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## **Class Struggles Heat Up in Greece**

**By Dimitris Fasfalis**

Workers in Greece today stand in the forefront of the converging European class struggles against big capital's attempt to make working people pay the costs of its crisis.

Mobilizations against this austerity drive are spreading across Europe. In France, strikes and demonstrations were held on May 27 and a day of actions is planned for June 24. In Portugal, 300,000 working people demonstrated in the streets of Lisbon on May 30 to express their rejection of the socialist government's austerity plan. In Spain, public employees took to the streets on June 2. In Italy, a national demonstration was held in Rome on June 5, with strikes and other actions planned up to June 14. In Great Britain, the unions and left-wing organizations are organising a day of demonstrations on June 22. In Romania public employees took to the streets on June 4.

The ongoing resistance in Greece shows labour activists and militants of the anti-capitalist left that their struggles can create new paths forward in determining the outcome of the present economic crisis. The latest 24-hour general strike in Greece, held on May 20, registered a success of the labour movement in overcoming the propaganda campaign of the mass media and the slanders coming from the PASOK (Pan-Hellenic Socialist) government. More than 50,000 people took to the streets in Athens and demonstrations were held in the country's major urban centres.[1] Public school teachers took part massively in the Athens demonstration. The participation in the strike was very high in the public sector but less so in the private. The major trade union federations also organized a day of meetings on June 5. This fight is far from over.

### **The May 5 general strike**

The general strike and demonstrations on May 5 were an overwhelming success. Launched by the General Confederation of Workers in Greece (GSEE) and the state employees' trade-union (ADEDY), the appeal to cease work for 24 hours was observed massively by both public and private-sector workers. Demonstrations were held in all the major cities across Greece except Larissa: in Tripoli and Patra in the Peloponnese, in Ioannina and Igoumenitsa in Epirus, in

Herakleion (Crete), and also in Salonika, the metropolis of Northern Greece, where thousands of demonstrators took to the streets.

It is in Athens, however, where the largest demonstrations were seen. The streets of central Athens were taken over by a human flood of some 250,000 citizens. Its components reflected the working class of the Greek metropolis in all its diversity: workers of the private sector, such as those of the Skaramanga shipyards of the Piraeus, workers of the public utilities and the state, such as those of the electricity company (DEI), the teachers and the nurses of the public health system, unemployed and retired workers, immigrant and undocumented workers, university and high-school students. The slogans coming from the ranks of the demonstration all expressed the people's refusal to pay the costs of the capitalist crisis triggered by global finance: "No to the anti-workers tempest," "No to flexibility, yes to the 35-hour workweek," "Workers, arise! They're taking everything we got," "We paid their profits, we will not pay their crisis." [2]

Thirty-year old Johanna demonstrated to "say no to the IMF. They want to make us believe that they had to come here [to "rescue" state finances], but I do not believe it in the least. Who would accept such treatment?"

A profound feeling of injustice is driving the crowd's protests. Yannis, a thirty-year old professor, explained to l'Humanité reporter:

"Everyone feels that there is no justice. The money is there but they do not want to go and get it... I do not see another way out: they offered us only one option". [3]

The stakes of the movement against the IMF/European Union/Greek PASOK government austerity plan were explained by Ilias Vretakou, vice-president of the ADEDY union:

"We're sending from Athens a message of struggle and resistance to workers of all the European countries, against the barbarism of capital markets, governments and the European Union. The government, the IMF and the European Union have decided to drive the workers, and Greek society, to the most savage social barbarism that we have ever known. They're levelling workers and society down to the bottom. They're stealing our wages, they're stealing our pensions, they're stealing our social rights, they're stealing our right to life. They're imposing the law of the jungle in work relations,... reducing the wage rate for extra hours. They make it possible for employers to lay off an older employee and hire, with the same money, three or four young workers under precarious conditions." [4]

This speech drew enthusiastic applause from the crowd that had just booed away the GSEE leader Panagopoulos, criticized by rank-and-file unionists for reluctance to fight the austerity measures in February. [5] Among the other speakers, Claus Matecki (of the German union DGB) and Paul Fourier (of the French General Confederation of Workers) also aroused vivid applause, especially when the latter declared: "Today, we're all Greeks! Thank you and good luck." [6]

Among the political forces of the Left, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) participated massively to the protests. The social-democrats

(PASOK) did not have an organized presence, despite internal stirrings among the left-wing of the party in face of the austerity plan implemented by the PASOK government.

