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The Unist'ot'en, the Gulf Islands and the pipelines

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Photo: Virginia Monk

A work crew on the roof of the bunkhouse being built at the Unist'ot'en Blockade Camp.

In a clearing beside the Morice River, 65 kilometers southwest of Houston, BC stands the Unist'ot'en Blockade Camp. This camp has become the focal point of the opposition by the people of British Columbia to the construction of pipelines across our Province. The Unist'ot'en have taken a clear and easily understood position on such development—they simply say, there will be no pipelines constructed on their land. This clear stand has helped coalesce opposition to the pipelines and generated waves of solidarity.

Many Gulf Islanders, engaged in their own work against the fossil fuel economy in general and the pipelines and tankers specifically, have felt a deep connection with the Unist'ot'en.

Back in February, in response to a call for material support for the blockade camp, a Galiano Islander was part of a small

group that delivered two pick-up truck loads of food and supplies to the camp. In barely a week, over \$5,000 was raised, mostly on Galiano, as part of this undertaking. Discussing what further could be done, the leadership there indicated that what was needed most was a secure, insulated bunkhouse which would allow the camp to be viable year-round. This kernel of an idea quickly developed into a concrete plan.

Fundraising was begun and close to \$30,000 was raised. Drawings for a substantial, yet simple to construct, bunk house were developed. And a crew, four from Galiano and others from the Lower Mainland and other BC communities, was assembled.

Bunkhouse construction was timed to coincide with a more general work-camp which is held annually in May. As many as

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60 people, many of them young activists, were in camp at any given time, working on three major projects—the bunkhouse, a large pit-house being built in the traditional manner, and a permaculture garden which will make the camp more self-sufficient.

With so many young people in the camp, there was a wonderful energy—they're not prepared to accept the world as it is, rather they are confronting directly the issues of environmental degradation and human exploitation.

During the work camp there were plenty of opportunities to hear about the close connection of the Unist'ot'en to their land as well as to discuss the broader analysis that underlies their opposition to all the pipeline proposals.

Before each meal a thanks was given that always included reference to the clean air, the bounty of the land and especially the pure waters of the Morice River. This river, a major tributary of the Skeena, flows strong and clear. It is one of the few rivers left in British Columbia with water clean enough to drink without any need for filtration or purification. It is hard to put into words the deep connection that the Unist'ot'en feel to their land and its waters.

The Unist'ot'en have identified industry proposals for as many as 11 pipelines across their land. The one most people have heard of is Northern Gateway—the dual pipeline intended to bring diluent from the Coast to Alberta and dilbit (diluted bitumen) from Alberta back to the Coast. Many people believe that the battle to stop Northern Gateway has already been won. This may be true—although the proponent, Enbridge, certainly doesn't believe this.

Natural Gas Pipelines

The most important current battle is to stop the PTP (Pacific Trails) pipeline for fracked natural gas. There are two reasons for this. The PTP will enable fracking on a massive scale to proceed in north-eastern British Columbia—putting watersheds, air quality and forests in jeopardy. But, just as importantly, PTP is like a Trojan horse. If it is built, thus establishing a pipeline corridor through BC, it will be much harder to stop subsequent pipeline proposals. Since both the BC Liberals and the BCNDP have come out in favour of PTP, and because this proposal has been promoted as a 'clean' energy project, this will be the harder fight.

During our time at the camp we met many indigenous people—elders and activists; Unist'ot'en, other Wet'suwet'en and neighbouring Nations. On one occasion in particular, a multi-generational group of about ten Unist'ot'en people came to the camp. After a tour of the various projects, they stood in the middle of the bunkhouse and addressed the work crew. Their words about their struggle to protect their land and their thanks to those who were standing together with them, were very heartfelt and moving.

Bunkhouse construction moved quickly, even with a crew of essentially unskilled and semi-skilled workers—many of whom had never set foot on a construction site before. In about 12 days the bunkhouse, a structure with about 1400 square feet of usable space, was taken to lock-up, insulated and completely sheathed inside and out. Within the next weeks the building will be completed with the construction of bunks, the addition of a wood stove, and other final details.

The hope of the Unist'ot'en, and of those who helped construct this bunk house, is that its role as part of a blockade camp will be rendered redundant. Perhaps after the last pipeline proposal has been withdrawn, the bunkhouse will become part of an educational centre.

For more information about the Unist'ot'en Camp and the fight to stop the pipelines go to unistotencamp.com or forestation.wikidot.com. 