

Civil resistance as deterrent to fracking: Part One, They shale not pass

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Can we mobilize and prepare the towns threatened by hydraulic fracturing with action plans so well-devised, so widely and transparently publicized, that unconventional energy developers wouldn't dare enter?

It's win before you fight. Using an innovatively designed civil resistance campaign as a nonviolent deterrent, the people of Quebec have so far been successful in defending their land against hydraulic fracturing. Over the course of three years, plans to drill some 20,000 shale gas wells along the St. Lawrence River, between Montreal and Quebec City, have been thwarted to the point of being recognized as a *de facto* moratorium on this form of extreme energy extraction. As an organizer who helped build this movement, I'm here to share some strategic insights and tactical ideas.

The battle planned

What level of preparedness does a resistance movement need to display before it can avoid the need to engage physically in nonviolent battle?

What constitutes a cost high enough to deter the fracking industry and the government officials it seduces? What kind of organizing does it take to prevent countrysides from being turned into industrial wastelands drenched in fracking contaminants, dotted with methane-spewing drilling rigs and carcinogen-emitting holding ponds, criss-crossed by 24/7 trucking operations over pipelines running everywhere?

Can we mobilize and prepare the towns under threat with action plans so well-devised, so widely and transparently publicized, that unconventional energy developers wouldn't dare enter?

How many organized communities would be needed, each ready to sustain protracted action of the kind the world has seen unfold in the West Sussex [village of Balcombe](#)?

This idea of a citizenry so fiercely indignant, so powerfully organized it could actually shield its land from the fangs of a strong, wealthy and inherently polluting industry is what inspired an emergent, integrated civil resistance design.

What the frack?

Sometime around 2007, stealthily, in typical blitzkrieg fashion as they do everywhere, unconventional energy developers moved into Quebec to test drill and frack for shale gas, appearing right in the middle of people's fields and backyards. In 2009, environmental organizations issued their first few statements. In 2010, alarmed and intensely worried citizens started calling journalists, who found a compelling story: articulate, undeserving victims, and a secretive, maladroit, and insatiable industry. The issue suddenly got front page ink and prime time coverage.

Citizens from rural areas soon found each other and started organizing. Artists and celebrities, some of whom owned properties in targeted areas, got involved. They helped further alert and mobilize public opinion through a viral video. An online petition gathered 130,000 names. Experienced activists informed by civil resistance theory and practice (including this author) felt compelled to join, moved by the outrage they felt, and what they feared might happen.

In January 2010, the leadership of the main labour and environmental organizations called a meeting of activists to rally support for a "generic" moratorium on shale gas development, defined as an immediate suspension of no specific duration of all exploration and fracking operations.

Labour and environmental leaders had reached a backroom deal with the main opposition party, the Parti Québécois. The Party would support the call for moratorium on shale gas in the St. Lawrence valley. One of the main environmental spokesmen was also being groomed for the position of future Environment minister.

Nobody seemed to have a strategy to deal with what would happen once we got a short-term moratorium. We were concerned that the anti-fracking movement may end up in disarray, or disband, once a short-term fracking moratorium was declared. By definition, a moratorium is temporary. It might be rescinded, potentially under a new government that would no longer have much use for a citizen movement.

La Campagne Moratoire d'une Génération (MDG), the One-Generation Moratorium Campaign, was founded on a mission to prevent "dirty energy", i.e. polluting fossil fuels - oil and gas, traditional and unconventional, whether found on the ground or offshore, including shale oil and gas - and nuclear energy, from being developed in Quebec. Luckily, because it lacked exploitable hydrocarbon resources and enjoyed an ample supply of hydroelectric power, the province never had developed meaningful fossil fuel resources.

In December 2010, a group of us - all volunteers who initially met at the Greenpeace local office in Montreal - started circulating a call and proposal to leaders and groups who had kickstarted the fast-growing mobilization on the issue of fracking in Quebec:

With three preliminary ingredients - an ultimatum to the Quebec government to impose a 20-year moratorium on fracking, a proactive nonviolent direct action training program, and a long-distance walk from Rimouski to Montreal - our hope was to lay the groundwork and build unity around a preventative struggle strategy to put on hold all current fracking operations and pre-testing wells in the province.

Over the next couple of months, our enthusiasm and the depth of our commitment would be put to the test.

Resistance to resistance: the challenge of unity

Building unity around a preventative civil resistance strategy proved more difficult than we thought.

It is quite ironic. The first and hardest line of struggle is sometimes found with those who, at least in our mind, are our prime allies.

Initially, the main visible activist leaders in opposition to shale gas did not respond to the proposal. They ignored our repeated requests for a meeting to discuss strategy. Apart from Greenpeace, which has a history and ongoing practice of nonviolent resistance and direct action, the established environmental NGO's, the main spokespeople and the issue-advocacy groups focused on media campaigns simply ignored the idea, hoping it

would go away. Then, seeing that the campaign didn't wither and was going to be officially launched, three of the main environmental leaders summoned us to quit the initiative, or be ostracized.

