Targeting coal: protest mounts

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Anyone concerned about the burning of fossil fuels and resultant climate change is scared beyond words because of the prospect of coal usage growing or continuing. But there is an additional side of coal, an even darker one - to many who have seen coal industry practices in Appalachia - than the distinction of being the worst polluting of the main fossil fuels. Mountaintop removal is a form of strip mining of coal that even the most cynical of educated citizens would not guess exists. But it does indeed, to the tune of 800 square miles already. One consequence is that there have been 6,000 "valley fills” of debris from mountain tops in West Virginia and Kentucky. Since 1980, according to the National Mining Association, only 5% of the destroyed land has been returned to some kind of “economic development” such as bogus wildlife habitat.
The nightmare does not stop there. “Sludge impoundment” occurs behind dams in former valleys that become a source of toxic leaks, and dam failure is an historic fact. And when sludge is put into old underground coal mines, this contaminates ground water for drinking. Other issues involving coal is processing - very poisonous - and transport that poses outrageous risks.
With global climate change becoming quickly the out-of-control threat that scientists thought would not be occurring for decades, “positive feedback loops” are kicking in. So the very idea of tearing apart much of Appalachia for more coal, when a vast portion of the whole eastern part of the U.S. depends on rivers springing forth from the Appalachian Mountains, is more than appalling and insane.

Coal equals murder. We have only one planet, with its delicate climate balance, and the people of Appalachia have only one home. Unfortunately, West Virginia has only one main industry, coal, which keeps workers under the thumb of ruthless coal corporations. Much of the nation seems to regard the folk of West Virginia and parts of Kentucky, Virginia and Tennessee as hicks who are stupid from inbreeding. To make the stereotype work, it is further assumed that some populations in the world were simply made to be poor, exploited and killed off as a price for modern civilization that demands energy from fossil fuels. Poisoned waters, disease and "Acts of God" continue to take their toll in Appalachia's coal communities.
Normally, North Americans expect foreigners with darker skins to be sacrificed. In Appalachia, poor people or those who love the mountains have been targeted to be leveled along with coal-rich mountains - unless resistance can be successful, or they ride out the collapse of the global corporate economy.
Julia Bonds of Coal River Mountain Watch, of Whitesville, West Virginia, told a crowd recently: "For an environmental revolution, we can get the nation to take the bait on becoming concerned about coal and moutaintop removal, because they don't know where their electricity is coming from."

Peak oil and alternatives to petroleum

Coal is often cited as the answer to dwindling oil and natural gas. There are several reasons this is not even a half truth. There is supposedly enough coal to provide “centuries” of abundant energy. This is not true either, when it comes to perpetuating the energy demands of the consumer economy. Yet, despite the reality of coal’s limitations - even without the environmental devastation considered - coal looms to some of us as an unstoppable and even attractive goal for a long-term energy diet.
As the planet’s “endowment” of crude oil is extracted, burned and spilled to the point of reaching the maximum level, and declining, coal is a commonly chosen as a replacement fuel. Those of us following peak oil (and natural gas) and who concern ourselves with an appropriate response to petrocolapse, are divided into two camps.
First, there are those who believe coal will fail to replace much petroleum and will just end up staying in the ground as economics radically change. Second, there are those who are convinced that the rich elite, or “human nature,” will automatically call on coal (as well as nuclear power) to be maximized in order to maintain at least a remnant of today’s high-intensity consumers.
Rather than play a numbers game about coal reserves and factor in the low-sulfur desirability of Appalachian coal, or wonder about the feasibility of coal gasification and liquifaction, an understanding of peak oil allows us to count out coal. While it’s true we don’t know how big the attempt will be to increase the role of coal, and what tragic effect there will be on the climate and mountain-ecosystem, the global economy relies overwhelmingly on cheap, abundant petroleum that only grows in supply. So, as reality sets in and hits the oil market, a massive breakdown of transportation for workers and goods, factory production, mining and agriculture will end up in the abandonment of the landscape of our petroleum infrastructure.
The final energy crisis will be about a liquid fuels shortage that is permanent. The low energy return from pursuing alternatives to cheap petroleum is as serious as the fact that they do not provide the huge array of products made by oil and natural gas.

