

The UK's coal burn is not just having a huge impact on climate. It's also devastating communities in the UK, Russia, Colombia and other nations that supply our coal power stations. Those impacted are doing their best to resist the mining companies that are destroying their land, stealing their homes and polluting their air and water. But they need our help!

Coal burnt in the UK is a product of enormous human rights abuses and ecological destruction in Russia, Colombia and the USA, according to a new report from the Coal Action Network.

The report, 'Ditch Coal' adds the human and localised environmental story to the better known impacts coal burning has on climate change and health.

It also shows why the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change's 'a new direction for UK energy policy' speech, last November, was so disappointing and inadequate, despite its apparent - but in fact highly conditional - promise to phase out coal power generation by 2025

Coal mined domestically combined with coal from Russia, Colombia and the USA supplies almost all of the coal burnt in the UK's 12 power stations.

The situation in each of these coal producing nations is dire and directly linked to UK consumption. The only way to prevent this destruction is to quickly phase out coal burning and the mining it requires once and for all.

The current status of UK power stations

Coal's contribution to the UK's energy mix is in decline, but the damage it causes is vast.

Drax, the UK's biggest coal and biomass power station situated in North Yorkshire, is receiving and burning far more coal than the other 11 coal fired power stations.

Drax burns biomass in two of its units to avoid having to close under the European Union's air pollution controls. These controls also contributed to the upcoming closure of nearby Eggborough and Ferrybridge power stations.

CAN researchers found Cottam and Aberthaw power stations are the second and third biggest coal burners in the UK between July and October 2015. Scotland's only coal power station, Longannet saw a resurgence in coal imports although it is due to close in early 2016.

The other power stations were not receiving much coal in the time period studied. 21.2 million tonnes of coal was imported from Russia, Colombia and the USA in the year to August 2015.

Mining in the UK

In the UK communities are fighting new planning applications to opencast mine coal, while

others are battling to get abandoned sites restored to their former natural state in Scotland and South Wales. The odds are stacked against coal affected communities.

One such battle is being fought by residents near Field House, County Durham where planning has just been given after an appeal. This was the first approval after the coal phase out announcement, which contradicts the Government's supposed commitment to reducing our use of coal.

In Wales, the United Valleys Action Group and friends are fighting an appeal by Miller Argent, who already run the UK's biggest opencast at Ffos-y-Fran. The company wants to start a six million tonne mine adjacent to the existing one. Continual rounds of applications have a big impact on local people, says Eddy Blanche of United Valleys Action Group: "The developers paid rooms full of people to write thousands of pages of technical documents. We had to read them, research them, understand them and respond to them. All while doing our jobs and trying to live our lives around it."

The Coal Action Network has worked extensively with communities resisting opencast coal mining. Other communities are fighting applications close to Druridge Bay and at the Varteg in South Wales.

The last significant deep mine, Kellingley, shut in December 2015. Kellingley had been supplying Drax and its closure will increase reliance on imported coal. Prior to Kellingley closing the UK supplied 31% of the coal burnt in the UK.

Mining in Russia

Russia provides the majority of coal (43%) imported to be burnt in the UK, making this country the second biggest user of Russian coal. The devastation caused by coal mining in the Kuzbass, Russia's main coal producing region, is extensive.

Indigenous Shor and Teleut peoples are being forcefully moved off their land - displaced to urban areas where they are detached from their language, spiritual sites and livelihoods. In November 2013 Ilgiz Khalimov, director of coal mining outfit Yuzhnaya, subsidiary of Sibuglement, intimated that if local communities did not "sell their houses and estates to Yuzhnaya, then the houses might burn down."

Later that month arson attacks started in the village of Kazas, clearing the way for the mine to expand and for the entire village to be destroyed. Eight other majority Shor villages nearby have also been evicted and destroyed. Yuzhnaya is owned by Sibuglement supplies the UK with coal.

The Shor people find themselves living under a resource curse. Before, their land provided well for them, but the coal underneath it enticed companies which are now polluting their waterways; only 6% of mine waste water is treated.

Local people and the wildlife they depend on are forced to drink toxic water and their traditional economic activities, hunting and fishing, are prevented. Prior to destruction their villages became unbearable to live in due to heavy blasting sending rocks into the air and covering gardens with dust.

Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, is quick to attack any criticism of coal mining and, as such, any organisations defending these communities. A repressive law passed in 2012 requires NGOs involved in 'political activity' and receiving funding from abroad to register as 'foreign agents.'

Ecodefense, an ecological group that have been publicising the plight of the indigenous people affected by coal mining, was the first organisation named under this law.

Mining in Colombia and the US

The situation in Colombia, where 33% of the UK's coal is imported from, is similar to that in Russia. Enormous mines continue to forcibly displace entire villages.

The village of Boquerón, a majority Afro-Colombian community of about a thousand inhabitants, underwent its first resettlement in March 2015. The move was ordered by the national government due to unhealthy levels of air pollution caused by opencast coal mining. Other communities fear they will soon suffer a similar fate.

"The companies talk about voluntary displacement, but it is forced displacement. At the moment they are evicting people from Boquerón. We are worried. We are fighting to get land titles for our collective land. This will help us protect our ecosystem as they push to expand the mine", said Nubia Maria Florian Ditta in March 2015.

She is a member of Las Cruces community council Chiriguaná, where the expansion of a USA based Drummond's mine threatens the village.

Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are disproportionately affected by mining activities. As well as experiencing the health effects of nearby coal mining, they live in the midst of a conflict that is intentionally created for the benefit of mining companies that are themselves implicated in paramilitary violence and killings.

In the USA, the final big supplier of coal to the UK with 19% of imports, mining companies destroy entire mountain ranges in Appalachia using controversial Mountaintop Removal methods, and intentionally collapse vast swathes of land in Illinois.

Coal pollutes the water downstream of the mines, in the rivers carrying coal barges, and in the port cities exporting to the UK. "We are opposed to coal mining practices such as longwall mining that destroy our fertile farmland, as well as coal ... disposal methods that threaten the health of our communities, lands and waters", says a spokesperson from Citizens Against Longwall Mining from central Illinois.

Government action needed

Amber Rudd's announced last November an intention to close the UK's coal fired power stations by 2025, subject to a consultation and other caveats, chief among them that other power sources such as gas and nuclear had come on stream by then.

This is simply too slow, and the commitments too uncertain. Another ten years of communities being made homeless, waterways being poisoned and residents fighting against applications and for restoration is simply not acceptable.

In her speech Amber Rudd told us, "I want to take action now." So do we, and so the Coal Action Network calls for prompt meaningful action, with a much earlier phase out announcement and legally binding legislation to ensure that there are no U-turns by future governments.

Action needs to be taken to stop the physical and psychological attacks on rural communities in other countries that supply the UK's coal. In the UK, where communities have to fight repeated mine applications, a coal phase out needs to be backed up by a timely ban on all opencast mining.

Now is the time to be lobbying for a faster phase out. If the Government will not take a lead on this, then it is the role of those of us who consume the end product - through our electricity supply - of harmful coal extraction, to take action.

Pressure can be applied to mining companies, coal infrastructure, and power station operators using diverse methods including divestment, direct action and solidarity with directly affected communities in the UK and abroad. We can pressure power stations for an earlier closure by organising in our communities.

Now is the time to stand in solidarity with affected communities and end coal power.

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