



No. 32

October 12, 2019

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### **Workers Speak About Their Concerns**

## **An Idea of What Our Work Life Looks Like**

- *Discussion with Pipeline Builder André Vachon* -

André Vachon is a pipeline builder in Alberta. On October 6, he and Rose Marie Sackela spoke at a forum organized by Women for Rights and Empowerment, on the problems facing the workers and communities who bear the brunt of the decisions of the global energy giants, which governments permit to act with impunity. André is also the Marxist-Leninist Party of Canada candidate in Edmonton Manning.

*Renewal Update* is posting below an edited version of André's presentation on the experience of workers in the energy sector. A report on Rose Marie's presentation on the fight to protect the rivers that provide the drinking water for metro Edmonton and the other parts of the Prairies will follow in another issue.

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Three generations of my family have been involved in building pipelines, since the 1950s in fact. I do not think we pipeline builders have ever received so much attention from the cartel parties vying for power. These days, they fall all over themselves claiming to be the ones most concerned with our future. But no one asks us what we think. They cannot represent us because their conditions of life and work are not ours.

Like my fellow workers, I have views about a new direction needed for the economy. I have concerns about the environment and how governments are trampling on Indigenous rights. No one

asks us about our concerns. Our job is supposed to be to be available to go to work when all the decisions have been made, the companies have been guaranteed public funding, and they need us to actually build the pipeline and create the wealth they crave.

Despite all this supposed concern for our welfare, these same governments -- whether Kenney or his predecessors in Alberta or Trudeau in Ottawa -- trample on our rights. All workers in the construction industry and building trades are working under labour laws enacted during the 1980s, a decade of fierce resistance on our part to union-busting; when assaults on construction workers' wages and working conditions were ferocious.



The labour law denies workers the right to bargain collectively and engage in actions to defend our right to decide what wages and working conditions are acceptable to us in return for our capacity to work. One thing it does is create complex and difficult arrangements. I will not go into the details here but suffice it to say the law makes it so difficult for a union to go on legal strike that no legal strike has occurred since 1988. In 2007, workers from a number of trades defied this legislation and carried out strike action together. Of course they were forced back to work with draconian threats of punishment.

We also face double-breasting laws, which means a company can have union and non-union arms of the same company and just shift all the work to the non-union arm when it suits them. This has allowed the company-organized union called the Christian Labour Association of Canada – CLAC – and non-union companies to overwhelm us and force down our wages and working conditions.



At this time, it is commonplace for contractors to sign a collective agreement with construction workers and then demand we work for less or the job will go to non-union companies. If the Trans Mountain expansion pipeline is ever built, all but one of the contractors will be non-union or company-organized CLAC union contractors. These are the supposed good jobs the cartel parties speak of.

The unions are currently challenging these laws in the courts as unconstitutional. Leading up to the provincial election, several unions organized rallies and marches to demand that their rights be recognized in law, but no matter which party government has been in power it has bowed to the dictate of these big, mainly U.S., contractors who have taken billions of dollars of social wealth out of the Canadian economy, social wealth we workers produced with our sweat and blood.

As you can well imagine, when governments criminalize us for exercising our right to decide what wages, working conditions, benefits and pensions are acceptable, and to be compensated according to our skills and contribution to society, those wages and conditions are pushed down. Most pipeline workers, working for non-union contractors or under a CLAC agreement, do not have a pension; they do not have benefits when they are laid off; they do not have a job steward on the job or health representative to protect their safety or defend them when abused by those in authority. They can be fired with impunity on just about any pretext.

Just to give you an idea of what our work life is like, while jobs vary a lot, an average job for my union local, Local 955 Operating Engineers, is 12 or 13 weeks. A major pipeline might stretch that out to a maximum of four months a year. When we work, it is six or even seven days a week, up to 13 hours a day. I personally worked 67 days in a row once. The reason it stopped at 67 is because after 70 days without a day off, the company would have had to give us 14 days off with pay. So on day 68 we were laid off.

None of this can be called concern for pipeline workers. For a period of time we work to the point of exhaustion day after day and then we face unemployment and uncertainty, never knowing if or when we might be next called for a job. This is not how an economy should be organized.

