The emerging anti-coal debate

Dr Paul Chatterton
It certainly feels uncomfortable being part of an emerging anti-coal movement in the UK. In the 1980s, coal brought activists together in solidarity with working class miners fighting a daily struggle on the frontline against the privatisation of the economy. For decades before, miners had seen themselves as a powerful, militant community of workers who could hold massive sway over the course of the British Government and economy. It was for this reason that so many people supported them and for this reason that the Thatcher Government wanted them defeated. As an activist back then it was clear whose side you were on. I am sure that if they had been around, many of today’s young eco-activists would have also supported the miners on pickets, giving out food, and raising funds.

Fast-forward two-and-a-half decades and activism is different. A whole generation, or two, has since cut its political teeth through opposition to road and aviation building programmes. In the late 1990s, attention turned to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organisation and the G8, as thousands of protesters turned up to present their demands or disrupt the meetings. There was an outpouring of international solidarity against what was seen as rampant trans-national capital.

The recent Camps for Climate Action grew out of these roots and have brought activism back to the hydrocarbon economy – but this time to put the last nail in its coffin. The first camps opposed Drax, the largest single point of CO₂ emissions in the UK, then the controversial expansion of Heathrow, which is set to steamroll over neighbouring villages, and most recently plans to build a new generation of coal-fired power stations starting with Kingsnorth in Kent. Coal has galvanised a new generation of activists but has been a controversial choice as it instantly makes today’s activists seem hostile to or ignorant of the huge struggle that working class communities went through to try and protect the coal industry. Many of these activists, recently out of university and in their twenties have no immediate connection with what happened during the 1980s miners’ strike. But they are not an entirely different movement. Coal may now be the enemy, but issues of power, justice and equality still loom large for environmental activists. So what are the issues that have motivated this emerging anti-coal movement?

The main reason behind its emergence is that the movement now knows what we, as a species, are up against, and how inadequate the response is from those in power. In the years since the miners’ strike there has been a huge global awakening of awareness to the terrifying effects humans are having on the world’s ecosystem, as greenhouse gases lead to the real prospect of dangerous climate change. Coal burning is the ace in the pack in terms of how effective we will be in avoiding this dangerous scenario. Energy producers are attracted to coal as it is cheap, easy to utilise and relatively abundant, especially in the more geopolitically stable West. But it is by far the dirtiest (or most carbon intensive) fossil fuel. Coal emits around 1.7 times as much carbon per unit of energy when burned as does natural gas and 1.25 times as much as oil. Globally, it accounts for roughly 20 per cent of greenhouse gases today and coal has the largest historic debt as half of the accumulated CO₂ in the atmosphere has come from coal (and Britain contributed most during its industrial revolution).

The UK Government’s decision to turn to new coal by planning to build at least seven new coal-fired power stations has been the last straw for many activists. There is an impressive cast in support of their arguments. The first is James Hansen, the head of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Science, who in response to the UK Government’s decision to build new coal-fired power stations stated in early 2008 that:
'In the face of such threats (from climate change) it is madness to propose a new generation of power plants based on burning coal, which is the dirtiest and most polluting of all the fossil fuels. We need a moratorium on the construction of coal-fired power plants and we must phase out the existing ones within two decades.'

A further blow came from a letter to Hilary Benn, Secretary of the State for the Environment, jointly signed by the USA’s Union of Concerned Scientists, the Sierra Club and the Natural Resources Defence Council in July 2008, which urged him to reject plans for new conventional coal-fired power stations as these made meeting global pollution reduction goals almost impossible. The third came from the UK Government’s own House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee in the same month, which stated that coal power should be seen as a last resort, even with the promise of carbon capture and storage. Finally, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) produced a report in July, called After the Coal Rush, that outlined the need for a two year moratorium on new coal fired stations otherwise the EU would not meet its emissions targets.

No wonder then that coal has spurred a new movement. The policy and science arguments against it are competent, broad and fierce; the alternatives to it are there, and there are people willing to take direct action. And with so much of the UK’s current and future generating capacity tied up in coal, opposition will only mount. Replacing old coal-fired power stations with new ones, rather than developing new energy sources around renewables, locks Britain into a high level of carbon emissions for years to come. But the problem, and thing that is really terrifying people and spurring them to action, is that the science is saying that we don’t have years. A recent report calculated that there are only 100 months left before we reach the global tipping point.
A strategy to stop new coal, like any good strategy, needs to be multifaceted to be effective. It needs public opposition of the type seen across the UK in recent months. It also needs serious and well researched reports outlining the issues from a variety of groups such as think tanks, independent government committees and scientists — and we have these in abundance. It needs to seriously engage with the unions and the workers in the industry, and here there has been less success. More work needs to be done to take the argument to the workers and unions, discuss openly with them our joint future and what a just economic transition will look like. This has been started, for example through the Workers’ Climate Action Network as well as a conference called ‘Class, Clean Coal and Climate Change’, which is being co-organised by the NUM with participants from this year’s climate camp in Newcastle upon Tyne and will take place November 1st.

And most importantly, the anti-coal movement has to be seen to be promoting alternatives that are workable. People must be empowered to realise that they can play a part as engaged citizens in collectively tackling a huge crisis — ordinary people can make arguments about alternatives and where our energy should come from. We need alternatives that cover a range of areas and which can frame the debate in a way that seems feasible, doable and affordable. Again these exist in abundance in reports like CAT’s zerocarbonbritain, The Green New Deal and the Cap and Share proposal. At the same time, the Transition Towns movement is bringing people together to implement alternatives at a local level. The nub of many of these alternatives is re-regulation, citizens’ empowerment, avoiding market-based and carbon trading solutions and setting strict and enforceable targets. It is all these factors coming together that makes a really strong movement, which surrounds those holding on to previous ways of acting and encourages people to embrace new ways of organising.

Wanting to halt climate change has unfortunately become connected to being anti-coal. But this is not the same thing as being against the people, the unions and the proud and courageous history of the coal industry and its communities. Most people are not against coal as such. This black gold that created strong communities and so much solidarity has been putting all our futures at risk. But in any case, there has got to be a more rational way of generating jobs than working in confined underground spaces digging coal and putting workers at risk of developing diseases such as pneumoconiosis, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. These health risks aside, the problems outlined by the scientific community are now so grave that any romanticism about restarting the coal industry is a luxury we cannot afford. This hard line is not just about coal but would apply equally to the nuclear, aviation, automobile and mining industries, for example. It would apply to any major contributor to CO₂ emissions.

The real potential strength of the emerging anti-coal movement is that its multifaceted nature might create such a momentum of feeling and evidence against coal, in a similar way to the arguments presented against nuclear, that the Government would be forced to act. An encouraging aspect is the extent to which the media seems supportive of, or at least inquisitive about this movement. The activists involved are difficult to fit into the standard activist box, seem media savvy and well informed by arguments and alternatives. They also seem to be motivated by self preservation rather than green romanticism. But hurdles do remain that the anti-coal movement needs to focus on one by one, build strategies for and find allies against. These include: more dialogue with workers and the unions about a just transition; challenging the right of large power companies to extract profits from fossil fuel-powered generation; the inadequacies of the European Emissions Trading Scheme in shifting industry in a greener direction quickly enough; and the limits of getting renewables at the centre of energy supply due to the privatisation of the national grid. However, with its urgency, clarity, evidence and passion, expect the anti-coal movement to make real waves in the coming months. If we build new coal power stations, the road back from the collapse of the precious biosphere on which we all depend will be even more difficult. But we have time to act still, and action there will be.

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