Many among the demonstrators voted PASOK in October 2009. They are now disappointed and angry to find out that the triumphant Left that drove out of government the right-wing corrupt government of Kostas Karamanlis (New Democracy) gave in, without any fight whatsoever, to the neoliberal politics of finance capital. Dimitra, a retiree residing in the Athens region, hoped that the PASOK victory would “make things better.” Disappointed, she’s furious when she thinks of PASOK Prime Minister George Papandreou: “When I think that I’ve voted for this moron!”[7]

Media coverage of the May 5 demonstrations was centred on the “koukouloforoi”, the “masked ones”, who physically attacked symbols of market mass culture and finance capitalism. The Marfin bank on Stadiou street in downtown Athens was attacked by Molotov cocktails and burned. Three employees of the bank lost their lives in fire. The Marfin staff were compelled to work that day despite the call to strike and were literally locked into the bank. There was no emergency exit plan, making their evacuation all the more difficult.

The response of the labour movement was immediate and crystal clear. In the evening of May 5, the ADEDY president explained that these “fascist practices aim to scare people at a time when mass struggle is necessary to halt the measures that throw the life of Greeks into hardship.”[8] The following day, May 6, a mourning crowd gathered at Syndagma Place, in front of the Bouli (Greek Parliament), to denounce the adoption of the austerity plan by the elected representatives of the National Assembly.[9]

This spark of street violence is not unrelated to popular exasperation toward the Papandreou government. The austerity plan imposed to the Greek people by the financial markets – the leading financial institutions, the IMF, and the European Union – is a blatant denial of national sovereignty and democracy. Furthermore, the government has stood its ground since February and refuses to heed the message echoing from the streets. Instead, it heightens the authoritarianism of the austerity plan: once it has been adopted by the National Assembly on May 6 (by the votes of the PASOK socialists, of New Democracy and the nationalist-racist LAOS), it will be implemented through a series of orders from the Finance Ministry, leaving no room for parliamentary interference and limiting the elected representatives of the people to a purely formal advisory capacity.

The plan’s lack of democratic legitimacy thus opens the door, in some components on the fringes of the social movement, for concepts of the legitimacy of street violence (clashes with the police, burning of various symbols of the capitalist order, etc.). The party of the capitalist order headed by the PASOK has thus as a corollary the violence of the “koukouloforoi” in the mobilizations. Quite apart from the “masked ones”, the blatant authoritarian drive of the austerity measures nourishes an acute anti-parliamentarian tendency within sections of the workers’ movement. Slogans such as “Let it burn!” or “Give the thieves to the people!” were shouted several times in the demonstration. Dozens of demonstrators have also attempted to cut through the security lines of Parliament, before being violently pushed off by police forces.[10]

### **Looking before and after May 5**

The May 5 actions registered a success because they were prepared: the united mass mobilization was not a spontaneous response, but rather the result of three months of mobilizations by workers' unions. As early as February 24, the union movement engaged itself in fighting the announced austerity plan, thus denying the ruling class and its spokespersons a monopoly of information and politics. It is precisely that criticism, carried out through actions in the streets and workplaces, that has allowed the social movement to communicate possible scenarios other than the one written by finance capital. Hence, the reactionary and demobilizing notion that this plan is a necessary evil has been shaken, opening the way for a popular counterattack.

On February 24, a first general strike responded to the austerity measures announced by the government. In Athens, 45,000 persons were in the streets; in Salonika, there were 10,000. In the Athens demonstration, Dimitri, a 28-year old civil engineer, explained the reasons of the mobilization: "We want a job, decent wages and a true social insurance system. Our country has to respect European Union norms which are unfair." [11] A second 24-hour general strike took place on March 11 coupled with demonstrations in the country's main cities.

The 24-hour general strikes (February 24, March 11, May 5 and May 20) were without a doubt the most visible examples of the popular mobilizations against austerity. But other actions, more limited in scope, have played a crucial role in building up a momentum and ensuring continuity in the resistance movement. Fabien Perrier, reporter of the French Communist Party daily *l'Humanité*, underlined the atmosphere of social agitation that took hold of Athens in the end of April: "In Athens, each day, the streets are echoing the shouts of demonstrators and of angry professional bodies." [12]

Many of these mobilizations helped to prepare for the general strike. For instance, on March 5 mass meetings were held in many cities to build the general strike of March 11. The meeting in Volos (a city on the coast of Thessaly, north of Athens) brought together not only unionists but also laid-off METKA workers, preceding a solidarity concert of many artists. In the same manner, May 1 boosted the mass mobilizations before the May 5 general strike. The state employees' union (ADEDY) called state employees to strike from May 4 for the same reason. Its call was followed, and demonstrations were held on that day.

These limited mobilizations also allowed the labour movement to engage the battle to win over public opinion. Many actions thus responded to the government at each turn of the crisis. Hence, when George Papandreou held a press conference on April 25 to announce he would trigger the European mechanism of financial support, hundreds of demonstrators responded in the streets of downtown Athens shouting: "The struggle of the people will destroy the IMF slaughterhouse." [13] Two days later, on April 27, civil servants were striking and teachers were camping on Syndagma Place, in front of Parliament, to denounce the bleeding suffered by the public education system. In the meantime, Piraeus harbour was blocked by a 24-hour strike of seamen following the call of their union, the PNO.