Protesting coal in SW Virginia

On July 10, 2006, several dozen activists with Earth First! and Rising Tide blockaded the bridge over the Clinch River to the coal-fired electric power plant in Carbo, Virginia. For several hours, starting at 8:30 a.m., coal trucks were not able to

bring coal to the plant. With lockdowns, lines of young people linking arms or carrying signs and holding banners, truck-tire deflating, and an activist suspended from the bridge over the river, business-as-usual was disrupted in the name of saving the climate and the mountains.
“The coal industry and its government puppets are ignoring widespread public concern over large scale strip mining, air pollution and global climate change,” said protester Erin Mckelvy of Blacksburg, Virginia.
This reporter had been attending the Earth First! Rendezvous to give workshops on peak oil and the evils of plastics. I accompanied the activists to the American Electric Power’s electric facility where the well-organized direct action unfolded rapidly and peacefully. Local activists of the coal-fields community plus regional Earth First!ers had educated visiting activists for the Rendezvous with a visit to a mountaintop removal strip mine. Outreach to workers and police went smoothly while the activists chanted, sang and were briefly serenaded by a Depaver and his guitar.
Amazingly, the police did not escalate orders to disperse with dire threats or arrests, even though by mid-afternoon - when the activists called it a day and were leaving to swim in a clean river - a large force of local and state police agencies’ special teams converged to bring order to the climate-changing facility. Happily for the budget-conscious activists, no arrests were made and all equipment and materials were saved to be used in the next action. It is disconcerting, however, that over 50 police cars, two armored cars, at least one helicopter, a K-9 bomb unit, and an enormous prisoner transport bus were dispatched to a nonviolent protest.

The demands issued by Earth First!/Rising Tide:were:
- Shut down the Clinch River Power Plant and all aging, diry, coal burning power plants
- Cease all Moutaintop removal/surface mining in Appalachia
- Respond to the reality of climate change and move away from fossl fuels and towards a cleaner energy future
For pictures of the July 10 protest, including shots showing the disabled coal truck against the backdrop of the electric facility’s smoke stacks putting out 4.25 million pounds of carbon dioxide into the air annually, visit www.mountainjusticemedia.org, or contact the Earth First! Media Center at telephone 1-828-277-8729.
W(h)ither Earth First!?Earth First! has been active for a quarter century, protesting and monkey-wrenching certain destructive extractive industries. As the most visible group in the radical environmental movement - with the possible exception of Greenpeace - Earth First! is not really growing, despite the worsening global ecological picture. The activists of one year are only a small minority of the activists of a few years later, with numbers remaining roughly static.
This is a sociological issue, as few people in the general population seem motivated to take action on matters that ought to concern them. The problem of low participation is often blamed on side issues within Earth First!, or the public's perception of young and wild activists. The movement is also wracked occasionally by internal debate and disputes, as are all movements. Yet, the efforts are sincere as individuals struggle to collaborate for the Earth, despite egos and other psychological baggage.
Some in the movement have been targeted by grand juries regarding eco-sabotage as of this year, resulting in activists and former activists informing on others which in turn discourages participation in activism and free speech. Hence, the Green Scare has come, much like the Red Scare of the late 1940s onward into the early 1960s throughout U.S. society.
For Earth First!, a challenge for many years seems to have been whether to focus purely on the environment or also on social-justice issues and conflicts involving personal liberation. However, the latest EF! Rendezvous commemorative T-shirt is “Making biocentrism a threat again” - with a picture of strip mining. The movement is looking harder than ever at energy industries. The 2004 Rendezvous in Maine culminated in the occupation of the Governor’s front yard in protest of a proposed liquified natural gas facility. The Gov could not go to the movies that evening, as he may not have wanted to wade through the protesters’ gifts of rancid lobster guts and a simulated petroleum spill. Like the Virginia Clinch River action, the Main action was no debacle of arrest and court appearances.
Earth First! activists represent often the best and brightest future leaders of the environmental and social-justice movements. So it is crucial that they focus on energy, as they do, while understanding there is no technological fix for the challenge of peak oil and petrocollapse. Likewise, as reluctant and minimalist consumers, it is crucial for their individual health (and everyone's) to eliminate plastic contamination from their food, water and skin. The greatest strength of Earth First! is its practice of mutual aid and solidarity, as the adherents enjoy a tribal experience in the woods each year and during actions.
To truly recognize the future’s minimal-energy world and the lifestyle that must be adopted, subsequent Earth First! Rendezvous should be located in less remote areas that allow for mass transportation to bring more people together in a fashion that does not invite unrealistic or hypocritical use of fossil fuels for cars. It is true that wilderness in need of protection "requires" car travel, but opposition to climate change and practicing egalitarianism are doable in or near any city served by rail, bus and bicycle.

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Web resources:
www.mountainjusticesummer.org
www.katuahearthfirst.org
http://risingtide.org.uk/node/140