombian state to take action to prevent further deaths of Wayuu children.

Arundhati Roy, anti-globalization critic and celebrated author, in her popular essay "The Pandemic is a Portal," writes that the world has a choice: "We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

Catalina Caro Galvis with CENSAT Agua Viva (Friends of the Earth Colombia) is one activist based in Colombia's capital of Bogota that is "imagining a world anew" in Roy's words.

Caro, like activists around the world, works with trade unions, Indigenous communities and international solidarity networks in support of a just transition to a post-carbon, post-extractivist society.

Caro's organization wants the debate on climate change to not just focus on greenhouse gas emissions. According to Caro, the entire fossil-based energy model needs addressing.

The 2019 UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report, "Climate Change and Land," agrees and states that it is not just the energy model that needs an overhaul to stop climate change from severely altering the earth's systems but also the way we produce food.

In New Brunswick, activists in solidarity with Colombia have educated NB Power and the public about Colombian coal since José Julio Perez visited the Maritimes in 2006. They say that it is important to support the demands of the affected communities and workers at the mine.

Francisco Ramirez Cuellar was the latest speaker from Colombia to visit the Maritimes and speak to audiences about the workers.

In 2015, the Colombian union leader, lawyer and survivor of eight known assassination attempts publicly spoke in Fredericton about the murders, violence and poverty linked to the multinational mining companies in his country. Ramirez explained that New Brunswickers must acknowledge and act on the "blood coal" leaving Colombia that is sold to NB Power.

Colombian coal is called "blood coal" not only because of the violence exerted on displaced communities but also because of the miners and union activists who have lost their lives due to their harsh and unsafe working conditions and activism.

In a recent interview with the NB Media Co-op, Ramirez said he wants Canadians to remember that Canada played a role in rewriting Colombia's mining code which he says resulted in Cerrejón paying a paltry amount in taxes back to Colombia.

"Workers receive an income seven times lower than the

continued on page 2

What can the lockdown teach us about reducing carbon emissions?

By MATTHEW HAYES

Thanks to the global coronavirus pandemic, 2020 is almost certain to be the first year the world has managed to reduce its carbon footprint.

With the new federal finance minister announcing that the recovery must be a green one, it is time to think about what we can learn about emission reductions from the reductions imposed by the coronavirus lockdown.

The International Energy Agency estimates that in the first quarter of this year, carbon emissions fell 3.8 per cent over the first quarter in 2019, and that 2020 could see a fall in emissions of eight per cent.

If this seems like a silver lining, don't blink. Though the biggest reduction ever recorded by a factor of six, global carbon emissions have only fallen to levels recorded in 2010.

While this is a good start, we would have to cut emissions along these levels year after year for at least the next decade to keep global temperatures from rising beyond the safe threshold of 1.5-2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. And there is no clear way to do that.

In fact, as economies have re-opened, carbon emissions have surged back. Despite lockdowns that saw daily global emissions reductions of about 17 per cent in early April, the carbon content in the atmosphere—which represents years of continued emissions growth—reached its highest-ever recorded levels in May at 417ppm.

A return to normal is built into the current macroeconomic policy of the federal Trudeau government, which has rescued high carbon polluters (airports, the tar sands, oil and gas pipelines, etc.) and aims to return our economy to growth as soon as possible.

The lockdown is instructive of how we might do things differently. What if instead of returning to normal, we thought about how we might reorganize our economy to lock-in the carbon reductions we saw in the lockdown? One place to think about this is in terms of urban mobility.

During the lockdown, we drove a lot less because there was less going on. In the future, we want more to be going on, but we want to drive less. Is it possible to have both?

Fredericktonians spend a huge amount on urban mobility. Collectively, we spend $407.6 million per year on cars. I know, that sounds like a lot. The CAA estimates an average of $9,000 per year per car in Canada (which includes depreciation).[1] If Fredericktonians are about the average, that is how much we spend collectively.

By contrast, the municipal government spent $30 million on public transportation in 2019.

