

ne

t

g
e.

the first and only
special struggle to
answers your
your concerns
our planet in
versible

CRISIS
solution of a
emergency
can
h

WILEY
favourite bookstore.

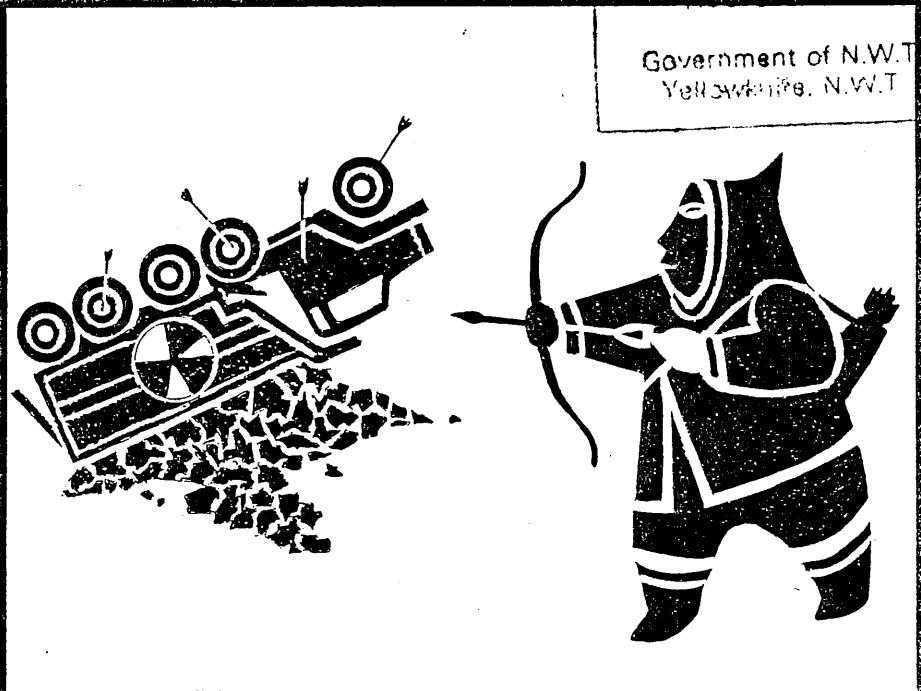
TABLED DOCUMENT NO. - 38 - 90 (1) TABLED ON FEB 28 1990

This Magazine

Volume 23 #2 July-August 1989

\$2.75

SNOW JOB



DOING THE URANIUM HUSTLE IN THE NWT BY PAUL MCKAY



SNOW

JOB

DOING THE URANIUM HUSTLE IN THE NWT

BY PAUL MCKAY

Three thousand years before the steam engine and the printing press put their definitive mark on western industrial society, a nomadic people with a complex, resilient culture was flourishing in what is now Canada's Arctic Keewatin district. Everything in the Inuit world – their hunting and gathering patterns, their tools, their oral culture, their villages, their art, their dreams – reflected an environment that was both unforgivingly harsh and exquisitely fragile.

The thawing tundra has been, especially, an ageless physical and spiritual symbol of promise for the Inuit. Spring brought the return of their sacred caribou – the elemental source of food and clothing. It brought lakes and rivers teeming with trout and char, and salt water coves filled with walrus, whale, seal, geese and polar bear. It was a time for common rejoicing.

This Arctic spring was different. A series of scientific reports publicly confirmed what has been suspected for decades: the Inuit are being slowly, systematically poisoned. In March, alarming levels of PCBs were found in the flesh of caribou, polar bears and even the breast milk of Inuit mothers. Another scientific team announced the discovery of a widening hole in the ozone layer above the North Pole. Then, radiation tests showed the Inuit and their caribou were accumulating astonishing levels of radioactive elements which are directly traceable to nuclear weapons testing and Chernobyl.

Taken together, the reports weld a bleak scientific verdict and a malevolent irony.