So the fight goes on, and in this regard how to defend our rights in this situation is a problem for all workers in the industry to take up. Generally the unions have tried to stem the tide of non-union and employer-unions dominating construction in Alberta by at least, as they say, "keeping their market share" of the jobs. This has not been successful because to do so they have to underbid their "competitors" and guarantee that there will be no "trouble" with the labour they provide, in other words no active defence of the rights of workers and their wages and working conditions. This difficult situation requires all of us construction workers to get involved to discuss and work out how the problem poses itself and proceed based on our collective wisdom and actions with analysis in defence of the rights of all.

Workers in the building trades have long called for an end to the plunder of our natural resources, including an end to making the destructive practice of shipping bitumen the mainstay of the Alberta economy. Billions of dollars of actual and potential social wealth have been ripped out of Mother Earth and shipped out of Alberta under the control of the mainly foreign oil oligopolies. They make all the decisions about what is produced, how it is produced and what the people may or may not think of such an economy. This control and the decisions, taken mainly in the U.S., as to the direction of the economy and production of oil and gas are tied up with war production and the energy needs of the vast U.S. military and war economy. The result is in front of us on a world scale -- the destruction of any country and people who do not submit to U.S. dictate and control.



Let us think about it with a clear head. Venezuela produces similar heavy oil to Alberta. It was the biggest supplier of heavy oil to the U.S. for many years under the control of the United States on unfavourable terms to the people of Venezuela. Since the people and government of Venezuela, under Chávez and now Maduro, have made efforts to change the terms of production and trade, the

U.S. has imposed sanctions and blockades. This came to a head early this year when the U.S. attempted a coup to impose regime change and oust President Maduro. The coup failed and immediately the U.S. organized secret meetings with governments -- including Canada, the military and energy cartels to decide what needed to be done to destroy Venezuela. One decision was to increase bitumen production in Alberta to 5 million barrels a day and thus reduce any reliance on Venezuelan heavy oil.

Construction workers have long called for diversification of the economy away from this reliance on natural resources, and also for the transition to renewables. But this desire has been turned into nothing more than pay-the-rich schemes. For example, two petrochemical plants were given \$500 million in handouts upon completion. One is jointly owned by the Kuwaiti National Oil Company, i.e. the Emir of Kuwait. The other used to be, and probably still is, owned by the Koch brothers, one of whom died recently. This is not diversification towards manufacturing, food production, social programs and public services and humanization of the social and natural environment. This is more of the same pay-the-rich schemes where the social wealth workers produce is handed over to the rich ruling elite.



Most people think that the status quo is not sustainable, but the people are not in control. In contrast, the oil oligarchs and their representatives in governments dream of doubling bitumen production and pipelines in all directions, which they insist is the road to prosperity. We ask: How did Alberta reach such a stage that its ruling elite consider that without pipelines to tidewater the sky will fall? Enormous quantities of oil and natural gas have been exported from Alberta for decades, generating billions of dollars in revenue. Where did that revenue go? Who had control of it and how was it invested? It certainly did not go into making the Alberta economy all-sided, stable and less dependent on exporting raw and semi-refined material as the working people have been demanding for decades. The U.S. energy giants

and military only have eyes for Alberta's oil and natural gas and could care less for the viability of its economy and well-being of the people.

The development of Alberta's energy sector in the last decades coincides with the integration of Canada as a whole into so-called continentalism and now globalism, embroiling us in a worldwide violent battle to achieve U.S. imperialist hegemony. All energy, transportation, communications and security corridors and money head south and that includes the Trans Mountain pipeline, which mainly feeds refineries on the U.S. west coast. Just imagine: much of the Alberta heavy oil transported to tidewater through the existing Trans Mountain pipeline is shipped onward to Washington State and refined there and then shipped back to BC as gasoline and airline fuel and sold at exorbitant prices! A recent BC government inquiry into high gasoline prices faced by motorists in the Lower Mainland concluded they were the result of price gouging by the energy cartels.

The workers' movement in Canada has given rise to many slogans expressing the need for a new direction for the economy: *Don't Ship Our Jobs Down the Pipeline!; Our Resources, Not Big Oil's!;*

*Refine It Where We Mine It!; No to Rip and Ship!; Whose Economy? Our Economy!; Who Decides? We Decide!; Manufacturing Yes! Nation-Wrecking No!* These slogans express the determination of working people to find solutions to the problems facing the socialized economy and change its direction to develop a pro-social nation-building project and vest sovereignty in the people.

