

Big Oil is using the coronavirus pandemic to push through the Keystone XL pipeline

Bill McKibben

The oil industry saw its opening and moved with breathtaking speed to take advantage of this moment

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TransCanada's Keystone pipeline facility. Photograph: Jeff McIntosh/AP

I'm going to tell you the single worst story I've heard in these past few horrid months, a story that combines naked greed, political influence peddling, a willingness to endanger innocent human beings, utter blindness to one of the greatest calamities in human history and a complete disregard for the next crisis aiming for our planet. I'm going to try to stay calm enough to tell it properly, but I confess it's hard.

The background: a decade ago, beginning with indigenous activists in Canada and farmers and ranchers in the American west and midwest, opposition began to something called the Keystone XL pipeline, designed to carry filthy tar sands oil from the Canadian province of Alberta to the Gulf of Mexico. It quickly became a flashpoint for the fast-growing climate movement, especially after Nasa

scientist James Hansen explained that draining those tar sands deposits would be “game over” for the climate system. And so thousands went to jail and millions rallied and eventually Barack Obama bent to that pressure and blocked the pipeline. Donald Trump, days after taking office, reversed that decision, but the pipeline has never been built, both because its builder, TC Energy, has had trouble arranging the [financing](#) and [permits](#), and because 30,000 people have trained to do nonviolent civil disobedience to block construction. It’s been widely assumed that, should a Democrat win the White House in November, the project would finally be gone for good.

And then came the coronavirus epidemic – and the oil industry saw its opening. It moved with breathtaking speed to take advantage of the moment.

In Alberta, premier Jason Kenney, a pliant servant of the oil companies who had already set up a [“war room”](#) to fight environmentalists, [invested](#) \$1.1bn of taxpayers’ money to TC Energy to fund construction through the year, and set aside another \$6bn in a [loan guarantee](#).

Meanwhile, on the southern side of the border, a series of states quickly adopted laws making it a felony to protest “critical infrastructure” like pipelines. (Last week South Dakota, a crucial link on the KXL route, [made it a felony](#) even to “incite” such protest.) And the Department of Health and Human Services issued a [memorandum](#) exempting pipeline construction from stay-at-home orders because such work was [“critical”](#) – that is, the department is asserting it is essential to build oil pipelines at the precise moment that the world is swimming in oil and that the Trump administration is boasting about getting Saudi and Russian autocrats to *cut* supply.



On Tuesday, TC Energy announced it was [moving workers](#) from across America into place in states along the pipeline route – although local reporters in Montana discovered they’d [actually begun arriving](#) 48 hours earlier, narrowly beating the state imposition of a quarantine.

On Thursday, JP Morgan Chase announced that it was leading a [\\$1.25bn bond issue](#) for TC Energy.

So here’s how it shakes out:

1) The oil industry is flying in workers from across America to rural states with already strained health care systems, at a moment when all Americans have been asked to shelter in place, and pretending that they are “essential” employees in order to build a pipeline that would carry oil no one wants or needs, and which would go a long way toward wrecking the planet’s climate system.

2) The work is being done on the [edges of many Indian reservations](#) – endangering a group of people who, over the centuries, have [endured](#) 90% population losses from introduced epidemics, and who are suffering horrible losses already from this one. As Faith Spotted Eagle of the Yankton Sioux [put it](#) on Wednesday, “this causes eerie memories for us [of] the infected smallpox blankets that were distributed to tribes intentionally”.

3) It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the oil industry is acting decisively now because it knows this is the one moment when protesters can't make themselves heard. Those 30,000 trained volunteers represent one of the great nonviolent armies in American history, willing to suffer to protect the planet – but they are moral human beings who will not risk taking microbes into prisons with them, and endanger prisoners crowded together in impossible conditions.

There are plenty of targets for anger – timid Democrats like Montana governor Steve Bullock, who could delay the construction, or like Joe Biden, who could have made it clear that the pipeline would be shut if he won, but who instead issued a statement to NPR which should be eligible for the mealy-mouthed hall of fame:

“Vice-president Biden supports establishing a process requiring that for any significant infrastructure project – including all pipelines – there must be a full review and accounting of the impact on climate, local environmental health and climate justice before any project can proceed. Vice-president Biden believes that the approach Secretary Kerry applied in analyzing the costs and benefits of the [Keystone XL pipeline](#) and other cross-border pipelines – including to national security and diplomacy – is a model to build from in establishing this process.”

But let's be clear: the villains here are the oil industry and the big banks. And let's further be clear: their villainy is not new. The oil industry knew about and lied about climate change for 30 years: they've prevented us from flattening the carbon curve, and set up a tragedy far greater even than coronavirus and one which will play out for decades to come. And the banks are their invaluable allies: Chase Bank has [lent \\$268bn](#) to the industry since the Paris climate accords – what's another billion to build a useless pipeline and perhaps spread a fatal disease?

Literally nothing matters to these people except money. Even in a moment when the rest of us are changing our every habit to try and protect each other, they are willing to sacrifice nothing. No – let's be clear again. In this moment they are using the cover of the pandemic to make yet more money, to do things they could not get away with at any other time. These aren't penny-ante price gougers trying to corner the local market in hand sanitizer so they can make a buck – these are cold-blooded and calculating members of the one percent. It's so over-the-top evil that it's like the comic book version of Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine, written in blood.

I am a Methodist, sometimes a Sunday School teacher. I don't actually believe in hell – I think God is capable of forgiving people for the worst things. But I don't think I am.

Though the hour is late, there may still be ways to fight this blitzkrieg. The coalitions that have battled it for a decade are, even forced apart by the microbe, now coming together to try. We will do it with real and unabating rage in our hearts.

How could anyone be this low?

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