The verdict is that the fragile Arctic ecosystem collects and concentrates pollutants at a faster pace than almost anywhere else on the planet, and that the biological pathways to the Inuit are proving to be equally quick and deadly. Despite this, the Inuit have no choice but to continue eating the caribou, trout and walrus they have depended on since 2,000 BC.

The irony is that this peaceful, non-polluting people is being poisoned by the plume of a distant industrial society that is the very antithesis of their own. A more sinister and final form of cultural genocide would be hard to imagine.

Enter the federal government and a West German utility consortium. They want to give the Keewatin Inuit a uranium mine.

The barren-land tundra near Baker Lake, N.W.T., is the last place on earth anyone would expect to see what now waits on the drawing boards: two 200-metre-deep holes in the permafrost from which giant dumptrucks will emerge hauling 15,000 tons of radioactive rock per day; a subdivision-size mill complex which will extract uranium with tons of acids, solvents and toxic chemicals; and finally a mountain of toxic, radioactive tailing wastes left on the surface. The mine will require a series of roads through the tundra, a makeshift town, an airport capable of handling jets, a marine terminal and an imported workforce of about 250. Ten years after it opens, the ore will be gone.

All this will be to supply atomic fuel for reactors in the heavily industrialized, consumption-driven countries that are

now poisoning the Inuit from afar. And, in the process, the uranium fuel will be transformed into even more deadly nuclear wastes, which will remain lethal for centuries.

It is exactly the kind of environmentally reckless, profit-driven, quick and dirty development which runs counter to the Inuit traditions of stewardship, common purpose and patient adaptation. The uranium mine is of, for and by an industrial culture. Nevertheless, the federal Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), and a band of N.W.T. business types have concluded that this is what the Inuit need to bring them into the modern world.

To convince them, DIAND and officials from the N.W.T. government convened an extraordinary meeting in the Inuit hamlet of Baker Lake in early March. On paper, the purpose was to give the Keewatin Inuit a candid, detailed look at the uranium mine proposal, answer their questions and listen to their objections. The reality was a two-day cheerleading session on uranium mining, good corporate citizenship and the unimpeachable credibility of Canada's nuclear industry regulators. The Inuit were not even given their own place on the agenda.

The lineup featured the head of Urangesellschaft Canada (UGC), a West German utility consortium that discovered the Baker Lake uranium deposit; UGC's environmental consultant; an executive from Britain's Central Electricity Generating Board (which has a twenty per cent interest in the proposed mine); officials from DIAND in Ottawa and Yellowknife; officials from the N.W.T. departments of Energy, Mines and Petroleum, and Renewable Resources; staff from the federal Atomic Energy Control Board and officials from Environment Canada and Saskatchewan Environment.

Getting all that officialdom to a wind-swept, frozen hamlet 1,500 kilometres north of Winnipeg was no easy – or inexpensive – task. Everyone was jammed into Baker Lake's single hotel at a cost of \$175 per night per person. After a few minutes of calculations over lunch, some N.W.T. administrators nonchalantly put the total government bill (excluding salaries) for the two-day meeting at \$75,000.

From the beginning there were signs that it would be a sugar-coated, "father knows best" presentation. Since 1980, Inuit organizations have resolutely opposed any form of nuclear installations in the Arctic – military or civilian. That opposition has resulted in cancelled plans for a uranium mine in Labrador and an AECL "Slowpoke" reactor in the N.W.T.



The thawing tundra has been an ageless physical and spiritual symbol of promise for the Inuit

In the case of the proposed Labrador uranium mine, a Newfoundland environmental assessment board rejected the project in 1980 in the harshest possible terms.

Our principle conclusion is that Brinex [an international uranium consortium] should not be permitted to mine and mill uranium until it satisfies the government that it can and will safely dispose of the waste materials. It has not done this, and admits that technology is not available at present to make safe and permanent disposal economically feasible. We are convinced by the evidence

heard and submitted that no economically feasible techniques are available at present for the safe and ultimate disposal of waste radioactive material.

Urangesellschaft had a forty per cent interest in the Labrador proposal, and its environmental consultant from that project is now handling the Keewatin proposal.

