

Alberta NDP to work with Trudeau to ram through Trans Mountain pipeline expansion

By Janet Browning
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Alberta Premier Rachel Notley pledged to oil industry executives attending the 49th Annual Global Petroleum Show that her trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) government will join forces with Justin Trudeau's federal Liberals to ensure that the pipelines they need to get tar sands oil to overseas markets are built.

Notley spoke to the high-profile Calgary gathering last month, the day after the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP) said tar sands production will grow to 3.7 million barrels per day by 2030, up from 2.4 million barrels per day last year.

Performing her assigned task as the representative of Alberta's Big Oil companies and Canada's financial elite, which has banked heavily on Canadian capitalism's role as a major energy exporter, Notley declared, "I have very little time for any conversation that seeks to shut down or significantly limit our oil sands. The oil sands are massive job and wealth creators here in Alberta and quite frankly across and throughout Canada, and we need to protect the good jobs they create."

Notley went on to discuss the proposed expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline, which would greatly increase the amount of untreated bitumen transported to the British Columbia coast for export to Asia. Trudeau, said Notley, has "indicated he is still very much committed to seeing the matter through, and I believe that is the case. I feel very confident we have the undivided and unequivocal support of the federal government on this matter."

Late last year the Trudeau government gave the Trans Mountain project federal approval, but it faces massive popular opposition, including from indigenous and environmental groups. To Notley's dismay, BC's new Green Party-supported, NDP minority government is

publicly committed to doing "everything in its power" to prevent the pipeline expansion.

Notley's declaration of solidarity with Trudeau amounts to an explicit commitment that her government will cheer on the ramming through of the Trans Mountain project over popular opposition, including by resorting to state repression. Last December, following protests against the Liberals' approval of the project, Energy and Natural Resources Minister Jim Carr said that the federal government would deploy the military, if needed, to ensure the pipeline project proceeds. (See: Canada's Resources Minister threatens to use army against pipeline protests)

Notley's groveling to the major oil corporations illustrates the right-wing, pro-big business character of the NDP government she leads. Underscoring her loyalty to Big Oil and its pipeline projects, Notley banned Alberta NDP staffers from campaigning for the BC NDP in that province's recent election.

Since coming to power in 2015, the NDP has offloaded the economic crisis, which costs tens of thousands of workers in oil and ancillary industries their jobs, onto the backs of working people.

Notley's government has imposed a series of austerity budgets, starving critical public services like health and education of resources, while upholding the so-called "Alberta advantage"—rock-bottom taxes on big business, the rich and super-rich—and handing over subsidies to Big Oil as part of its climate change policy.

Alberta's tar sands industry currently emits about 70 megatons of greenhouse gases annually. Under Notley's Climate Action Plan, industry emissions will be allowed to rise to 100 megatons, a 42 percent increase in carbon emissions, without any consequences for the heavy tar sands emitters.

Upgrades of existing tar sands facilities started after 2015 will be subject to a separate 10-megaton cap.

Earlier this year, Notley traveled to Washington to establish working relations with the new Trump administration and lobby for approval of the Keystone XL pipeline. The *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of Canada's financial elite, took notice of her role, describing Notley as a crucial member of "Team Canada."

The corporate elite and its media outlets were no less enthused by her performance at the Global Petroleum Show. Notley's speech "encapsulates the shift in the government's view of the industry," gushed Gary Leach, president of the Explorers and Producers Association of Canada. "She has probably realized the premier of Alberta has a key role as a spokesperson for this industry, a key role as a defender of this industry. She's really the only one who can deliver those messages to a national and international audience."

Alberta industry representatives are adamant that pipelines be built to tidewater, because the rise of the US shale oil industry has dramatically cut into projected US sales and because concerns about pipeline capacity are deterring the investments they claim are needed to seize the opportunities presented by growing demand for oil in Asia.

CAPP President Tim McMillan complained last month, "We're seeing increased capital moving south of the border to the US, as Canada's competitive position is deteriorating relative to our largest customer, trading partner, and now competitor for energy markets."

"It is imperative," added the petroleum producer association head, "that Canada gets its products to market, that Canada becomes a secure, reliable supplier of choice in growing markets around the world."

In their insatiable drive to boost corporate profits, the major oil corporations have a loyal handmaiden in Alberta's NDP government.

During the Global Petroleum Show, the NDP government revealed that environmentalist Tzeporah Berman, a former Greenpeace director, would be leaving the government-appointed Oil Sands Advisory Group, a body established to recommend penalties on emissions exceeding the 100-megaton cap imposed under Notley's climate change policy. Industry spokesmen and right-wing opposition politicians had

been clamoring for Berman to be removed from the panel, citing her comparison of the oil industry to the fiery fictional wasteland of Mordor and her support for the BC NDP's stance on blocking the Trans Mountain pipeline project.

From the outset, the NDP stacked the Advisory Group with representatives of Big Oil and the financial elite. The group's "industry caucus" includes executives of six tar sands companies, while the "community caucus" is led by Melody Lepine, director of government and industry relations at the Mikisew Cree First Nation, which itself has lucrative relations with the oil industry.

Suncor Energy, one of the biggest oil sands producers, has equity partnerships with the Fort McKay and Mikisew First Nations. This is part of the Canadian bourgeoisie's strategy of cultivating a native elite that can be used to give political cover for environmentally destructive resource development projects and to suppress opposition among the largely impoverished indigenous population.

As would be expected, the nonbinding consensus report that the Advisory Group recently produced is tailored to the needs of the oil producers. It recommends emissions above the government's cap be legal, as long as fines are paid to the province, and advances proposals for the government to help the oil companies avoid reaching that point.

While the NDP bends over backwards to meet the needs of Big Oil, the province's workers confront demands for pay cuts and other givebacks. 300 workers at Evraz Canada's Calgary plant, which makes well casing and tubing for the oil and gas industry, voted unanimously in favor of strike action last month to oppose company demands for sweeping contract concessions, including cuts to pensions, survivor benefits and wages.

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