Step by step, what seemed inevitable in the minds of the majority became a question to be settled by the relationship of forces. An opinion poll of the Greek newspaper *To Vima* estimated the

proportion of those against the reduction of wages at 79.5% of the population.[14] Within the social movement, participants are gaining in confidence, and the idea that the outcome of the struggle is not yet settled is gaining ground. Despina, 27 years old, didn't take part in the May 4 demonstrations of public employees. She underlined however to the Humanité reporter that "those who are on the move are right: they have understood the stakes of this movement. The civil servants are the first [direct victims of austerity measures]; but all of Greece is going to suffer. The unions are united, and the government is starting to shake." [15]

Every progressive-minded person hails Greek labour's resistance to the dictatorship of finance capital. The mobilizations of the past three months have been worthy of the political legacy of the struggle against the junta dictatorship (1967-1974) and of the earlier resistance to fascism. Many crucial questions are yet to be settled.

First of all, the strategy followed by the union leadership is open to question. In face of a government which refuses to heed the protests of the people in the streets, and moreover compels parliament to implement measures dictated from big business, isn't there a risk that repeated 24-hour strikes could become proof of the movement's powerlessness to change the course of events? The labour movement in France suffered a demoralising setback in the spring of last year after three rounds of 24-hour general strikes. The outcome of events is not yet decided in Greece.

But time could be on labour's side, provided that its leaders have the necessary boldness. How long, for instance, could the PASOK government and its European counterparts hold on in face of an unlimited general strike led by general assemblies of the mass movement?

A second question relates to the social movement's organizational framework. Will it be able to unite into a single voice or platform? Will it be able to establish a democratic and unifying organ speaking in the name of its different components in the streets and ensuring autonomous control of its mobilizations?

These questions seem crucial since they will determine during the coming months the success or failure of labour's attempt to give birth to new possibilities and thus fight off the fatality of neoliberal barbarism. The stakes are high: the immediate future of the social state is being decided today in the streets of Athens.

*An earlier version of this article was published in French under the title: "La résistance sociale en Grèce: bilan et perspectives". [16] It has been translated and updated by the author.*

## **Notes**

[1] See article of Andreas Sartzekis, <http://www.npa2009.org/content/grece-apres-la-greve>.

[2] *Avgi*, May 6.

[3] *L'Humanité*, May 6.

[4] *Avgi*, May 6.

[5] The first strike against the austerity measures was launched by the state employees' ADEDY on February 11 while the GSEE top leadership refused to join their forces, arguing that the interests of private sector workers were not endangered by the government's announcements. It is useful to underline that Panagopoulos is a member of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) headed by Prime Minister Georges Papandreou. In face of the mounting

pressure from the ranks, GSEE leaders rallied the ADEDY February 24 during the first 24-hour general strike.  
L'Humanité, May 6.

[6] *L'Humanité*, May 6.

[7] *L'Humanité*, May 11.

[8] *Avgi*, May 6.

[9] *Avgi*, May 7.

[10] *Avgi*, May 6.

[11] *L'Humanité*, February 25.

[12] *L'Humanité*, April 27.

[13] *Avgi*, April 25.

[14] *L'Humanité*, May 5.

[15] *L'Humanité*, May 5.

[16] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article17454>

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## **Gangs and Violence in Jamaica and Haiti**

by **Roger Annis**

When police in Jamaica launched a bloody assault in May on poor neighbourhoods in the country's capital city, news outlets in Canada responded with an ignorance and insensitivity that is all too common in their coverage of the Caribbean islands. As with Haiti, Jamaica is portrayed as incomprehensibly violent and not quite civilized.

Canada's national broadcaster aired a 20-minute story on its morning radio newsmagazine, *The Current*, on May 28. Neither the host nor the two guests she interviewed sounded the slightest concern when she explained in her introduction that 73 people had been killed to date by the police assault. In fact, both guests welcomed the police action. "It was long overdue," they chimed. "Criminal gangs in Jamaica have become too powerful."

Astonishingly, one of the guests, Philip Mascoll, a former reporter for the *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest distribution daily newspaper, said that Canadians should prepare for similar police action in poor housing projects in Toronto!

He prefaced his comment by saying, "People are going to hate me for saying this, but...." If the program host was fazed, she didn't indicate.

### **Gangs and government in Jamaica**

Carolyn Gomes, Executive Director of Jamaicans for Justice, has a different, highly critical view of the police action. In a May 28 interview from Kingston aired on *Democracy Now!*, she told hosts Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez that for decades the Jamaican police have been a force outside the law that operates with "complete and total impunity."

Last year, Gomes said, police killed an estimated 250 people. In the past decade, not a single officer has been charged with the deaths of any of the several thousand citizens who have died at police hands.