The Baker Lake project has also been stalled because of a continuing Inuit land claim to 30,000 square miles in Keewatin.

That aboriginal claim has been challenged by the companies that want to develop the Baker Lake uranium deposit, and other Canadian mining outfits that have already staked out – with the financial and technical assistance of the federal government – the mineral-rich Keewatin.

The interest of the mining companies is clear: unrestricted access to profitable ore. A 1979 editorial from the industry bible, *The Northern Miner*, put the case bluntly:

Preliminary exploration has indicated that this area is rich in uranium and many other minerals, and it is unthinkable that development should be stopped in order to preserve such a rudimentary way of life as to require hunting for one's next meal. Surely we have progressed beyond that. All too often we have the southern do-gooders and environmentalists wanting to keep these people [the Inuit] in their basic lifestyles as a sort of quaint museum piece rather than encouraging them to become part of the 20th century.

For its part, Ottawa (principally through DIAND) has been convinced for decades that the only way to bring the Inuit into the twentieth century – and slash its heavy northern subsidies – is through southern-style development.

"Mineral and oil potential offers the only realistic chance for the north to become economically independent during the next ten to twenty years," a key 1965 federal policy paper argued. Translation: the north must exchange government dependence for corporate dependence.

With those shared motives, the mining companies and the feds found themselves in the Federal Court of Canada on one side of the Keewatin Inuit aboriginal land claims with the Inuit on the other. The mining companies, including Urangesellschaft, launched a hardball offence by arguing there was no proof the Inuit had occupied the Keewatin lands since ancient times – and therefore had no legal claim to it. When that argument was smashed by archeological evidence, the feds took the lead and argued that all Inuit rights to the land – if any – had been extinguished by Charles II of England in 1670, when he gave – sight unseen – vast parts of North America to his cousin Rupert, in Germany.

The Federal Court ruling on this was crucial and agonizingly ambiguous for all the parties. In 1979, it concluded that the Inuit aboriginal title had not been extinguished at any time, and that the Keewatin Inuit claim had to be recognized and respected. However, it also made a distinction between aboriginal rights and property rights – and then failed to define either. That left all the litigants claiming victory. The mining companies and Ottawa insisted development had been given the green light because property rights were up for grabs, while the Inuit insisted that no development could take place without their consent as aboriginal people.

Ten years after the court ruling, that impasse still exists. The standoff has suited the most influential Inuit organizations, which are overwhelmingly opposed to the Baker Lake project. They have all the time in the world. But for the mining companies, DIAND and a newly autonomous N.W.T. government anxious to prove that the Arctic is “open for business,” the standoff is a calamity. The Baker Lake project has become a test case on Arctic development, and a test of wills. So, behind the scenes, they have apparently come to the collective conclusion that the only way to proceed is to persuade the Inuit with sweet reason. Ergo, the government-bankrolled meeting in Baker Lake in March.

It was a disaster. There was not even a hint of impartiality. The meeting was chaired by a bumbling, incoherent DIAND geologist whose performance embarrassed even his own government colleagues. His first task was to explain to the 150 Inuit in the Baker Lake hockey arena why the agenda for the meeting and all the print and audio-visual materials were in English only, and why the Inuit organizations had no place on the agenda. It went downhill from there.

The first presentation was by the federal Atomic Energy Control Board, which regulates the nuclear industry in Canada, including uranium mines. With breathtaking obliviousness and an air of being carefully coached, a freshly scrubbed Carmel Letourneau proudly showed aboriginal people from remote Arctic villages a video on radiation, shot by the U.S. En-