Our insistence on the need to go beyond a generic moratorium and to build a capacity for mass civil disobedience were the main sticking points. Because the relationship was untested, and because an intentional civil resistance approach was relatively new to leaders who had become savvy in the game of traditional politics, the environmental leaders seemed to fear an uncontrollable fringe, as they equated civil disobedience in particular with violence.

It got ugly. Still we didn't stop. We chose not to respond in kind, and kept our eyes on the prize, confident that one day, we would all congratulate each other on a joint victory.

Walking the talk

One of the highlights of the One-Generation Moratorium Campaign, and one for which it is most remembered, is the month-long walk it organized in the spring of 2011 along an itinerary closely following the areas claimed for fracking by the industry.

On May 15, 2011, after the ultimatum and weeks of organising, a group of about 50 people, aged from 15 to 75, started out from the mid-sized town of Rimouski. From day one, with thumbs up at our banner and sympathetic honking at our signs, with the occasional gift of muffins and fresh water from front porches, it was confirmed we were walking the right path: ordinary people approved. Across the southern shore of the St. Lawrence valley, up the Richelieu river also under threat, down to Montreal, some 700 km (over 430 miles) were walked, in total for 33 days.

Upon entering a town, we'd put together our singing parade, complete with giant puppets, industry giants on stilts, and a roaring pipeline dragon flanked by papier mâché props such as a sick cow, a walking drilling rig, and a giant tap with poison signs.

Each night, local folks were invited to a special event with local singers, skits, presentations and short movies, one of which was a participatory video made by local citizens. Each step of the way, we talked about fracking, the need for a 20-year moratorium, long-term solutions (energy saving and green alternatives), and the need to prepare preventative nonviolent struggle, including civil disobedience as a last resort.

The press followed us closely, with national media at the start, middle and end points. The walk was the event of the day in rural towns. It would usually open the news, with the weather forecast sometimes closing with what the day would be like for the walkers. In cities like Trois-Rivières and Quebec City, the march through downtown would bring out hundreds, marching with the fanfare and swaying with the samba band. When we finally reached Montreal, a crowd of some 10,000 to 15,000 people awaited -the largest environmental demonstration in Quebec history at the time - our allies having finally come together to celebrate. They held the banner in front of the march, with Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois at their side, with no representative from the walk invited to the photo op, however...

In the month it took to reach Montreal, two small victories were achieved. First, a bill was presented and adopted for a reduced 5-year moratorium on shale gas development under the St. Lawrence River proper and any of its islands west of Anticosti. Second, on the eve of the walk entering the world's second largest French-speaking city, the Environment minister declared for the first time that no more drilling and no more fracking would be allowed in the province at all, until further notice.

More than two years later, the *de facto* moratorium is still standing. We call it a citizen moratorium, because it was clearly the result of grassroots organising and popular mobilisation.

Other huge benefits of the walk were:

Trust and much closer relationships with rural groups all over the St. Lawrence Valley.

Widespread support for the more "radical" position that shale gas should not be developed, or should remain in the ground for at least 20 years.

Hundreds were now ready to attend Nonviolent Direct Action training sessions.

Other leaders could not malign civil resistance as much - rumours of Moratoire D'une Generation being "violent hotheads" subsided (or stopped working).

More than a village to raise a movement

Winning big usually requires a formidable synergy of efforts from wide and diverse civil society sectors. I would be remiss if I did not mention other key initiatives on which this success has rested.

Over a hundred citizen groups were formed over the last three years, that Moratoire D'une Generation (MDG) had little to no role in organising. Most were formed after a core group of infuriated citizens exchanged contact information, following an evening educational, at a local community hall. This built the powerful and well mediatized Regroupement Interegional Gaz de Schiste Vallee du St-Laurent (RIGSVSL), with a membership primarily composed of middle-aged, experienced home owners across the area under threat, many with ties to political parties, chiefly the Parti Quebecois.

Using traditional community organising methods, the Regroupement canvassed rural communities, asking residents to sign a letter refusing access to the industry, and selling the highly visible red and yellow "Non au gas de schiste" signs that now dot villages and rural roads across Quebec. Over 30,000 property owners have signed the letter. With signature rates sometimes reaching as high as 90%, the organizers brought to city hall maps showing the supportive properties painstakingly coloured one by one. Many municipal governments were swayed. Bylaws specifically designed to protect drinking water sources from the industry drilling were adopted in over 60 towns.

More symbolic than legally binding, these bylaws and letters have certainly made visible the blatant failure of the energy industry to gain any social acceptance of fracking in the province.

The AQLPA, a government-funded environmental group, has also been key in providing initial expertise and direction to the movement. As well, an independent committee of academic and scientific experts should be mentioned as a major source of critical knowledge, expertise and analyses to the grassroots and media.