Jamaican writer and social critic Annie Paul wrote to Britain's Channel 4 News on May 26:

"The situation in Jamaica is very complex. There are no clear good guys and bad guys here or elsewhere for that matter. No 'evil empire' that can easily be targeted and dismantled because the very governance system of the country has for decades been sharing power, so to speak, with dons or leaders such as Dudus [alias of Christopher Coke].

"Clearly the problem arose because the formal governance system, inherited from the British, left large segments of the poor literally unrepresented and voiceless before and after independence.

“The failure to include or extend the state’s protection and support to all segments of the population created space for alternate leaders to spring up because the excluded still needed security, justice systems, jobs among other things.

“This void was filled by so-called community leaders or godfather figures who used any means necessary to provide these basic necessities for the people in their respective neighbourhoods. It takes cash to care, as a popular political slogan goes, and it was inevitable that such leaders would turn to drugs and arms running, and other illicit sources of income to support their followers in the absence of any legal methods of doing so.”

### **Rise of post-independence radical action in Jamaica**

Much of the influence of criminal gangs today dates back to the wave of political violence unleashed upon the country following the election of Prime Minister Michael Manley in 1972. He headed the People’s National Party, a social democratic party that sought modest reforms to ease the crushing poverty from which the majority of the population suffers.

Jamaica’s ruling elite and foreign backers waged a violent and debilitating assault on Manley’s government and party to prevent it from implementing reforms, combining paramilitary assaults on neighbourhoods supporting the PNP with sabotage of the country’s economy. Hundreds of Manley supporters perished and Jamaica’s economy was seriously crippled. It contracted by 25 percent from 1972 to 1980. Eventually, Manley’s government lost the national election of 1980.

The right-wing Jamaica Labour Party that replaced Manley is the very one that is in power today and that launched the murderous “anti-gang” assault in May . It is associated with criminal gangs that grew out of the paramilitary squads created to bring down the PNP government. David Rowe, a University of Miami adjunct professor and lawyer who specialises in Jamaican law, told the UK *Independent* that the Labour Party government and the gangs have an “almost symbiotic relationship”.

The memory and fear of the politically violent years of the 1970’s and 1980’s has been a considerable barrier to Jamaica embarking upon another experiment of socially progressive government. Manley and the PNP were elected again in 1989, but the party had by then abandoned any plans for radical social reform. Its rule from 1989 to 1992 proved a great disappointment to its supporters.

The rise of the PNP was part of a wave of social radicalism that swept across Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1960’s and 70’s, inspired by the anti-colonial and national liberation struggles in Africa and Asia, including the looming defeat of U.S. imperialism in Vietnam and the revolutionary trail blazed by Cuba beginning in 1959.

An important beachhead of the wave of radicalism was a social revolution in Chile spurred on by the election of Salvador Allende to the presidency in 1970. The bloody overthrow of Allende in 1973 by a military coup backed by the United States was a huge setback to social revolution in



the region, but new victories were scored in 1979 with the coming to power of revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and the island of Grenada. These victories lent an added urgency to the U.S.-led effort to unseat Manley and the PNP.

### **Self-defense is not gang violence**

During the 1970's and 1980's, self-defense initiatives were taken by poor and PNP-supporting communities, first against the violent campaign to overthrow Manley, then against the deepening impoverishment of most working people that followed the 1980 election.

The government of Edward Seaga (popularly nicknamed "CIAga" for his close ties to successive U.S. administrations) that followed Manley implemented one of the first national programs of structural adjustment in an underdeveloped country, policies that are today termed neoliberalism.

The imperialist-imposed "adjustments" in Jamaica consisted of relaxing conditions on foreign investment and industry; opening markets to the import of cheaper, typically heavily-subsidized, food products and other goods and services; dismantling of public enterprises and services; and an accompanying drastic reduction in the living standards of the majority of the population. Not coincidentally, this is also the period when the trade and transit of illegal drugs first gained a strong foothold in Jamaica.

The community organizations and popular self-defense committees that had arisen in poor neighbourhoods in the face of the assault on the Manley government, and the new ones that arose post-1980, were obliged to assume responsibilities for social and other community services as these were progressively abandoned by the Labour Party government and its foreign backers.

The gangs that settled into a comfortable association with the Labour Party government also assumed certain measures of social role in poor neighbourhoods as part of the price of gaining territory and foot soldiers for their new-found, lucrative criminal dealings. Furthermore, with the political retreat of the PNP leaders from a radical social program, the distinction between community organizations of political/social origin and those of anti-social origin became blurred over time.

### **Jamaica and Haiti**

There are a lot of parallels to be drawn with the recent history of Haiti. There, mainstream media presents a superficial image of near-incomprehensible gang violence running rampant in poor neighbourhoods. This has been the one, overriding theme of news coverage by Canada's national broadcaster and other corporate media ever since the election in the year 2000 of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Yet, social violence in Haiti has come almost exclusively from the country's elite, its paramilitary forces, and their foreign backers in Washington, Ottawa and Paris.