The question for New Brunswick policymakers is whether it is possible to provide Fredericton with better mobility services than it currently does for less than $437.6 million.

In addition to saving costs, better collective organization of urban mobility would help us trim the carbon emissions of a sector of our economy that accounts for about 28 per cent of our total emissions.

The Blaine Higgs Conservative government has demonstrated that public transit is not one of its priorities, deciding to refuse federal money to help Fredericton pay for its projected $770,000 transit shortfall. The Green Party announced on August 19 that they would dedicate carbon tax revenue to public transit to the tune of $2 million. To date, according to Saint John Councillor Donna Reardon, New Brunswick may be the only provincial government in Canada that does not support public transit funding for its municipalities.

In addition to saving residents' money and reducing carbon emissions, it is possible for New Brunswick cities to increase

Fredericton buses leaving King's Place. Photo by Douglas Mullin.

continued on page 2

Canadian start-up plans to mine seabed to stop climate change

By CORTNEY MACDONNELL

Carbon-intensive transportation and the need to transition to a zero-carbon economy has led climate activists to call for a transition to electric vehicles that run on rechargeable batteries instead of gas but marine scientists and conservationists say that mining metals for the batteries is putting ocean life at risk.

International mining companies are positioning themselves to profit from the extraction of metals needed to produce electric car batteries like iron, nickel, copper, titanium and cobalt. DeepGreen Metals is one such Canadian-based seabed mining company.

According to the start-up company's website, they "are scientists, environmentalists, engineers and entrepreneurs who see climate change and meeting the resource needs of nine billion people as the biggest challenges of our time."

DeepGreen has exploration contracts to explore metals in polymetallic nodules in ocean waters off the coast of the Pacific island nations of Nauru, Tonga and Kiribati. The company aims to mine metals, such as cobalt, needed for batteries from the polymetallic nodules.

Polymetallic nodules are also called manganese nodules. The nodules sit on the seafloor and contain valuable metals.

DeepGreen is pressing the International Seabed Authority (ISA) to rapidly finalize regulations so the company can mine the deep seabed.

Catherine Coumans of Miningwatch Canada is one of many who are concerned about the impact of seabed mining on the marine environment.

"Plans to mine the deep sea show every hallmark of the environmental disasters industrial mining has created on land, including long-lasting ecosystem destruction and a failure to deliver benefits to local communities and vulnerable developing countries," said Coumans.

DeepGreen's CEO Gerard Barron told RNZ that sea-bed mining is an exciting new venture for addressing climate change while benefiting the Pacific countries: "It will mean jobs for them, it will mean economic prosperity, and the opportunity to participate in one of the most exciting new initiatives that can really have a meaningful impact on addressing climate change, and that's good for everyone on the planet."

However, a report released in May refutes DeepGreen's claims.

On May 19, the Deep Sea Mining Campaign in collaboration with MiningWatch Canada released a report on the impact of mining deep sea polymetallic nodules. The report analysed more than 250 peer-reviewed scientific articles and found that the impacts are extensive, severe, and would cause irreversible damage to an ocean already under stress.

The report, "Predicting the impacts of mining deep sea polymetallic nodules in the Pacific Ocean," also denies DeepGreen Metals' claims that there will be economic gains for Pacific island economies.

The report calls for a moratorium as the only responsible way forward until several fundamental conditions can be met, including environmental, social and economic risks to be comprehensively understood and no loss of biodiversity.

Dr. Andrew Chin, the report's lead researcher, stated, "We've only scratched the surface of understanding the deep ocean. Science is just starting to appreciate that the deep sea is not an empty void but is brimming with wonderful and unique life forms. Deep sea ecosystems form an interconnected realm with mid and surface waters through the movement of species, energy flows, and currents."

Chin added, "Not only will the nodule mining result in the loss of these species and damage deep sea beds for thousands of years, it will potentially result in negative consequences for the rest of the ocean and the people who depend on its health."

The nodules take a million years to form and the impacts of habitat loss from mining the nodules on the deep sea octopus and many species are not yet studied.

