

Oppose the fracking operation at Barton Moss

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Over the last few months, protesters at Barton Moss in Salford, North West England, have been opposed by the full force of the state, while peacefully opposing shale gas test drillings operations being carried out by the IGas corporation.

Barton Moss has been chosen as one of many sites in the UK for a private corporation to carry out hydraulic fracturing. 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.

As with the Obama administration, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government is a vigorous proponent of the fracking industry, even though it has not been proven to be a safe way of extracting energy.

Hydraulic fracturing involves the use of millions of gallons of water mixed with sand and a lethal 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.

Contrary to industry statements that fracking is safe, evidence demonstrates that it 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.

A photograph, taken on February 11 at Barton Moss, shows a truck entering the site carrying what appears to be radioactive material. These are Cesium-137, a gamma ray source with a half-life of 30 years, used to make rock density measurements, and Americium-241/Beryllium, a neutron source with a half-life of 432 years, used to detect liquids in the rock pores. These are the two most commonly used radioactive sources in well logging, and prolonged exposure to either could result in harm to humans.

Another major danger associated with fracking is the potential of earthquakes. Two earthquakes, of magnitude 1.5 and 2.2, hit the Blackpool area of the North West in 2011 after fracking had been carried out. Fracking was temporarily suspended in the UK and resumed after a government review decided the process was safe, if adequately monitored. But only this week, geologists in the United States conclusively linked earthquakes deep under Ohio’s Appalachian Mountains to fracking.

IGas began its testing last summer after signing a deal with Peel Holdings, owners of the nearby MediaCity and the Manchester Ship Canal, to search the land it owns in the North West for energy resources recoverable by fracking.

Oil services conglomerate Schlumberger was contracted by IGas to do the well logging. The company finished its exploratory drilling this month and is set to return to Barton Moss later this year after announcing that it had detected the gas in samples from its test well. The firm said it intends to map a 100-square-kilometre area of the North West to determine where else to drill for shale gas.

The protests against fracking at Barton Moss began last November with a camp set up on the road nearby the site. Peel Holdings quickly moved to evict the camp. They asked

Manchester Civil Justice Centre for possession of the camp, and an order was granted by Judge Mark Pelling QC.

The protesters argued that the firm did not own the land where the camp is and had no right to evict them. The same month, lawyers for the protesters won a legal bid to prevent their eviction and have been granted a full hearing to decide if there are grounds for the right to appeal eviction. On July 16, the Court of Appeal will hear the case.

On March 9, more than 1,000 protesters marched in nearby Manchester city centre against the drilling at Barton Moss.

Throughout their time at the camp, protesters were subjected to a massive police presence costing more than £700,000, with numerous cases of police brutality alleged. In January, protester Sean O'Donnell suffered multiple injuries, including a broken metatarsal and suspected broken ribs, claiming he was thrown to the ground by police.

In February, a 15-year-old girl was arrested and subsequently held for six hours by police without being allowed access to her mother. She was only at the site because she was researching a geography project on fracking.

On March 17, another protester, Vanda Gillett, a mother of five, was also violently arrested. She accused the police of assaulting her and acting like “a pack of wolves.”

In order to carry out over 100 arrests, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) claimed that the camp was on a public highway and charged many with obstructing it or obstructing a police officer. This anti-democratic procedure was overruled by a judge at Manchester Magistrates Court on February 12, who said that the camp was on a public footpath and not a public highway.

The authoritarian Terrorism Act 2000 was also used as a pretext by GMP to raid the camp on January 6. Police searched it under Section 43 of the Act, claiming they were acting in response to a flare fired from the camp at a police helicopter. The search did not produce any evidence related to a flare. Section 43 power does not require a warrant and can be used only when a police officer “reasonably suspects” a person might be a terrorist.

The use of anti-terror legislation to target peaceful protesters is confirmation that such measures are on the statute books primarily to silence any and all dissent against the policies of the government and their big business allies.

The SEP warns against placing any confidence in the Green Party to counter such assaults.

Last week, Green MP Caroline Lucas and four others were cleared of obstructing a public highway during an anti-fracking protest outside energy company Cuadrilla's site in West Sussex last August.

Lucas claimed that her party would not cease campaigning until “our world is on the path to a clean energy future.” But

while condemning fracking, the Greens make no such protests against the inexorable drive to war by the major capitalist powers that has been exposed in their provocations against Russia in Ukraine.

Indeed, in countries such as Germany where the Greens have significant political influence, they are beating the drums for militarism. Former Green foreign minister Joschka Fischer has demanded openly that the European Union adopt an aggressive imperialist foreign policy, indifferent to the fact that nothing poses a more immediate and catastrophic disaster for humanity and the planet than a third world war with nuclear weapons.

The development of a democratically decided “clean energy future” cannot be conceived of in isolation from the development of the international class struggle against capitalism.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the uncontrolled application of fracking by private corporations whose sole aim is the maximisation of profits at any cost.

While fracking technology may provide an important source of energy in the future, the question of whether it can be safely employed can only be determined by careful scientific research, divorced from considerations of private profit and based on human need and the protection of the environment.

We call on those who agree with this approach to support the campaign of the SEP/PSG, vote for our candidates and join the fight for a Socialist United States of Europe.

For further information visit: www.socialequality.org.uk



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