In his excellent 2008 book, *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, author Peter Hallward documents the violence that descended on Haiti following the 2000 election and was then intensified following the overthrow of Aristide in 2004. He draws a sharp

distinction between the violent, paramilitary gangs that attacked the government and its supporters, on the one hand, and the organizations of self defense that arose in response, on the other.

Several political activists explained to Hallward, “In Haiti, as a rule, when you defend the interest of the people you are treated as a criminal, whether your name is Dessalines, Peralte or Wilme.” The latter was a community activist who was assassinated in July 2005 by UN soldiers; the former were two of Haiti’s historic anti-slavery and anti-colonial leaders.

The peoples of Jamaica and Haiti share a profound history. Their ancestors fought long and hard against the slave empires of the Americas, at times seeking alliances between each other. Haiti’s revolt against Spain, Britain and France was astonishingly successful. It wrote one of the most inspiring chapters in modern human history. Jamaica’s was not; the country did not gain independence from Britain until 1962.

Both countries have faced relentless, big power intervention in their internal affairs to prevent socially progressive government from gaining a foothold and expanding. Both are still waiting for a semblance of economic justice and independence.

From the Jamaican and Haitian experience, one sees that gang phenomena receive varied treatment from foreign powers and their media. Criminal gangs are tolerated so long as they abide their place and do not embarrass or encroach upon the business world of their sponsors. Sometimes, as in Jamaica, they must be curbed when the U.S. master requires a publicity show for its phony war on drugs.

Self defense efforts that arise when poor people and neighbourhoods are obliged to defend themselves against institutional violence are, however, never tolerated. What the CBC and others condemn as gang violence is in many cases the desperate effort of some of the poorest and most oppressed people in the world to protect themselves against the real perpetrators of violence, the imperial overlords of their countries.

*Roger Annis is a member of the Canada Haiti Action Network in Vancouver BC.*

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## **British Columbia: Corporate Vandals Assault Rivers, Oceans, Forests**

by **Roger Annis**

The assault on the environment accompanying expanding fossil fuel extraction is nothing new for the corporate elite in British Columbia. The lamentable state of the forest ranges, fish stocks and water quality in the province are a warning of the sharp threat to the entire biosphere by profit-hungry resource corporations that hangs over the entire province.

### **Forest Plunder**

For decades, companies have plundered the forests to feed lumber and paper mills. They have left blighted landscapes in their wake. Clear cutting is still the standard practice whenever a company enters a forest to cut. Logging of rare old growth forests is still practiced, notwithstanding highly publicized campaigns that succeeded in stopping it in some areas of the province, such as Clayoquot Sound on the western coast of Vancouver Island.

“We’ve lost 90 per cent of the valley bottoms where the big trees grow,” says Ken Wu of the recently-founded Ancient Forest Alliance on Vancouver Island. “All you have to do is fly over the Island to see it. The old growth is tattered and in tiny patches on the Island.”

A 2008 study at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver showed there is typically more economic value in a forest left uncut than is derived from logging it.

The corporate argument in favour of unfettered logging says that forests are a renewable resource available to future generations. But companies and government have steadily cut back on reforestation. An urgent call to action by three researchers published in the April 28, 2010, *Vancouver Sun* said “a major reforestation crisis is underway” in British Columbia. The backlog of lands in desperate need of replanting has doubled in the past 10 years while companies and government have drastically reduced their spending. Government spending on replanting is one-sixth of what it was 20 years ago and the number of seedlings planted today is three per cent of what it was back then.

The current B.C. Liberal Party government, first elected in 2001, has also drastically cut the operations of the Ministry of Forests, which is supposed to oversee the health of the forests and the practices of lumber and paper companies. Hundreds of employees in the ministry, including frontline inspectors and compliance officers, have been laid off. An article in the April 23 *Georgia Straight* details repercussions of these cuts.

The replanting that does take place is wholly inadequate. It typically replaces the diversity of tree species found in nature with a monoculture favouring the most commercially lucrative species. This, along with climate warming, has been a major contribution to the disaster that has struck

the vast pine forests of the province's interior — the out of control spread of the mountain pine beetle.

The beetle is a naturally occurring pest in the B.C. pine forests. Its effects have historically been limited by the diversity of tree species in the forest and cold winter temperatures that kill its larvae. Winters are no longer cold enough to kill the larvae and the beetle has bored its way through the province's pine forests. Vast swaths of interior B.C. are pine tree dead zones.

Several years ago, the beetle jumped its natural barrier to the east, the Rocky Mountains, and has now begun an inexorable march across the northern Canadian forests. Communities throughout the B.C. interior that depend on the forest industry for their livelihood are staring at a bleak future as the last of the trees killed by the beetle are cut and processed.