Today we must also acknowledge the imperative of action on climate change, and the duty we have as Canadians to uphold nation-to-nation relations with Indigenous peoples as well as Quebec. To consult with the Indigenous peoples and receive consent for activities on their territories is a principle we uphold and defend as workers. So too, we oppose Alberta-bashing, which claims that Alberta working people are red necks because we want stability and oppose corruption and opportunism.



We also oppose Quebec-bashing. I am a Quebecker. Even though I am the third generation of my family working on the pipelines, we still have roots and connections with Quebec. What stands out so clearly in all this bashing is the attempt to pit energy workers and the workers in the construction trades, who are so dependent on energy projects, against the Indigenous peoples, against the people of BC who want a say over their land and coastal waters, against the youth who are demanding action on climate change, and against the people of Quebec who want a say over their environment. Is this not a continuation of the old divide and conquer mode of operations of the colonialists so that the people themselves do not gain control over their lives?

The cartel parties in contention in the election and in government offer no viable alternative for the workers to address our concerns for employment and security of our well-being and that of our communities. Particularly in the energy-producing regions of Alberta, those in control of the economy and governments have developed no alternative economy that favours the working people and humanizes the natural environment. This puts working people in a difficult, if not impossible situation. The decision to support the TMX and similar carbon energy projects becomes a form of blackmail. As pipeline workers, if we say *No*, we do not want to work on the TMX, then our families suffer; we suffer as workers and are forced to fend for ourselves in an economy we do not control.

So really this is what we face. Now Kenney is off peddling opposition to a carbon tax in the 905 region of Ontario. The media claim that suburban 905ers are reactionary, similar to the accusation against Albertans, and they will give Kenney a good reception.

The same media do not tell 905ers what Kenney is up to in Alberta, or what he did when he was federal minister of immigration under Harper and what lies in store for them should his Conservative partner Scheer form the next government. The ruling elite declare, without any sense of social responsibility, let us go all out to sell the earth and its energy resources to fuel the global wars of occupation and aggression, which may include assaults on the working people of the U.S. itself. They engage in actions that accelerate climate change; they put their narrow private interests first and say, in practice, to hell with the well-being and consent of those directly affected. Is such a ruling class fit to govern? Their narrow interests for immediate private gain do not accommodate our interests as workers who need an all-sided economy that serves the needs of the people. Workers

need a nation-building project consistent with making Canada a Zone for Peace, an economy that provides security for our families and communities, and which humanizes the social and natural environment.



The topic for the discussion organized by Edmonton Women for Rights and Empowerment aptly raises the issue we face as Who Decides? Our answer is We Decide! This is why we say empower ourselves now by rejecting the cartel parties! By raising our voices in this election and speaking for ourselves, we declare that we will not let them dictate what people should discuss and think. We will not let them shove down our throats their agendas and their private interests, their pay-the-rich schemes and their complete disregard for the social and natural environment and the well-being of the people and economy. By speaking in our own name, we can work out what measures are needed and we affirm that the decisions about what is produced and how it is produced must be made in the interest of society and the workers who produce the goods and services on which we and society depend. We

have a right to decide our wages and working conditions; we have a right to set the aim of the modern economy, which is completely social and interrelated. Fighting to control our lives and the economic and political affairs of the country is what it means to empower ourselves at this time and it will provide a way forward.

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### Letter to the Editor

## Unacceptable People-Bashing by Ruling Elite

The article in *Renewal Update* about Quebec-bashing is very well written. It is sad to have the ruling elite speak about everything except the actual problems facing our country. I agree with what is said in the article that they use bashing to pit people against one another and take people's minds off the real issues.

They should not be bashing anyone. What we have as the ruling elite and who is running for those parties is appalling. It's almost as bad as in the U.S. In the last U.S. election, we had Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Both had tarnished reputations and it's also the case here, whether Conservative or Liberal. It's the same thing over and over again, the same promises that are never being kept.

My hope is that someday in the not too distant future, this beautiful country of ours -- especially at this time of year, sees other colours than red or blue.

*A Metallurgical Worker from New Brunswick*

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