Lubin and Northern Affairs Allées Indiennes et du Nord		APPLICATION FOR LAND USE PERMIT DEMANDE DE PERMIS D'UTILISATION DE TERRES	
Date: FEBRUARY 27/81		No.: 1975-109	
Applicant: URANGESSELLSCHAFT CANADA LIMITED P.O. BOX 19 TORONTO DOMINION CENTRE, TORONTO, ONT. M5K 1A1		Suite 2812, TORONTO DOMINION BANK TOWER TORONTO, ONTARIO M5K 1A1	
Qualifications - Titres Geological, Geophysical, Geochemical Surveys, Legal Land Survey		NTS 66 G-1, 2, 7, 8 SAR 15, 18, 19, 25, 28, 29, 45 DIANA 1-6; KB 2-8; BTRCT 1-2	
Equipment, Vehicles and Facilities - Equipement, Vehicules et Installations NO VEHICLES OR AIRCRAFT STATIONED AT SITE		FUEL WILL BE STORED ON LAND WELL CLEAR OF ANY WATER COURSES.	
Contractors & Sub-contractors - Entrepreneurs et Sous-traitants YES TO BE DETERMINED		LEGAL LAND SURVEYORS	
Fuels - Combustibles JP-4		205 l	
Methods of emptying and filling containers - Méthodes de vidage et de remplissage des réservoirs GARBAGE WILL BE BURNED AND BURIED		TOTAL: \$20.00	
Clauses (Address same as above)		Geological Engineer FEB 27/81	

The mill would leave 50 million tons of radioactive waste piled on the Arctic surface forever

vironmental Protection Agency in Denver, Colorado in 1978. The video said nothing about Canadian radiation standards, the Atomic Energy Control Board (AECB), the Arctic environment, uranium mines, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl or the last decade of new scientific research on the health hazards of radiation.

Asked about that when she was finished her talk, Letourneau agreed that the EPA video wasn't perfect, but "it is the best we have." Bernie Zgola, the supervisor of the AECB's microscopic national uranium mine inspection team, conceded the same point. "Okay, part of it was propaganda. But you can't dismiss the good parts."

One of those good parts, according to Letourneau and Zgola, was the description of how nuclear regulatory agencies around the world – including Canada's AECB – set their radiation exposure standards according to the mystic-sounding ALARA principle, which itself was developed by an apparently august

scientific body known as the International Committee on Radiological Protection (ICRP).

The point, Zgola assured the Inuit solemnly, was that AECB radiation standards were based strictly on impeccable, impartial scientific evidence. And that they would be enforced to the letter.

That assurance started to unravel when Zgola was reminded that the vaunted ALARA principle stood for the infinitely pliable phrase: "As Low as Reasonably Achievable," and that the ICRP officially adopted the ALARA principle in 1959 to provide "reasonable latitude for the expansion of atomic energy programs in the foreseeable future." So much for standards based solely on science.

Zgola retreated further when he was reminded that the ALARA principle had been in effect while hundreds of uranium miners were being poisoned in Ontario and Saskatchewan in the sixties, and in New Mexico where Navajo Indian uranium miners have suffered epidemic levels of lung cancer.

Zgola also had a hard time explaining why the international radiation standards have been getting stricter if they were "reasonable" in the first place, why the U.S. limits for public and occupational exposures to radiation are now far stricter than Canada's (both countries ostensibly follow the same ALARA principle), and why the AECB has not adopted even tougher radiation standards based on recent ICRP evidence that concludes they should be cut dramatically.

The answer, which Zgola denied, is that there is really nothing scientific at all about radiation standards, that the definition of "reasonably achievable" varies from country to country, jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and year to year, and that the uranium industry in Canada would be shut down tomorrow if it had to obey standards based on science instead of a trade-

off between public health and the health of the nuclear industry.

The point man for Urangesellschaft, company vice-president Mick Stuart, was the feature speaker for the first evening, but he did little to regain the confidence – or even interest – of the Inuit. With a Chaplinesque haircut and moustache, baleful eyes and the air of a solemn but klutzy professor, he soon had the Inuit kids giggling and their parents bored to tears. It seemed unlikely that the same man who had trouble operating an overhead projector, and put up illegible diagrams of chemical process circuits that doubtless only a few in the audience could decipher, was going to build a \$500-million project in a remote tundra plain just south of the Arctic circle.