### **Protecting the Great Bear Rainforest**

In 2006, an agreement was signed between forest companies and environmental organizations that, for some, offered hope for the future of the forests and related employment. Logging was suspended in one-third of the 6.4 million hectare Great Bear Rainforest along the central and northern B.C. coastline. A follow-up agreement in March 2009 will see the application of Ecosystem Based Management ("lighter touch" logging) to an additional 0.7 million hectares and additional measures to limit the most destructive of logging practices.

The Great Bear agreement does not protect the forest nor its inhabitants from mining, hydroelectric and tourism development. The logging suspension applies to 14 per cent of the most productive forest area.

In 2009, the three environmental organizations that spearheaded the original agreement — Greenpeace, Sierra Club B.C. and ForestEthics — voiced satisfaction with the results of the first three years. The following year, they sounded a different tone over a key part of the 2009 agreement, namely a process to identify the habitat requirements of five key bird and animal species at risk.

In a March 2010, statement, the groups said, "Although the B.C. government pledged to protect the biodiversity of the Great Bear Rainforest, it cannot confirm that it is maintaining enough habitat to prevent the extirpation of the five focal species... let alone managing them to low risk as is required to fully implement Ecosystem-Based Management."

### **Saving the Northern Forest of Canada?**

Another, much larger, forest agreement was recently signed between 21 member companies of the Forest Products Association of Canada (FPA) and nine major environmental organizations. It has been hailed as opening a new era in forest industry practice across Canada.

The Boreal Forest Agreement is a voluntary pact whose initial term is supposed to limit logging in the northern forests that are home to Canada's threatened woodland caribou herds. According to the FPA, it would halt logging on 29 million hectares of land, "virtually all Boreal caribou

habitat on company tenures.” There are an estimated 36,000 woodland caribou in Canada’s boreal forest (more numerous caribou species live further north).

The agreement’s potential to “open a different era of forest management” that protects the biosphere seems dubious. For one, the participation of forest companies is voluntary. In Alberta, to take one example, non-signatory companies hold cutting rights on 20 per cent of the commercially viable boreal forest in the province. In the same province, only one-quarter of the tenured lands of signatory companies are covered by the agreement. Only eight per cent of Alberta’s 50 million hectares of boreal forest will be protected from cutting or road-building by forest companies.

Stan Boutin, Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, thinks the agreement may help the caribou in other parts of Canada, but not in Alberta. That’s because of the widespread activity of the oil and gas companies. (The same could be said for the northeast British Columbia range of the caribou, where oil and gas activity is rapidly expanding).

In an interview on Vancouver Co-Operative Radio’s Red Eye program on May 29, Boutin said that close study of the caribou herds in Alberta began in 1994 and has revealed a catastrophic decline in numbers, down 80 per cent. The reasons are twofold. Once the boreal forest area is cut, it degrades the food source for caribou and opens it up to competing species such as moose and deer. More seriously, the road building associated with forest cutting and other industry allows predatory wolves to gain easier access to the herds. Boutin notes that road building and clear cutting by the oil and gas industry in Alberta is widespread in the caribou ranges.

He says that revival of the caribou herds will require a halt to further road building and forest cutting, and restoration of native vegetation to the affected areas. That’s a tall order in a country that has always given free rein to forest and other resource companies.

Boutin was asked whether the forest agreement is likely to reduce the cutting of forests in Canada. “I haven’t seen all the details of the agreement,” he replied, “but I would venture to guess that the annual allowable cut has not been reduced, just moved around.” “It’s pretty rare that the forest companies would agree to a reduction in annual allowable cut.”

### **Rights of Indigenous Peoples Ignored**

The Boreal Forest Agreement has brought sharp condemnations from Indigenous peoples across Canada. Clayton Thomas-Muller told Vancouver Media Co-Op’s Dawn Paley that the forest agreement, like the earlier one in B.C., are being signed over the heads of the affected indigenous peoples.

“What this means is that first nations no longer have the support of these mainstream environmental groups that have fallen into the strategy of conquer and divide deployed by industry.”

Mike Mercredi of the Fort Chipewyan Cree people is cited on OilSandsTruth.org:

“Any Environmental NGO out there who speaks on tar sands issues related to rare cancers being found in Fort Chipewyan or the boreal forest... are not speaking on behalf of any first nations in any of these regions.”

“The sovereignty of the first nations people of Canada is at risk and will be extinguished if this carries on. I will not allow it to happen. We are not allowing ENGOs to bargain with our children’s future, nor will we allow any ENGO to speak on our first nation’s behalf.”

Fort Chipewyan lies adjacent to the tar sands of Alberta and is suffering deeply from related water pollution and alarming increases in cancers among its residents.

### **Five Thousand Rally in Victoria to Save Wild Salmon**

One of the most visible expressions of the rise of a renewed environmental movement in B.C. has been the campaign against the proliferation of salmon farms along the B.C. coast. Concerned citizens want the provincial government to revoke the licenses of the largely Norwegian companies that operate the farms. They staged a weeks-long walk along the length of Vancouver Island in April and early May that drew widespread support. Called the “GET OUT MIGRATION,” it culminated in a rally in front of the provincial legislature in Victoria on May 8 comprising as many as 5,000 people.

