

## **OSSTF Human Rights Officer Response to Uranium Mining issue**

I am happy to have this chance to speak at this Citizen's Inquiry. I am speaking as a citizen of the region, who was born and raised here, as an individual who values the natural world for its intrinsic value, and as the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation Human Rights Officer for Limestone District 27.

The issue of Mining Uranium needs to be seen as a Human Rights issue. The decision to allow Uranium exploration on contested crown land creates a conflict between economic rights and human rights. Uranium Mining has the potential to destroy our access to clean drinking water. Uranium mining increases the potential for dangerous weapons to exist. Uranium mining interferes with our ability to find and experience beautiful places. Uranium Mining allows long standing disputes to be ignored for the sake of profit.

### **Energy Conservation**

When confronted with the question of Uranium mining in the Sharbot lake region, our Minister of the Environment asked protesters if "we would like to keep our lights on?" This is typical of the rhetoric that is used when we are forced to make tough choices about things that are harmful towards us. What usually happens is that issues are reduced to binary opposing viewpoints. Either we use nuclear power or the lights go off. Either we invest in sweatshop labour or our pension plans don't make money. These are false choices. What is left out of the debate in this case is the most obvious choice, which is energy conservation. Most of our lives are becoming more power intensive. Signs are getting bigger, lights are getting brighter, and plasma televisions draw more power than old cathode ray tubes.

I have heard much of the rhetoric about nuclear energy being safer and cleaner than the burning of fossil fuels. I think that <sup>at</sup> all parts of the "uranium cycle" there are severe safety and health risks that are simply too great to manage. It does not take a citizen long to figure out there are some major problems with the use of Nuclear power. In the last week on CBC radio there was a story about a problem with the safety records of a French company that was vying for the contract to one of the new Nuclear power stations slated to be built. Although there have been no major accidents in Canada the safety record in the world as a whole is not stellar, Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, these names should strike fear into us. Although there are probably fewer accidents per capita in nuclear facilities, the risks are much too great to support an expansion of existing programmes.

During the mining process there is little doubt in my mind that the process of Uranium Mining is not beneficial to any of the "stakeholders" For evidence of this I would suggest that people check out the pictures of Elliot Lake Mines by Edward Burtynsky in his series Manufactured Landscapes. A picture is worth a thousand words.

## **Human Rights**

As a Human Rights Officer, I am deeply dismayed by the way that this whole episode is being played out. I have grave concerns about the treatment of aboriginal peoples in this instance. In general our government has a lousy record of dealing with Native issues which results in a whole group of people living in appalling conditions in one of the richest nations in the world. The rights of the aboriginal groups in Canada need to be protected, not abandoned as appears to be happening in the case of The Ardoch and Shabot Obaadjiwaan first nations.

Even though Canada was the driving force behind to the refusal to ratify a statement declaring water a universal human right at the United Nations last week. I am going to make the assumption that access to clean drinking water is indeed a "Human Right" The addition of a Uranium Mine in our landscape is going cause strain on the existing water table and increase the risks of contaminated water. This will interfere with our right to clean drinking water and of course jeopardize the health and well being of ourselves and future generations.

If one takes a step back and looks at the issue from a distance it seems clear that the real conflict that is happening in this case is the conflict between economic rights and human rights. What is clear is that the price of Uranium has risen enough to make any land on the Canadian Shield a "viable" spot to mine. What is also clear is that it does not matter who lives on these lands, if there is money to be made, then those people need to just get out of the way. This kind of ethic really needs to be examined. In our times most of our leaders are focused more on things like cost of living and standard of living which can be easily measured, while equations of quality of life, which are harder to find, and less easy to measure are neglected. We need to be sure that the decisions that we make reflect the idea that people should come before profit. If decisions are carried out in this manner than our communities should be better structured to look after themselves and others.

In closing we need to ask more questions of ourselves and the people who are making decisions on our behalf. We need to reframe questions to put Human Rights ahead of Economic Rights. We should challenge alternatives that suggest binary solutions. Questions about cheap power should also contain questions about the cost that comes with it, both long term and short term. We need to look at the effect these kind of choices have on people. What is the real cost of relocating a group of people from their home? What is lost when our right to peaceful protest and assembly is taken away? What is lost when the only discussions we have are centered around cost effectiveness and profit? What is lost when economic rights come before human rights?

Thank you

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