Nevertheless, he plodded on. He confirmed that the proposed mine would operate for about ten years. During that time, fifty-five million tons of radioactive uranium ore would be gouged from the permafrost, and processed in a mill that itself would be brought in – piece by piece – by air, sea and tundra road. The mill would treat the ore with 12,000 tons of sulphuric acid per year, sodium chlorate, polymer reagents, kerosene and sodium hydroxide.

The net result would be 3.1 million tons of uranium oxide for export and fifty million tons of radioactive, toxic mine waste piled on the Arctic surface forever.

At that point the Inuit, led by the mayors of several hamlets, began peppering Stuart with questions. Wouldn't the roads and jets disturb the two caribou herds that had migration routes within a few miles of the site? How soon would it take for the radioactivity to collect in the trout downstream from the waste piles? Did Stuart know there were Inuit graves near the site? How many jobs would Inuit people get? What would happen if barges filled with sulfuric acid capsized in Chesterfield Inlet? What about the land claim?

Soon, the questions turned into simple, eloquent speeches on the sacredness of the caribou, and blunt condemnations of the project.

"We do not want this uranium mine. We do not want it at all," said Peter Kritaqlilik, the speaker of the Keewatin Regional Council and a noted Inuit hunter. "We are a quiet people, and we do not say much at meetings like this. But we want to continue our way of life. To us, the caribou is the most important thing. This mine may harm them. So we are against it. Life is more important than money."

"Life, most certainly, is more important than money," Stuart stammered, not knowing quite what to say. "And I can assure you, that is our philosophy."

From that point on, a steady stream of Inuit people walked up to the microphone to add their own voices to the opposition. There were wizened grandmothers, teenagers, men in snowmobile suits and mothers with babies tucked inside exquisitely embroidered parkas. Over the

next day, perhaps three dozen Inuit from Baker Lake spoke out in their native language. A few asked questions, but most simply and politely stated their opposition to the mine. Only one Inuit man said he was in favour because of the promise of some local jobs.

Mick Stuart met the sustained objections with patient, diplomatic answers and never lost his composure despite the political importance of the meeting. The DIAND officials, however, couldn't hide their chagrin.

The grilling intensified on the final afternoon, when Stuart returned to the crucial issue of the waste tailings. By now, everyone knew that there would be fifty million tons of them left on the surface, and that they would remain radioactive and toxic for ages. It was also clear that, once the ore was mined out, there would be little incentive for the West German company to stick around and keep a perpetual watch over them.

Admitting that the tailings plans were still incomplete, the Urangesellschaft engineer then startled the audience by showing them a crude *hand-drawn* diagram of the company's revised tailings plan: the fifty million tons would be simply left on the surface, surrounded by berms of waste rock from the mining operation, and left to freeze. In Stuart's opinion, this was a far better plan than the original two: simply dumping the mine wastes into nearby lakes, or filling in the excavated pit.

The sketch looked like it had been drawn over lunch that day, and was a dramatic contrast to the computer-designed blueprints for the mill complex, chemical flow-sheets and project layout maps Stuart had shown earlier. A computer-drawn model of the ore body, for instance, had pin-pointed the exact location of uranium ore pods buried 200 metres below the tundra, and another gave the precise dimensions and grade of each bank to be cut in the pit on the way to the bottom.

The tailing sketch spoke volumes about the companies' priorities: Urangesellschaft knew where the uranium was buried, how to get to it, how much it would cost to dig it out, how many tons of sulphuric acid would have to be barged in from Montreal each year, how long it would take to deplete the ore body, how many pounds would be exported and, undoubtedly, how much profit the company would make. But it had no idea what it was going to do with the fifty million tons of waste the mine would leave behind.

That glaring flaw was obvious to everyone in the arena. As Stuart lamely promised to come up with something more sophisticated in the future, even the DIAND chair looked dumbfounded, while uranium mine inspectors from Saskatchewan exchanged incredulous glances. Later that night, one of them said privately that the tailings plan would be a guaranteed failure, and would not be approved in his province.