Wild salmon migrate up and down the coast and rivers of northwest North America. They are a vital source of food and livelihood for the people who live there, including its indigenous peoples. Salmon also feed the trees that make oxygen and over 200 species fueling a \$1.6-billion wilderness tourism industry.

Last year saw a catastrophic decline in the numbers of salmon returning to spawn in the Fraser River. The river and its tributaries are the world’s largest salmon spawning ground. The salmon farms break natural laws by holding salmon stationary and intensifying the instances of disease and parasites. Most of the jobs they create are not for local residents; those that pay low wages. The farms’ contribution to local economies is exaggerated.

Salmon are under great stress due to climate change and destruction of their spawning habitat. They require clean, undisturbed creek and river beds in order to successfully reproduce. Urban development as well as mining, forestry and other industrial activity are constantly degrading this environment. The federal and provincial governments have for years denied there is a threat to the health and survival of salmon species on the west coast, but last year’s decline on the Fraser River has, finally, compelled the federal government to convene a formal inquiry into what is happening to them.

“I think there is a real sense of urgency to save the wild salmon” Fred Speck of the GwaWaenuk nation told the Vancouver Sun. He had walked the hundreds of kilometres covered by the march along with Alexandra Morton, the biologist who first alerted British Columbians to the damage caused by salmon farms many years ago.

The Save Our Salmon campaign proposes land-based, closed containment facilities as the only way in which salmon farms should be allowed to operate. In an article in the *Island Tides* biweekly newspaper in late May, Morton explained, “There is no reason we need to beg for low-paying jobs raising fish we cannot touch when we could have millions of salmon returning to us (every year)!”

As if forestry practices were not bad enough, one of the new threats to the rivers in British Columbia, and to the fish that live and spawn there, is the proliferation of hydro-electric projects. Permits for some 500 “run of river” projects have been granted by the provincial government or are under consideration. Touted as a “green” source of energy, “run of river” involves diverting water flow through channels and generating stations.

At the failed world climate summit conference in Copenhagen last January, mainstream environmental organizations in British Columbia presented an award to B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell. This bizarre gesture was motivated by the 2008 decision of the government to increase the sales tax on gasoline (a so-called “carbon tax”) by 2.3 cents per litre, to eventually rise to 10 cents. Happily, others in the environmental movement are less easily swayed by superficial policy.

**By the Numbers:**

- In total, Alberta is home to 49,508,709 hectares of boreal forest.
- Alberta has 20,649,531 hectares of commercial forest within its boreal zone.
- 16,963,909 hectares of the Forest Products Association of Canada (FPAC) member tenure lands in Alberta fall under the Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement.
- The Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement applies to 4,421,335 hectares of caribou range within the FPAC member tenure lands in Alberta.
- The Canadian Boreal Forest Agreement commits to no harvesting or road building in 4,373,171 hectares of caribou range in Alberta.

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## **British Columbia's Fossil Fuel Superpower Ambitions**

by **Roger Annis**

The province of Alberta is well known as a climate-destroying behemoth. The tar sands developments in the north of that province are the single largest source of greenhouse gas emissions on the planet. Less well known are the ambitions of its neighbouring province, British Columbia. It shares similar fossil fuel reserves and ambitions as Alberta.

Vast coal and natural gas reserves are being opened at breakneck speed. Construction is underway or planned for accompanying road, rail, pipeline and supertanker transport routes. Widespread opposition to these plans is growing, but will it spread fast enough to save the province from what amounts to an unprecedented assault on its natural environment and the health and welfare of its citizens?

### **No to Tar Sands Pipeline, Tankers**

An unprecedented alliance of environmental organizations and Indigenous communities has come together to stop a proposed 1,200-kilometre dual pipeline across northern British Columbia. Enbridge company says it will spend \$5-billion to build it. In a March 23 statement, Coastal First Nations Director Art Amos declared, "This bountiful and globally significant coastline cannot withstand an oil spill. This is where Enbridge hits a brick wall." The group speaks for all nine of the indigenous nationalities on the B.C. coastline.

A statement of some 150 environmental and indigenous organizations and individuals opposing the pipeline was published in the Globe and Mail, also on March 23. The date is the anniversary of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil tanker disaster in Alaska.

A 36-inch pipeline would service the export of Alberta tar sands product to refiners in the U.S. and Asia while a parallel 24-inch line would import the light oil condensate that is an essential input to extraction. Enbridge's application will now be reviewed by a three-person review panel established by the Canadian government and its National Energy Board.