The report also notes how some mining companies are considering discharging waste back into the ocean after initial processing and how that will impact sea life: "A range of animals including whales, turtles and tuna are known to routinely make extended deep dives to 1,000 metres below the surface and deeper. Such species could be exposed to mine waste discharged at any point in the water column."

Gerard Barron, CEO and Chairman of DeepGreen Metals, is seen here representing the country of Nauru at an annual session of the International Seabed Authority. The International Seabed Authority, representing 167 member states and the European Union, is mandated under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea to organize, regulate and control all mineral-related activities in the international seabed. Photo from the International Institute for Sustainable Development.

Dr. Helen Rosenbaum of the Deep Sea Mining Campaign warned, "Under the cover of COVID-19 the regulations could be pushed through despite the absence of meaningful public debate."

"DeepGreen promotes deep sea mining as creating great wealth with minimal or no adverse impacts. The science does not support their claims. In fact, the best available research clearly indicates that the mining of deep sea nodules will place Pacific island states at great risk. The stakes are extremely high with Pacific economies, cultures, livelihoods, fisheries, food security, tourism, and iconic marine species all under threat from deep sea nodule mining," added Rosenbaum.

"DeepGreen's partnership with Tonga, Kiribati, and Nauru is potentially a catalyst for conflict with the push from Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea for a moratorium, and Pacific civil society's vocal opposition to an industry that would destroy their oceans and Pacific way of life."

Coumans, of MiningWatch Canada, added, "The report's case study of the failed Nautilus Minerals deep sea mining project attests to the harsh realities of thinly capitalized operators, and contracts that protect corporate interests over that of governments. This project left the government of Papua New Guinea with a debt of $125 million US."

Nautilus Minerals filed for bankruptcy in 2019. Nautilus' Solwara 1 gold, silver and copper project off the coast of Papua New Guinea is opposed by locals and is the subject of legal proceedings. Removed from the Toronto Stock Exchange as part of the bankruptcy proceedings, Nautilus moved to unregulated trading, which Mining.com reported resulted in a surge in the buying of the company's shares.

The report notes that Pacific islands have experienced decades of mining and yet their economies are underdeveloped. The report concludes, "Even if commercially successful, deep sea mining may not provide sufficient revenues to be an economic panacea for Pacific islanders, or to offset predicted and potential losses in current uses of the ocean."

According to DeepGreen, deep sea mining is preferable to terrestrial mining and is able to meet the demand for minerals for technology required to reduce global carbon emissions.

Professor Alex Rogers, a deep sea ecologist and expert reviewer of the report, refutes DeepGreen's claims: "I do not agree that mining the deep seabed is necessary to achieve this. Post COVID-19, we have a unique opportunity to develop a 'green' transition to a zero-carbon economy with far more sustainable ways to meet mineral requirements."

Rogers explained, "We can do this through better regulation of terrestrial mining, circular economies based on smart design, recycling, reduced demand, and development of new technologies such as batteries that do not rely on metals obtained with a high environmental cost."

Besides seabed mining, governments like Indonesia are supporting an expansion of its mining and smelting industries to meet the demands for battery metals.

Siti Maimunah, a scholar and activist on mining from Indonesia, calls the greening of energy "a new frontier of extraction."

Cortney MacDonnell is an environmental action reporter with RAVEN (Rural Action and Voices for the Environment), a research project based at the University of New Brunswick.

With files from MiningWatch Canada and Tracy Glynn.

continued from page 1

From Colombia to New Brunswick

world average for coal miners," he said.

Ramirez recalled how the Canadian International Development Agency (an agency that has since been rolled into Global Affairs Canada) supported amendments to Colombia's legislation that opened Colombia to extractive multinational companies.

"These companies have allied with mercenaries, the military and paramilitaries," said Ramirez.

For Ramirez, a just energy transition requires the mine's multinational owners to cover the costs of the damage they have done to Indigenous and peasant communities, and workers.