"It wouldn't get more than five seconds worth

"To us, the caribou is the most important thing. Life is more important than money."



of consideration," he said. "If a new uranium mine came to us with that proposal, we'd never let them start digging."

The last Inuit question for Mick Stuart at the Baker Lake meeting was: "Why doesn't the company just put the tailings back in the pit the rock came out of?" It was a simple, direct question nobody else had bothered to ask.

"Well, we decided not to do that," Stuart said, clearing his throat uncomfortably, "because there's another deposit of lower-grade ore below the main one, which we might want to mine later if it becomes economic."

Bingo. That meant the plan for managing fifty million tons of radioactive tailings was being founded not on safety or long-term environmental grounds, but because of crude corporate economics. If there might be money at the bottom of the pit, don't fill it.

Suddenly, a partial explanation for another puzzle emerged: why was UGC developing a high-flown uranium mill complex at a remote Arctic site when there is a world glut of uranium, and the price has dropped from forty-two dollars to less than twelve dollars per pound in the last decade?

Those prices had just forced the temporary closing of northern Saskatchewan's Rabbit Lake uranium mill, throwing 170 people out of work. And even Mick Stuart's own figures show production costs at Baker Lake to be minimum of four dollars a pound higher than the current world price. The West German company could buy three million pounds from existing suppliers for less than sixteen dollars per pound and save itself a lot of trouble with land claims, environmentalists, regulations and savage Arctic weather conditions. Why build a risky, high-flown mill complex for one relatively small ore body?

The probable answer is that there is far more uranium in Keewatin than UGC has publicly declared, both underneath its proposed Baker Lake site and further to the northwest. That would square with the results of federal geological surveys, and it would also dovetail with the story from a Keewatin pilot, who says two drunk members of Mike Stuart's uranium crew climbed into his plane last summer and told him they had just finished assessing the *real* uranium strike eighty miles north of UGC's proposed mine - dead in the middle of the government-protected calving grounds of the Beverly caribou herd.

Already, the N.W.T. Chamber of Mines, on behalf of companies like Urangesellshaft, is lobbying hard for the removal of fixed Keewatin caribou protection boundaries that restrict

mineral exploration and mining. What happens if UGC builds a costly uranium mill at the perimeter of the caribou protection boundary, then claims it will go bankrupt if it can't mine rich ore inside the boundary?

You can bet the boundary will dissolve and the Inuit will be forced to perpetually follow the caribou herds deeper and deeper into the barrenland tundra, while the corrosive edge of our industrial culture follows behind them like an oil slick spreading along a coastal beach.

Even if that proves melodramatically false, there are enough glaring problems with the Baker Lake project to stop it cold now. The mining company has no credible plan yet to deal with fifty million tons of radioactive waste. A uranium mine in permafrost has never been built before. The fragile Arctic ecosystem is no place to experiment with radioactive materials like radium that remain lethal for thousands of years and concentrate in the food chain with deadly effect. The project is economically dubious as it stands. The N.W.T. has no departments or personnel experienced in regulating uranium mines or dealing with radiological hazards. No one knows what effect the construction and operation of the mine will have on the caribou migrations and reproductions. No one knows what the influx of an outside work force will do to one of the few Inuit communities that has not already been overwhelmed by a culture of greed, consumption, addiction and violence.

One thing is clear. The circumpolar organization that binds the Inuit from Greenland to Alaska says it is opposed to the Baker Lake uranium mine. The Keewatin Inuit have said they are opposed. The Baker Lake Inuit have now made it clear they are opposed.

If everyone else listened to the Inuit people in their own land, there would be no uranium mine.

Postscript: On March 8, one week after the Baker Lake meeting, the Yellowknife office of the Indian and Northern Affairs Land Use Department received a formal application by Urangesellshaft to continue uranium exploration and conduct land surveys inside the Beverly caribou calving zone. TM

Paul McKay is a freelance journalist living in Lansdowne, Ontario who specializes in environmental issues.

P
O
L
I
T
R
I
C
K
S

B
E
N
L
A
F
O
N
T
A
I
N
E