The pipeline would traverse the territories of 50 indigenous peoples in British Columbia and Alberta as well as 700 rivers, streams and lakes. It would facilitate the expansion of tar sands production and its already vast quantities of toxic pollutants. It would be served by supertankers from a terminal point in the northern coastal town of Kitimat.

There is a not-so-small obstacle in the way of this plan, however, which is a 1971 federal government moratorium on oil tanker traffic along the British Columbia coast. But the review panel has already said it considers the moratorium to have no legal status.

"There is so much opposition that Enbridge can count on legal challenges and delays that ultimately are going to cost the people who invest in the project," Josh Patterson told the Vancouver Sun on May 3. He is legal counsel for West Coast Environmental Law.



### **Rush to Natural Gas Extraction**

Meanwhile, a modern-day gold rush has been unleashed in the northeast of British Columbia for the extraction of natural gas from rock, shale and coal bed formations. Over the past decade, the provincial government has received several billion dollars in permit fees to explore and drill for gas.

The pace of drilling and extraction is accelerating. Plans are afoot to build gas processing facilities in the northeast as well as new pipelines and a liquefaction export terminal at Kitimat. Calgary based EnCana Corporation is heading up a consortium of seven other oil companies that would build a multi-billion dollar gas processing plant near Fort Nelson in the northeast. It would be the largest such facility in North America and the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the province. Another plant is proposed by a different consortium in the same region.

Indigenous and other communities in the gas fields have serious opposition to the gas wells and any processing plants. Writing in the Dec. 22, 2009 Vancouver Sun, Chief Kathie Dickie of the Fort Nelson First Nation said, "Without the capacity to determine and plan for this development, the survival of the Fort Nelson First Nation is in jeopardy. This plant and the development that it brings must not be the end of us."

In a bad omen for any government review of the proposed gas plants, the 800-member community has been told by the B.C. Environmental Assessment Office that its concerns over clean air fall outside the parameters of its 100-year-old treaty with the government of Canada. "Imagine being told by a government official in 2009 that you have no say in the quality of air that you and your children breathe? What parent would stand for it?" wrote Dickie.

Public protest has recently halted or slowed several exploratory coal bed, natural gas extraction projects. The biggest such victory was in the Flathead River Valley adjacent to the U.S. border in southeast B.C. The provincial government has been obliged to declare a halt to all coal, gas and other mining development there (though not to forest cutting, tourism development, and road building). Meanwhile, drilling plans are proceeding near Fernie, B.C., by none other than the infamous British Petroleum (BP).

Pollution and encroachment on farms and rural communities from existing gas fields in the northeast have provoked deep anger and opposition from residents. A string of bombings have struck gas facilities in the past several years. Police investigations have failed to find a culprit and they complain that too few residents are willing to assist them.

The extraction process is highly polluting, and though natural gas is touted to be a "cleaner" source of energy compared to oil or coal, it is anything but. In a recent article in the Australian Green Left Weekly, author Renfrew Clark explains that due to unavoidable leakage in the complex network of extraction, refining and transportation of natural gas, it is every bit as polluting as oil or coal. Natural gas is composed almost entirely of methane, a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Its refining also happens to release large amounts of CO<sub>2</sub>.

The gas fields themselves are highly polluting of the surrounding air and water. Hydrogen sulphide is a common waste byproduct that can kill when breathed in high enough quantities. Other waste gases cause long-term damage to humans, even in low doses.

To extract natural gas from underground rock formations, a toxic mix of water and chemicals are injected under pressure to break it up and release the gas. The process is called “fracking” and is expanding across the United States. The state of New York has banned it because it pollutes underground water (more information on natural gas and health hazards at Energy Justice Network).

## **Coal**

Fossil fuel extraction is set to expand in yet another form, namely coal. It accounts for two-thirds of Canada’s fossil fuel reserves, and most of those lie in Alberta and British Columbia. Three-quarters of Alberta’s electrical production comes from coal; Saskatchewan, Ontario and Nova Scotia also derive a significant portion of their electrical production from it.

British Columbia produces most of its power from hydroelectricity. But it is a major producer and exporter of coal. It exported some 30 million tons of the dirty stuff in 2009, most of it to Asia through the Port of Vancouver.

Most of B.C.’s coal is produced through mountain-top removal in the province’s southeast. With the rise of international coal prices, no fewer than 10 proposals for new mines are on the books, including several, surprisingly to many, along the eastern shore of Vancouver Island, a region much better known for its salmon, whales and forests than for coal.

One of the new coal projects is the proposed Raven Underground Mine near Courtenay on Vancouver Island. The streams and rivers that flow through the proposed mine site are home to valuable salmon and other fish stocks, and they drain into one of the largest shellfish habitats in North America. The mine proposal calls for washed coal to be trucked 80 kilometres along a narrow, winding highway often clogged with tourists to an export terminal to be constructed in Port Alberni, located on the west coast of Vancouver Island. A significant citizen protest movement has arisen to oppose the mine.

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