

Trump's pro-corporate rampage of reaction

Executive orders approve Dakota, Keystone pipelines

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President Donald Trump has ordered US government agencies to expedite approval of the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, running roughshod over opposition by environmentalists and Native American tribes.

The Dakota Access Pipe Line (DAPL) has encountered impassioned opposition, with thousands gathering despite the deep freeze of the North Dakota winter to block completion of the 1,200-mile-long pipeline, which is to bring oil from the Bakken fields to refineries in the Midwest and South. The pipeline's final link would cross the Missouri River just north of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, threatening its water supply and tearing up land deemed sacred in tribal culture.

After violent assaults on protesters last fall by heavily armed security guards hired by Texas-based Energy Transfer Partners, the pipeline company, as well as North Dakota state troopers and local sheriffs, the Obama administration ordered a review of the project by the Army Corp of Engineers, effectively postponing the final confrontation until Trump took office.

The Trump administration has numerous business and political ties to DAPL. The nominee for secretary of energy, former Texas Governor Rick Perry, was on the board of Energy Transfer Partners, while Trump himself owned stock in the company. One of his biggest financial backers during the campaign was Harold Hamm, CEO of Continental Energy, expected to be one of the largest users of the pipeline.

Construction of the Keystone XL pipeline was halted in late 2015 by the Obama administration after a lengthy campaign by environmental groups opposed to both the pipeline itself and the increased extraction of highly polluted tar sands oil from Alberta, Canada, which was to flow through the pipeline to refineries on the Texas Gulf Coast.

Trump's executive orders do not immediately revive either project, but they set the revival into motion.

TransCanada, the builder of Keystone XL, is invited to resubmit to the State Department its application to complete the pipeline. In the case of DAPL, Trump has instructed the Army Corps of Engineers to "consider, to the extent permitted by law and as warranted, whether to rescind or modify" the Obama administration decision to impose various procedural delays. There is little doubt what the outcome of that review will be.

The pipeline decrees were only two of the five executive orders issued by the White House Tuesday, all aimed at furthering Trump's efforts to eliminate environmental and safety regulations and boost the profits of American corporations. Two more orders required expedited permitting and environmental reviews of infrastructure projects designated as significant by the Trump administration.

The final order required that all pipeline construction use US-made steel products as much as possible, a largely superfluous directive since the US steel industry no longer produces many of the required items. This order is a bone thrown to the United Steel Workers and other unions that have backed Trump's policy of economic nationalism and will be used to claim that Trump's policies are helping put unemployed industrial workers back to work.

While Trump claimed that the Keystone project would provide "a lot of jobs, 28,000 jobs, great construction jobs," industry estimates suggest that the remaining construction work will employ 10,000 short-term workers, but only 50 full-time workers will be needed to operate the highly automated pipeline once crude oil begins to flow through it. Even smaller numbers of jobs are involved in the DAPL project, since major construction is nearly completed.

This did not stop Trump from staging a media circus in connection with the signing of the orders, holding up the documents to television cameras and declaring, "We will build our own pipeline, we will build our own pipes, like we used to in the old days."

Native American and environmental protesters promised stepped-up opposition to the Dakota pipeline in response to Trump's actions, which had been widely expected. Several hundred reinforcements arrived at the main protest campsite near Cannon Ball, North Dakota last weekend, and last Wednesday police arrested 21 demonstrators outside the construction site.

At a press briefing after the issuance of the executive orders, White House press spokesman Sean Spicer was asked about the protests and the likelihood that they would continue, but he evaded the question. Given the tenor of Trump's inaugural address and his vicious attacks on all critics, it is likely that the administration's response to such protests will be brutal and violent.

Trump's action had bipartisan support from the North Dakota congressional delegation, with both Republican Representative Kevin Cramer and Democratic Senator Heidi Heitkamp praising the decision. Heitkamp issued a statement declaring her support for DAPL and other "projects that support our energy, economy, and national security."

Trump made clear that the pipeline approvals and the orders to expedite permitting and environmental review were only a down payment on a much broader effort to raze all regulations on American corporations. He called the current system of environmental regulation "out of control" after meeting Tuesday morning with the CEOs of the three major auto manufacturers—General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler Automobiles. He promised immediate changes to expedite such reviews.

"We're gonna make a very short process, and we're going to either give you your permits or we're not gonna give you your permits," he told the auto bosses. "But you're gonna know very quickly. And generally speaking, we're gonna be giving you your permits. So we're gonna be very friendly."

The meeting with the auto executives followed a larger meeting on Monday with the CEOs of a dozen of the largest manufacturing companies. At that meeting, Trump declared his determination to do everything possible to clear away all regulatory restraints on their operations, including both environmental restrictions and workplace safety rules.

These words have already been translated into bureaucratic actions. The Federal Register posted notes Tuesday from federal agencies withdrawing 23 separate regulations. These included a new rule by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) limiting mercury discharges by dental offices, energy efficiency

standards for federal buildings, and poverty guidelines from the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Trump administration has imposed a media gag on the EPA and barred its staff from awarding any new contracts. EPA employees have been barred from issuing press releases, updating the agency blogs or posting to the agency's social media accounts. Trump has nominated to head the EPA the Oklahoma state attorney general, Scott Pruitt, who is currently engaged in 14 lawsuits against the EPA on behalf of Oklahoma-based polluters, mostly in the oil and gas industry.

Besides deregulation, Trump has pledged to cut taxes "massively" for American corporations. He told Monday's meeting of CEOs that he would keep his campaign pledge to cut the corporate tax rate from the present 35 percent to 15-20 percent. He added that his advisers think "we can cut regulations by 75 percent, maybe more."

While this pro-corporate wrecking operation proceeds in relation to environmental and health and safety regulations, the US Senate is proceeding with the confirmation of Trump's nominees.

Senate Democrats, who hold 48 of the 100 seats, have rubberstamped nearly all of Trump's nominees to national security positions, including Tuesday evening's near-unanimous 96-4 vote to confirm South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley as the US ambassador to the United Nations.

Three more Trump nominees were cleared by Senate committees, with the Senate Banking Committee approving the nomination of Dr. Ben Carson to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development on a unanimous vote, and the Senate Commerce Committee on a voice vote approving the nomination of Elaine Chao, the wife of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, to run the Department of Transportation.

The Senate Commerce Committee approved as well the nomination of billionaire asset-stripper Wilbur Ross to be secretary of commerce, also on a voice vote, meaning that no Democratic opposition was recorded.



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