Ramirez noted that 4,000 trade unionists have been murdered in Colombia since 1986. On March 22, 2008, Adolfo González Montes, a worker at Cerrejón and union leader, was tortured and killed at his home.

Despite the international attention on Colombia's murder rate of activists, the killings continue to break records. According to international human and environmental rights non-governmental organization, Global Witness, Colombia was the most dangerous country to be a land defender in 2019. 64 of the 212 land defenders murdered last year across the world were Colombian.

As NB Power makes plans to transition off coal, solidarity activists hope that other kinds of costs are considered when sourcing transition fuels, including the human costs.

NB Power has said that they made the switch to lower-sulfur Colombian coal because it is cleaner than the higher-sulfur coal found in the Maritimes but solidarity activists argue that environmental reasons are not the only motivating factor behind NB Power's decision to source coal from Colombia. New Brunswick boasts the fourth lowest prices for electricity in Canada.

"New Brunswickers may want to consider the impact of coal mining on the rights of Indigenous peoples in Colombia, notably their access to water, and then further consider what they might be able to do to address this situation. It's about seeing something wrong and doing what one can to help others address an injustice," said Brent Patterson of the Canadian chapter of the non-profit, Peace Brigades International.

"Solidarity involves seeing a just energy transition as an effort that crosses borders, that upholds Indigenous rights, that protects the right to drinking water, and that is intersectional in outlook. Solidarity emphasizes climate justice, racial justice and so much more," said Patterson.

Renelle LeBlanc lives in the Chaleur region, near the Belledune coal plant. LeBlanc has been part of efforts to educate people about the impacts of heavy industry in the region. In February, her media organization, Production Aulnes, organized the Maritime Spaces talk show that discussed heavy industry on the north shore of New Brunswick. LeBlanc said she was shocked upon hearing about the human cost of coal extraction in Colombia.

"I was lost for words. After, it came to my mind how little we know about what we consume and the fact that hardly any information is shared to that effect, unless you're involved in some way."

David Coon, Green Party Leader of New Brunswick and Member of the Legislative Assembly for Fredericton South, believes that there is zero political will by the two main political parties to propel a just energy transition in the province.

"Political choices matter when it comes to a just transition, and old parties are committed to old ways," he said.

Coon argues that the Electricity Act needs to change if the province is to treat a just energy transition seriously.

"One of the overriding public goals of today and for the foreseeable future is to make that just transition but it's not written into the Electricity Act and the mandate of NB Power," he said.

In 2019, Coon introduced a bill to amend the Electricity Act to enable municipalities to secure their electricity from renewable sources in the province, but the bill was defeated.

As the coal mining companies recognize that the end of coal is near, activists at CENSAT in Colombia are dreaming of Roy's portal to a new world: "We will fight to build a new world with regenerative practices that let us recover our reason and heart: to understand ourselves as equal to the other beings that inhabit the Earth."

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continued from page 1

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the convenience of moving around the city, reduce inequality and shift resources from car-centred infrastructure towards other modes of getting around.

The length of the pandemic will affect people's preferences for public modes of transportation and car sharing, but the auto industry sees it as part of the future. Public officials should now take proactive measures that can improve people's standards of living in urban areas in New Brunswick.

Municipal governments alone cannot facilitate the shift towards a more efficient, publicly-owned and operated mobility system. This has to be done provincially and federally, providing municipal governments with new income streams and access to credit to fund a mobilities transition.

We are entering a period in which the economic crisis will force governments to take a much larger role in the economy. If governments want to restore hope for the future, it must now act in bold new ways that seemed utopian only a year ago.

Matthew Hayes is a professor of sociology and the Canada Research Chair in Global and International Studies at St. Thomas University.

[1] Data sources: there are 26,328 households in Fredericton, according to the 2016 census. New Brunswickers own an average 1.72 cars per household, according to 2018 Statscan data (549,514 registered vehicles in New Brunswick under 4,500kg). The collective amount we spend on cars, $407.6 million, comes from multiplying 1.72 cars per 26,328 households by $9,000.