

Hydraulic fracturing and the case for socialist planning

Statement by Phyllis Scherrer, SEP candidate for US vice president

Phyllis Scherrer, SEP candidate for US vice president
18 May 2012

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the uncontrolled application of hydraulic fracturing by private corporations whose sole aim is the maximization of profits at any cost. This technology may provide an important source of energy in the future. However, the question of whether it can be safely employed can only be determined by careful scientific research, divorced from considerations of private profit, and undertaken by a workers government.

In recent years this new oil and natural gas extraction technique, high volume hydraulic fracturing, commonly known as “fracking”, has been employed extensively in a number of regions of the United States, resulting in a dramatic increase in energy production. This process is being promoted heavily not only by oil and gas companies but by the Obama administration.

Hydraulic fracturing involves the use of millions of gallons of water mixed with sand and a witch’s brew of toxic chemicals, including compounds with known carcinogenic or severe health effects such as benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylene. The “fracking fluid” is injected deep underground through a bore hole at high pressure to break open fissures in the shale and release the gas or oil trapped in tiny pockets within the rock.

A single vertical well can tap into only a limited area of the shale bedrock immediately surrounding the bore hole. The tremendous increase in the production potential of hydrofracking comes from this combination of vertical and horizontal directional drilling. This technique allows the drill bit to be turned horizontally once it has reached the depth of the shale formation. Drilling can then extend significant distances along the target bedrock layer and thus allow

the fracking fluid to be spread across a vastly greater area than by vertical drilling alone.

Once the rock is shattered, the resulting mixture of fracking fluid and natural gas or petroleum is brought back to the surface and the fuel materials separated and stored for shipment. The used fracking fluid, up to four million gallons per well, is now contaminated not only with the chemicals included as part of the fracking process, but with other materials picked up from the bedrock, including salts such as bromine and, in some cases at least, naturally occurring radioactive elements.

Contrary to industry statements that fracking is safe, a growing mountain of evidence demonstrates that this process poses significant dangers to the environment and human health. Much, but not all of the mixture of gas/oil and fracking fluid is brought back to the surface during the extraction process. Furthermore, in some cases, the used fluid is re-injected into the well as a disposal method. Therefore, a potential source of contamination will remain in the ground indefinitely after the well has been closed.

Is there any reason to believe that an industry whose overwhelming drive is the maximization of profit can be entrusted to ensure that no such failures will occur among the potentially tens of thousands of hydrofracking wells?

Both in Pennsylvania and New York, proposals to conduct systematic studies of the potential health effects of fracking have been blocked in their legislatures. In addition, the recently passed Pennsylvania law, Act 13 of 2012, forces doctors to sign a confidentiality agreement before the toxic contents of fracking fluid can be revealed to them.

This effectively bans doctors from sharing

information regarding patients who are suffering health effects possibly related to environmental pollution from fracking. The result cripples the medical community's ability to correlate patterns of illness with specific causes and consequently prevents the delivery of necessary health care, not to mention further masking the real effects of fracking.

A three-year study by researchers at the Colorado School of Public Health who monitored fracking wells in the state discovered that many are emitting potentially toxic substances into the air. The substances include hydrocarbons such as xylene, toluene, and benzene, a known carcinogen. The researchers concluded that, "air pollution caused by fracking may contribute to acute and chronic health problems for those living near natural gas drilling sites."

Despite these reports, recently released federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations aimed at curbing air pollution at drill sites were considerably weakened by the Obama administration which extended the deadline for compliance until 2015.

In western Pennsylvania, where fracking has been especially intense, pollution of rivers with bromine salts has been reported near Pittsburgh. This is most likely the result of contamination from fracking waste, threatening the drinking water supplies of many communities along the rivers. Waste fracking fluid is stored temporarily in large artificial pools at the drill site. These facilities are subject to leakage, contaminating the surrounding ground and water. Transportation of wastewater by either truck or pipeline creates similar risks.

In a de facto admission that fracking poses significant risks, New York State, which has for three years been reviewing proposed regulations for permitting fracking in the state, has declared that it will not be allowed in the watersheds providing drinking water for New York City and the city of Syracuse.

The consequences to human health and the environment are seen by the financial and corporate elite as an incidental "cost of doing business" in their quest for profits and world dominance.

Both parties praise the capitalist market and regard its operations as sacrosanct and unalterable. The Republicans propose the complete subordination of American society to the energy companies, opening up every piece of land and coastal waters to drilling,

regardless of environmental risks. The Democrats propose essentially the same policy, with a fig leaf of populist rhetoric about oil companies paying their "fair share" in taxes.

There is an additional, and even more ominous, factor at work. Obama has stated that the US can become "the Saudi Arabia of natural gas," and it is clear that the development of domestic sources of energy supply is a key element of the global strategy of American imperialism. This is combined with the establishment of military domination of resource-rich areas overseas, including the Middle East and Central Asia, as part of a two-pronged strategy to control global energy supplies, and in this way establish dominance over its imperialist rivals.

Capitalism promotes the irrational use of science and technology, both to boost short-term corporate profits and as part of the conflict of rival nation-states, which ultimately takes a military form. Under socialism the natural resources of humanity will be developed and utilized in a rational fashion to both protect the environment and put an end to poverty and inequality."

The Socialist Equality Party understands that only on the basis of a world socialist system will it be possible to establish a rational plan for the utilization of the natural resources of the entire planet to serve human needs and not private profit. This means developing oil and gas as part of a comprehensive energy policy that incorporates all alternative fuel technologies—regardless of corporate profit—and addresses the urgent environmental issues like global warming and toxic pollution.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact