
FOR THE LAND!

Roots and Revolutionary Dynamics of Indigenous Struggles in Canada



By Mike Krebs

CONTENTS

Roots and Revolutionary Dynamics of Indigenous Struggles in Canada	3
The Harper ‘Apology’ — Saying ‘Sorry’ with a Forked Tongue	14
The Crisis in Kashechewan: Water Contamination Exposes Canada’s Brutal Policies Against Indigenous People	21

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Krebs is a Vancouver-based Indigenous activist and an Associate Editor of *Socialist Voice*.

Copyright 2008 by Socialist Voice
www.socialistvoice.ca

Published by South Branch Publications
Printed in Canada
ISBN 978-1-897578-05-6

Socialist Voice

Marxist Perspectives for the 21st Century

A forum for discussion of today’s struggles of the workers and oppressed from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism, based in Canada but international in scope.

All *Socialist Voice* articles, as well as a selection of important documents from international movements for socialism and liberation, are available on our website, www.socialistvoice.ca

For a free email subscription send a blank email to
Socialist-Voice-subscribe@yahoo.com

Socialist Voice is also available through
an RSS feed at feeds.feedburner.com/SocialistVoice

Roots and Revolutionary Dynamics of Indigenous Struggles in Canada

A Movement for Land and Self-Determination

(Socialist Voice, November 20, 2007)

The Indigenous question is one of the most political issues in Canada today – perhaps the most important. There are Indigenous struggles going on in many different levels across Canada. There are struggles over land and resources such as that happening up north with the Tahltan nation, who are opposing the mining developments happening on their territory against their wishes. There is the similar situation with the Six Nations, who are opposing the theft of the Haldimand Tract in southwestern Ontario and the development that is going on there.

There are also Indigenous people fighting poverty in Indigenous communities both on and off reserve. The mainstream media carry many articles exposing what people do or should already know about, which is the horrible conditions that Indigenous people are forced to live under in the Canadian colonial society.

Another major issue that Indigenous people are dealing with and fighting, is the way that the lives of Indigenous women are devalued in the colonial society, and how this leads to such widespread instances of Indigenous women disappearing and being killed. This has been an issue in Vancouver with women going missing from the Downtown Eastside and up north along the Highway of Tears, the highway that runs between Prince Rupert and Prince George. This also happens in cities all across the Prairies, especially in Saskatoon. It is an urgent question.

The Indigenous struggle for self-determination is a revolutionary struggle. Yet it receives little recognition from leftist activists, currents, parties, and organizations in Canada.

Many groups talk about Indigenous struggles or cover them in their publications, but generally reframe these struggles in a way that does not address their revolutionary content. One example of this is the tendency of some left groups to frame the Indigenous struggle in Canada as one of an oppressed minority, without tak-

ing up the question of land and the question of Indigenous people as nations. This approach unscientifically separates the discrimination that Indigenous people face from its material base.

The reality is that Indigenous people are repeatedly finding themselves on opposing ends from leftists when it comes to leftist theory and practice.

Living standards of Indigenous people in Canada

As a starting place for looking at Indigenous struggles in Canada, it is important to outline the current conditions that Indigenous people are forced to live under. One of the ways to do this is look at some basic statistics. Here are a few that are taken from a report published by the Canadian Population Health Collective in 2004 called “Improving the Health of Canadians.” This is of course only one way to understand the kind of conditions Indigenous people live under, but it gives a general idea:

- More than one-third of Indigenous people live in homes that do not meet the most basic government standards of acceptability.
- Average life expectancy for Indigenous people is ten years less than the Canadian average.
- Indigenous children die at three times the rate of non-Indigenous children, and are more likely to be born with severe birth defects and conditions like fetal alcohol syndrome.
- The suicide rate of Indigenous people is six times higher than the Canada-wide average.
- Tuberculosis rates are 16 times higher in Indigenous communities than the rest of the population, and HIV and AIDS infection is growing fastest among Indigenous people.

We could go on and add to this the high rates of unemployment; the higher rates of being subjected to violence, whether it’s domestic or at the hands of police; the higher rates of incarceration, victimization by sexual assault, child apprehension and the lower level of access to formal education.

None of these statistics should be a surprise to anyone even remotely familiar with the conditions of Indigenous people in Canada. These statistics are produced, repeated and exposed over and over again. Indigenous people don’t need to read these numbers to

understand our situation, because this is just a basic description of day-to-day life, and this is only touching the surface.

But what's really important to understand is why Indigenous people face these conditions. Without the "why" of things, these statistics are meaningless towards understanding what they are portraying.

The true history of the development of Canada is significant, because the conditions that Indigenous people live under today are the result of hundreds of years of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and resources. They are the result of a genocidal campaign against Indigenous people at the hands of Canadian colonialism, and hundreds of years of suppression of the development of Indigenous nations.

This process of colonization involved many stages, across Canada and the Americas, and it manifested itself in different ways. Here we are only looking at the general picture.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763

The early colonization of North America involved destroying the traditional societies and economies. This was carried out in the pursuit of the hegemony of merchant, and eventually industrial capitalism.

During the early stages of British and French colonialism, the British produced Royal Proclamation of 1763. This was basically a recognition by the British of the right of Indigenous people to their land. This document is brought up a lot by Indigenous people, because it is seen as the colonial government admitting and acknowledging that it cannot and should not take Indigenous lands and territories without some sort of consent or arrangement. In terms of Canadian law and the perspective of Indigenous people, there has been nothing since then that has revoked the Proclamation of 1763.

But why did the British, at this point, recognize Indigenous rights to their lands and resources, and then go ahead and completely ignore them?

There are three major contexts that have to be understood in looking at the Proclamation of 1763. One is the balance of forces that existed at the time between the British and French settler

societies and the Indigenous population. This is prior to industrialization, and is at a time when Indigenous people still made up the vast majority of the population in what became Canada. So the settler society was qualitatively and quantitatively in a much weaker position than it would soon become.

Second, this document was issued during an Indigenous insurgency led by Chief Pontiac against the colonial policies of the British, during which several British forts were besieged and others completely destroyed. The British needed to respond to this insurgency, and in issuing the Royal Proclamation hoped to placate the Indigenous people involved in this uprising.

Finally, this document was meant to protect the interests of British colonialism against those of French colonialism. This document came out of the French defeat by the British at this time, when the main interest of the British over Canada was the extraction of primary resources, such as furs.

The intention of the document was to prevent further settlement by French settlers on Indigenous land. For the British, Indigenous territory was little more than a vast hunting ground, that needed to be kept free of settlement. The majority of people who were gathering these resources for Companies like the Hudson's Bay Company were Indigenous.

What this all means is that the British had an interest in enshrining at least some rights for Indigenous people, as the protection of these rights served the interests of British merchants.

This early merchant capitalism started to slowly have an effect and transform Indigenous societies. Traditionally Indigenous people were hunting, and in some cases farming, for the purposes of local consumption, or engaging in small-scale trade with other Indigenous peoples for tradeable goods. But the influence of the fur trade economy through the Hudson's Bay Company, the French and the British, changed these hunting practices to primitive accumulation of these same goods in exchange for products from the Hudson's Bay Company, and eventually straight for cash.

This created some instances where the development of capitalism, though it was inherently exploitative process, was being carried out with some degree of cooperation between the settlers and at least some Indigenous people. This is how the devel-

opment of the Metis Nation should be understood, as a society comprised of Indigenous and settler culture, growing out of this process around the trade of fur and other natural resources.

Understanding the development of the Metis nation is important because it shows that the impending genocide against Indigenous people wasn't a necessary part of the development of production in Canada. In this period there was some degree of cooperation, at least from Indigenous people, with the settler society, a willingness to co-exist.

But over time, the dominant trend was towards a complete dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands and resources.

From 'co-existence' to conquest

As industrial capitalism developed, the importance of the fur trade and other forms of primary accumulation dropped. What became more important was the need to implement private property relations as the foundation for the further penetration of a market economy. This directly clashed with Indigenous land rights, because it involved speeding up the transformation of these lands into private homesteads held by non-Indigenous people.

This rapid settlement met with a lot of resistance from Indigenous people in Canada. There were the Metis and Northwest Rebellions, and numerous battles across what would become Canada, including large-scale resistance by the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations) and by Indigenous people along the northwest coast.

These were battles over the land, and also over different conceptions of economic property relations, different conceptions of what the land meant. Indigenous people did have some concepts of ownership. Territories used primarily by a particular Indigenous society were belongings of a people, clan, or family. But this is completely different from the European conception of private property that was being imposed in this process.

This process also clashed with the concept that was held by many Indigenous people of the ability to co-exist with the people who were coming from Europe and settling there. One of the more well-known examples is the Two-Row Wampum that is still upheld by the Haudenosaunee people. This was an agreement made with an understanding that people were coming from

Europe and settling on Indigenous lands, but that this land could be shared. Indigenous people and the European societies might live totally separately, and might develop in different directions, but would nonetheless be able to share the territory in a more or less peaceful manner.

But colonialism, in its drive to seize Indigenous peoples' lands and resources and to implement private property, left no room for this coexistence whatsoever. By the end of the 19th century, the colonizers had a more advanced army with an entire empire behind it. This was backed up with the divide and conquer tactics that were played out over several generations against different Indigenous people, and in many cases the complete destruction of Indigenous peoples' traditional economic base. In this context, Indigenous resistance to this process was effectively quelled.

Almost all Indigenous land was expropriated, and the vast majority of Indigenous people were forced onto reservations. In some cases, there was a piece of paper that the government could point to, known as a treaty, so that they could at least claim that they took the land fair and square. For most of the lands in B.C., however, they don't even have this, and by their own admission stole this land outright.

Cultural assimilation, germ warfare, genocide

The next major stage in this colonial process going into the 20th century was the attempted forced "assimilation" of Indigenous people. This was done with the promise of educating Indigenous people and "civilizing" them, supposedly in order to integrate us into Canadian society. It should be obvious to anyone familiar with the true history of Canada that this is all completely nonsense.

The first means through which this "civilizing mission" was carried out was the residential school system, which was above all a means of destroying Indigenous societies.

The residential school system had the effect of fostering complete self-hatred in most of those who went through it, building a collective psychology within Indigenous people in the colonizer's image. Indigenous people were forced to internalize a conception of themselves as being drunken, lazy, and stupid.

This was done by dislocating Indigenous people from their communities, putting children in schools where they were punished for speaking their languages. There was also the rampant, systematic sexual abuse and rape against Indigenous people, an experience that has negatively affected the interpersonal relationships of Indigenous people and will continue to do so for generations to come.

The second significant part of this attempted forced “assimilation” was government support for economic projects by Indigenous people. In many Indigenous communities, the government supplied training and resources for people to have their own farming projects, and in other areas, fishing projects, or economic projects of a similar nature.

These were projects that were designed to fail. What was really behind these projects was to promote the belief among Indigenous people that they would be able to “make it” in the dominant settler society. (This is very similar to the illusions that are put in the minds of other working and oppressed people, the illusion that in Canada people can become their own bosses and achieve greatness along that path.)

Originally many of these farming and commercial fishing projects by Indigenous people were very successful. In the reserve my family is from, Piikani, we were given some of the worst farmland in the area, and yet we were very successful initially in adapting and getting farming going.

But this was happening at the same time as, in our particular case, we lost up to 80 percent of our population in a period of 25 years, basically to biological warfare: deaths from tuberculosis, smallpox, and other diseases. This early farming was also happening when people were being forced into the residential schools, both on and off the reserves.

So of course in this context Indigenous people were not able to compete as new players in the growing market economy, and with few exceptions, these Indigenous-run farms collapsed.

Indigenous resurgence and “Red Power”

These processes dominated the experience of Indigenous people up to around the mid-twentieth-century, when there was an up-



APRIL 20, 2006. *Kahnawake Mohawk Warriors demonstrate solidarity with the Six Nations blockade at Caledonia Ontario. A sign at the Chateauguay side of Kahnawake warns the RCMP and the Quebec Provincial Police not to enter the Mohawk community of Kahnawake.*

surge of Indigenous resistance. (This is not to say that Indigenous resistance to Canadian colonialism ever subsided: it wasn't until 1924 that the Iroquois Confederacy, the traditional government of the Haudenosaunee was forcibly broken up by the Canadian government and the band council system was imposed on those communities.)

The 1960s gave rise to the Red Power movement. This movement was heavily influenced by the upsurge of anti-colonial struggles all over the world, including in Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba. It was also influenced by the Black Power movement that was a growing force in the USA.

This was also happening when there was a very large migration of Indigenous people off reserves and into cities, and it was this population that formed the seed of the Red Power movement.

It is significant to note that many of those involved in this were among the most assimilated Indigenous people: very urbanized, with relatively more formal education than previous generations.

And yet, despite that, the dominant tendency of the Indigenous struggle in Canada and the U.S. at the time and up to the present, has been a national one. The aims and orientation of this struggle haven't been towards struggling for "recognition," for acceptance, for integration, or parity within the Canadian or U.S. society. Instead, the struggle has been against the dominant path of these colonial societies, rejecting the very legitimacy of the existence of these nation states.

This struggle has been coupled with a tremendous revival of Indigenous culture over the last 2 or 3 decades. Indigenous people were able to start to learn about the real histories, about their backgrounds. Languages considered "dead" by the anthropologists are starting to return.

This stems from Indigenous people having a common understanding of the roots of Indigenous oppression: that the Canadian state is an entity of occupation, that it exists at the expense of Indigenous people. And the problems that we face today stem directly from this occupation.

Indigenous struggles continue

We are not just talking about land as a historical question either. To this day, infringement on Indigenous territory continues and is still deepening. This is happening primarily at the hands of Canadian mining and land development companies. It includes, for example, the territory of the Tahltan Nation, the Six Nations territory near Caledonia, and the logging of Cree territory near Grassy Narrows.

Indigenous people are also trying to stop the International Monetary Fund-style deals that are being forced upon us in the form of so-called "modern treaties." These agreements are an attempt to pave the way for the eventual elimination of the reserve system, which is the last cohesive land base that Indigenous people are able to live on.

For this reason, the most pointed Indigenous struggles over the last couple decades, the ones that have electrified Indigenous people across Canada, have been assertions of Indigenous peoples' rights over their lands. These are struggles framed by Indigenous people as a struggle over the land that belongs to us as

nations. These are happening regardless of the relatively small size of the Indigenous population in Canada. And despite our numbers, when Indigenous people assert these rights, it has a huge impact on the overall politics of Canada.

To emphasize the significance of Indigenous struggles for land is to present the objective reality in Canada today. It's not to say that Indigenous people's movements are completely separate from other struggles going on in Canada, including of course the struggles of working people. The participation of Indigenous people in the workforce in Canada is actually a lot higher than the perception. Historically, and up to the present, Indigenous people still make up the vast majority of the reserve army of labour. There is large participation of Indigenous people in skilled and semiskilled labour jobs, including participation in the construction industry, mining, fishing, logging. There is also a significant amount of Indigenous women working in clerical jobs.

In the last decade more and more Indigenous people have entered post-secondary schools and middle-class professions: doctors, teachers, lawyers, different types of administrative positions. But none of this has changed the fact that as Indigenous people we still frame our struggles mainly as national struggles, and we still see this as the primary battle that we face.

Indigenous people are fighting for the ability to decide what can and cannot happen with Indigenous land and resources. We are fighting for real control over the institutions that affect our lives directly: education, the judicial system, community services. Or, in situations where Indigenous people have their own living structures, models or institutions, we struggle for these to be respected, and that there be no more attempts to try and destroy them. We are struggling as Indigenous people for the space to develop institutions that actually serve our needs.

Revolutionary dynamics of the Indigenous struggle

It is essential that other working and oppressed people support these aspirations, and support the right of Indigenous nations for self-determination. Their struggle has a revolutionary dynamic that inherently challenges Canadian capitalism. The Indigenous question in Canada cannot be solved within the confines of Ca-

nadian capitalism. The Canadian government and corporations cannot afford even relatively small concessions, let alone the much larger concessions that would be necessary to allow the space for Indigenous communities to solve the numerous problems we face, in a way that is just and in a way that is lasting.

The Canadian ruling class understands this, and this is why they pay so much attention to Indigenous struggles. The assertion of Indigenous rights challenges the very legitimacy of Canada as a nation-state.

In conclusion, it must be understood that the Indigenous struggle in Canada is part of the larger struggle of Indigenous people that is unfolding at the international scale. Indigenous people are on the move throughout Latin America, especially in Bolivia, Mexico, and Ecuador. The Indigenous struggle in Canada has to be understood as part of other Indigenous struggles, like that of the Palestinian people, who have been waging for decades a national liberation struggle, against the occupation of their land by the Israeli Apartheid state. These struggles and their significance must be understood, appreciated, and supported, in order to make revolutionary change, here in Canada and internationally.

The Harper ‘Apology’ — Saying ‘Sorry’ with a Forked Tongue

(Socialist Voice, June 29, 2008)

“I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone... Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill.”

—*Duncan Campbell Scott, head of the Department of Indian Affairs and founder of the residential school system, 1920*

On June 11, 2008, Stephen Harper, prime minister of Canada and leader of the Conservative Party, issued an “apology” for the residential school system that over 150,000 Indigenous children were forced through. The hype before and after the statement was enormous, with extensive coverage in all major media.

This event had a strong emotional and psychological impact on Indigenous survivors of residential schools all across Canada, who suffered attempted forced assimilation as well as countless acts of violence, rape, and abuse. Descendants of those subjected to this system were equally affected.

People packed into community halls and similar venues on June 11 for what was bound to be an emotionally triggering day for survivors, regardless of their view towards the meaning of the “apology.” Some survivors reportedly felt that the statement was a step forward, while many were highly critical.

In trying to understand the responses of Indigenous people across Canada to this “apology,” it is first important to address what it did not do. It must be judged in terms of the ability of Indigenous people to move forward in the process of true healing, not just from the effects of the residential school system, but from the entire process of Canadian colonialism. In this framework, the deficiencies of the “apology” are much greater than any positive impact it could have.

A crime of genocide

“I don’t want to hear it. You know, you might as well send the janitor up to apologize...if it’s just empty words or a nicely written text.” — Michael Cachagee, survivor of Shingwauk Indian Residential School[1]

If there is one thing that Mr. Harper’s “apology” provided that could be considered groundbreaking or new, it’s the idea that there can be crimes without criminals.

You would think offering an “apology” means taking some sort of accountability for the residential school system. But Harper’s statement acknowledges that what happened is a “mistake” without dealing with it as a crime, and without any sense of any individual accountability for it. It views the residential school system as only a mistake.

No discussion of the residential school system can be meaningful without acknowledging that this was an act of genocide. For those who value the importance of international law and the United Nations convention of genocide, let’s look at the UN definition itself as outlined in the “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted in 1948”:

“Article 2. In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

Arguably all five of these criteria apply to the residential school system and other aspects of the Canadian government’s coloniza-

tion of Indigenous people. And there can be no argument that parts (b) and (e) apply, as a number of Indigenous writers have pointed out.[2] It is important to note that guilt for this crime lies not only with the individuals who committed specific crimes against Indigenous people (i.e. sexual assault, physical violence, forced removal), but also with those who enacted the entire policy.

So even though Harper apologized for the residential schools as a “system,” it doesn’t absolve individuals who participated in the numerous criminal acts they committed. Yet, that is what Harper’s statement attempts to do by apologizing on behalf of “all Canadians,” deceptively hiding behind the false logic that “nobody is guilty if everyone is.”

This is similar to some of the ideas discussed by Cherokee activist and academic Andrea Smith in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Smith uses Carol Adam’s concept of the “absent referent” in exploring various aspects of sexual violence against Indigenous women, as well as how this concept recurs throughout Western society, mythology, and history. One example is that of the “battered” woman, which makes women “the inherent victims of battering. The batterer is rendered invisible and thus the absent referent”.[3]

A similar tool of deception is at work in not only the “apology”, but the entire approach of the Canadian government in its “solutions” to the residential school issue. Aside from notorious cases like that of the Archbishop Hubert O’Connor,[4] and others who can be easily tarred as “bad people who did bad things,” in Harper’s statement the perpetrator of the crimes against residential school survivors has no tangible face, almost no concrete existence.

Putting residential schools in historical context

A second great weakness of the “apology,” related to the first, is that it attempts to separate the residential schools from the entire colonial project of the Canadian state. This further obscures a true understanding of why this crime was committed and a more real understanding than simply saying “we were wrong.”

The key role of the residential school system in the overall process of Canadian colonialism cannot be overestimated. The theft of Indigenous lands and resources, along with the destruction of

Indigenous cultures and societies, were met with resistance. In many cases this resistance was well organized and proved difficult for the European settlers to quell, despite their supposedly more “advanced” weapons and military organization.

Rather than risking a resurgence of resistance in the various Indigenous communities that could result from allowing them to exist, the authorities adopted a policy of forced partial assimilation. Even if total destruction of Indigenous people could not be achieved, partial assimilation could weaken the resistance of Indigenous communities, while producing an underclass to perform menial wage labour in the Canadian economy.

This assimilation was partial in the sense that Indigenous people were not to be completely absorbed into the settler society as equals. Even to call these youth prisons “schools” distorts not only how these institutions functioned but what was actually being taught.

The residential school system had the effect of fostering complete self-hatred in most of those who went through it, building a collective psychology within Indigenous people that reproduced the colonizer’s image of them. Indigenous people were forced to internalize a conception of themselves as being drunken, lazy, and stupid. Weakening Indigenous communities, cultures, and nations was the primary goal, with little in the way of “education” even in terms of Western conceptions of learning.

Challenging the Canadian state and the underlying settler project

These political implications of the residential school project continue today. It has had such a disastrous effect on the inter-personal relationships of Indigenous people that its wounds are overcome only with immense individual and collective struggle.

Generations of physical and sexual abuse, alcohol and drug addiction, continued child apprehension by organs of the Canadian state, alarming rates of suicide — these are only the more visible of the many problems Indigenous people have been forced to work through because of the residential school experience. As a result, the ability of Indigenous communities to effectively organize against the continued theft of lands and resources is directly weakened.

Yet this resistance continues, and should be understood as one of the main factors influencing the decision of the Canadian government to issue this “apology.” Right now there are numerous struggles by Indigenous people within Canada over land and resources. These struggles are intensifying in response to the Canadian capitalist economy’s increased hunger for valuable resources such as platinum, uranium, and oil in a time of increasing prices, scarcity, and volatility in energy markets.

These struggles of Indigenous people, be it Haudenosaunee, Cree, Innu, Anishininimowin, or Tahltan, just to list a few examples, are only in part over who the land in question “belongs” to in the Western sense of private property. When Indigenous people assert sovereignty over their lands, this also challenges the legitimacy of the entire Canadian nation state and the settler project that underpins it.

More importantly, it involves struggles for the assertion of a different conception of land and of Indigenous worldviews that see the well being of humans and the state of the land and all its living beings as inseparable. This means a respect for the earth and valuing life in a way totally alien from the “market value” these things may or may not have under capitalist relations.

These struggles over the land mark a departure from engaging with the Canadian political establishment on the terms it tries to set. Evidence of this can be seen in the consistent criminalization that goes on whenever Indigenous people make stands for their rights. Organizers like Shaun Brant, the KI 6, Robert Love-lace, and Wolverine are presented by the mainstream media, the police, and politicians as “criminals,” while the actual political content and nature of their actions is hidden.

The “apology” of Harper, along with the entire “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” project, must in the end be understood in this context. For example, we are being asked to engage on the level of accepting whether the apology is “sincere” or not and whether the settlement money is “enough,” and to welcome the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” as a meaningful space in which to heal.

This is a direct attempt to reframe the direction of Indigenous struggles by looking for solutions, or at least dialogue, within

the framework of the Canadian settler state as it exists today. Could there be a more fundamental attack on Indigenous sovereignty than this, given the direction in which many Indigenous struggles are heading all across Canada?

Mixed reactions to Harper's statement

The “apology” certainly had an impact on survivors of the residential school system, and this is completely understandable. Even a small acknowledgement of wrongdoing goes a long way, given how many years the Canadian government has refused to show accountability for its crimes. Indigenous people are subjected to a large amount of crazymaking around the ways they have been negatively impacted by the residential schools and other criminal acts. In fact this crazymaking is itself yet another act working to undermine the struggle of Indigenous people to end colonial oppression.

Given this dynamic, the “apology” could certainly be expected to have an impact on Indigenous people, which was characterized generally in the mainstream media as “mixed” at best. This reflects the healthy level of distrust among Indigenous people as to the true intentions and meaning of the “apology,” all hype aside. While many survivors interviewed in the media appear to have accepted the apology, many have also completely rejected it, and very few actually believe it will be of much consequence in terms of the healing process Indigenous people are still going through.

Towards ‘truth and reconciliation’ on Indigenous terms

Whether it is over the ability to decide what will and will not happen on our own lands, or how we are to overcome the impact of the residential school experience and what to do with those criminally responsible, it is essential to carry out these struggles on our own terms. Time and time again this approach has proven to be the most effective way to move forward in our struggles.

For this reason, we have to recognize the inherent limitations to the upcoming “Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” Unlike the commission of the same name that took place in post-apartheid South Africa, this commission is being headed by the

same racist institutions responsible for the crimes under study, not to mention the crimes it continues to commit.

With a power dynamic like this, we can't expect real truth or reconciliation to come out of this commission. We especially can't expect these things from the commission under the Harper government, the same government that voted against ratification of the UN declaration on the rights of Indigenous people, the same government which is still pushing for the extinguishment of aboriginal title (to mention only two of its main anti-Indigenous policies).

The most effective means of healing the wounds of the residential school experience will be to challenge the very foundations of its existence. This includes the grassroots work of survivors that have been fighting for several decades to see real justice for the perpetrators of the crimes of the residential school project. Without this effort the Canadian government would have never been put in a position to issue an "apology," however weak and limited that apology was. This challenge also includes the struggles against the destruction of Indigenous territories going on all across Canada.

These struggles for sovereignty open up space for true healing, not just of the problems we face as a result of the genocidal residential school project, but all the problems we are forced to deal with as a result of Canadian colonialism.

Footnotes

[1] From interview with Al-Jazeera English, available at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=LJazWy0HHc4>

[2] See for example 'Healing begins when the wounding stops: Indian Residential Schools and the prospects for "truth and reconciliation" in Canada,' by Ward Churchill, <http://briarpatchmagazine.com/2008/06/09/healing-begins-when-the-wounding-stops/>. See also 'An Historic Non-Apology, Completely and Utterly Not Accepted,' co-authored by Roland Chrisjohn, Andrea Bear Nicholas, Karen Stote, James Craven (Omahkohkiaayo i'poyi), Tanya Wasacase, Pierre Loiselle, and Andrea O. Smith, <http://www.marxmail.org/ApologyNotAccepted.htm>

[3] Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. South End Press (2005), Cambridge MA. p. 22.

[4] Hubert O'Connor was a Roman Catholic bishop of the British Columbia diocese of Prince George. He resigned after being charged with sex crimes in 1991. He was convicted in 1996 of committing rape and indecent assault on two young aboriginal women during the 1960s when he was a priest. He was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison, but was released on bail after serving six months.

The Crisis in Kashechewan: Water Contamination Exposes Canada's Brutal Policies Against Indigenous People

(Socialist Voice, November 23, 2005)

The crisis on the Kashechewan Native reserve in northern Ontario has once again placed the brutal social and living conditions of Indigenous people in Canada onto the center stage of politics.

On October 14th, Health Canada alerted the reserve that their drinking water supply had tested positive for the deadly e. coli bacteria. At the time, over half the 2,000 residents were suffering numerous water-related illnesses, including diarrhea and painful stomach cramps, or they were suffering from horrific skin diseases such as scabies and impetigo caused by other contaminants in the water.

Television images and newspaper photos showing residents' bodies covered in rashes and scars made headline news across Canada, provoking shock and anger throughout the country. The minority Liberal Party government, already weakened by political scandal and unpopularity, was thrown onto the defensive and into a panicked response.

The mainstream capitalist media tried to frame the issue as one of 'mismanagement' or a 'confusion over jurisdiction' between the federal and provincial governments. But the crisis in Kashechewan is not new, and it is not limited to clean water. With rare exceptions, similar or worse conditions prevail in every Indigenous community within the borders of what is now 'Canada.' They are a result of the suppression of the right of Indigenous people to self-determination—a result of several centuries of British, French, and Canadian colonialism, and in the most recent period, deepening neo-liberal attacks by the federal government and employers.

What happened in Kashechewan?

Kashechewan is a reserve inhabited by James Bay Cree people and is located on the shore of James Bay in the province of Ontario. It is only accessible by boat or plane. The community has been on a boil-water advisory from Health Canada for over 2

years, and numerous such advisories have been in place for decades. Since April of this year alone, the Canadian government had shipped over \$250,000 worth of bottled water into Kashechewan.

According to Dr. Murray Trussler, a doctor who went to the reserve shortly after the e. coli contamination was discovered, the widespread presence of skin disease is largely due to a lack of clean bathing water. When shock levels of chlorine are fed into the water system in an attempt to kill the e. coli, this aggravates skin rashes and diseases.

The immediate cause of the water contamination is that the intake for the reserve's drinking water supply is 135 meters downstream from the community's sewage lagoon. Federal government officials refused to heed the community's concerns over the choice of location of the water treatment plant, built just over ten years ago. Thus, even when the water treatment plant is fully functioning, the water supply intake is contaminated by sewage.

To further complicate matters, the tide from James Bay regularly pushes sewage back up the river from where it flows.

But the explanation of the tragedy doesn't stop there. The Kashechewan reserve was built on a flood plain on a spot chosen by the Canadian government at the beginning of the 20th century. The area where the houses of the reserve are now located was built in 1957. In both cases, the elders of the community insisted these were bad locations. Both times they were ignored.

Almost every springtime, the reserve faces flooding problems, despite a large dike surrounding the community built by the federal government to 'protect' it. In addition to contributing to the contamination of the water supply, this flooding has caused severe mould problems in almost every single house and building on the reserve.

The federal government (which has exclusive constitutional responsibility for providing services on Canada's Native reserves) never provided adequate training for operating the reserve's water treatment plant. Numerous reports in the hands of both the federal and Ontario governments predicted that water contamination of Kashechewan was inevitable unless measures were taken to remedy the problem.

Problems Beyond Clean Water, Problems Beyond Kashechewan

“I never had a problem with the water. It’s the unemployment and boredom that are killing me.” — An Indigenous youth living on Kashechewan reserve

The contaminated water is only one of many problems facing the Indigenous people of Kashechewan. Social problems are unavoidable as a result of the catastrophic economic situation on the reserve. Unemployment is as high as 87%, a legacy of an historic federal government policy that isolated Indigenous people on remote reserves and denied us the opportunities for economic and social development. It was, in the final analysis, a policy of forced assimilation and cultural genocide.



Unemployment rates such as that of Kashechewan are common on virtually every one of the several hundred Indigenous reserves in Canada. On average, unemployment and poverty rates in Canada are three times higher for Indigenous people than for non-Indigenous people.

More than 100 Indigenous reserves within the borders of what is now called ‘Canada’ are under boil water advisories from Health Canada. Fifty of these are within the province of Ontario. A 2001 study by the Canadian government found that almost 75% of the water systems on reserves posed a threat to drinking water. The Kwicksutaineuk reserve, for example, located on Gilford Island off the coast of British Columbia, has lived with a boil water advisory for 9 years straight, and every single house on the reserve has been condemned because of mould problems.

A report published by the Canadian Population Health Collective in 2004, titled ‘Improving the Health of Canadians’, gives a general idea of what type of life an Indigenous person born in Canada can expect. According to the report:

- More than one-third of Indigenous people live in homes that

do not meet the most basic government standards of acceptability.

- Average life expectancy for Indigenous people is ten years less than that of the Canadian average.
- Indigenous children die at three times the rate of non-Indigenous children, and are more likely to be born with severe birth defects and conditions like fetal alcohol syndrome.
- The suicide rate of Indigenous people is six times higher than the Canada-wide average.
- Tuberculosis rates are 16 times higher in Indigenous communities than the rest of the population, and HIV and AIDS infection is growing fastest among Indigenous people.

For Indigenous people, who comprise roughly four percent of the 31.4 million people within Canada, such statistics are more than representations or symbols. They are everyday reality. Humiliation, theft of dignity, and frustration at being forced to survive in such conditions in what is supposedly one of the wealthiest first-world countries in the world - these are the realities of life for Indigenous people in Canada.

Canadian Colonialism Directly Responsible for Kashechewan Crisis

The problems of water quality in Kashechewan, including the original locations of the reserve and of its water treatment system, are not a matter of 'oversight' or 'engineering mistakes'. They are a result of the colonial relationship that exists between Indigenous people and the Canadian government.

The Indigenous people living in what is now Kashechewan were forced to live there as a part of the process of the Canadian government occupying Cree territory, destroying their traditional economies, and forcing them onto reservations. The government of the time explained unconvincingly to the elders back in 1912, that the location was 'great' because it was a traditional hunting ground. Considering, however, that by this time the Cree of the area had been squeezed out of their hunting and fur-trading economy by the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in the area, this was pure nonsense.

As with the subjugation of other Indigenous nations by the

British, French, and then Canadian colonial powers, this was how the suppression of the Cree nation's right to self-determination played out in real life. The Canadian government stole Cree lands and resources in the interest of promoting the hegemony of Canadian capitalism while suppressing any independent political, economic, or cultural development.

The problems facing the Indigenous people in Kashechewan flow directly from this process of occupying and oppressing Indigenous nations. This was, and continues to be, an inherent aspect of Canada's development as a nation-state. The suppression of the right of Indigenous nations to self-determination became fundamental to Canada's eventual growth into a wealthy imperialist country.

'Fix' Our Problems? No Thanks!

One of the federal government's first responses to the crisis was a massive 'emergency' airlift of over half the community to towns and cities throughout Ontario in order to receive medical care. Then it announced a plan to 'rebuild' the entire reserve over the next ten years, including over 300 million dollars in funding for new houses and expanded drug and alcohol counseling programs.

At best, these are temporary measures to cool things down until the widespread anger generated across Canada within Indigenous communities and their supporters dies down. At worst, it is an attempt to yet again forcibly displace an Indigenous community in an attempt to break its spirit. On the surface, these might sound like great plans, but after more than a century of false promises from the same government, most Indigenous people aren't going to fall for these cheap tricks. It will take more than a few new houses and a 'better' location to deal with the real problems facing any Indigenous reserve in Canada.

Just ask the Innu youth of Davis Inlet, Labrador. They were forcibly removed in late 2002 to Natuashish, a new 'community' built by the federal government at a cost of over \$200 million, only to have all the same problems with gas-sniffing and breath-taking suicide rates arise again.

Because of the inherently colonial and oppressive nature of the

Canadian government, no ‘solution’ that it puts forward for the water crisis in Kashechewan can truly be in the interest of the Indigenous people living there.

The Importance of Indigenous Self-Determination in Building a Revolutionary Movement in Canada

The quick response of the Canadian government to the Kashechewan crisis (once it hit the news, that is) is a result of the fear by the Canadian ruling class of the fight of Indigenous people for self-determination. Militant struggles in recent years—by Mohawk communities in Quebec in 1990, at Ipperwash, Ontario in 1995, Gustafsen Lake in British Columbia in 1996, and Burnt Church, New Brunswick in 2000—serve as reminders to the rulers that their hegemony over land, resources and labour is perhaps but a fleeting condition.

Indigenous people have rights to our land that have never been ceded. These self-determination rights loom large for the Canadian ruling class because they challenge the very foundations of its legitimacy, and that of its nation-state. Is it any coincidence that the two major crises facing the current federal government—Kashechewan and the so-called “sponsorship scandal”—both involve the self-determination of oppressed nations within Canada, in one case that of Indigenous people, and in the other of the Quebecois?

The wealthy classes around the world are engaged in ever-sharper competition with each other as their economic order teeters on the edge of a sharp decline. They are fighting over access to markets, cheap labor and natural resources. They are also driven to attack the salaries, social conditions and democratic rights of the people in their own countries.

Canada’s rulers are part and parcel of this declining order. They will continue to carry out fresh attacks against Indigenous people. As a result, we cannot trust promises to improve the conditions of peoples living in conditions like those on Kashechewan and Natuashish, just as the residents of New Orleans are learning through bitter experience that U.S. government promises to improve their shattered lives are worthless. The only improvements we can expect are those we fight for.

The recent youth rebellion in France, the growing antiwar consciousness of people in the United States, and the decision of the people of Kashechewan to go public with their crisis and shame the federal government into action are encouraging signs of growing resistance to this declining international order.

So long as our right to self-determination is suppressed, Indigenous people will face more Kashechewans, more poverty, and more humiliation. Only by fighting for the right to govern ourselves, to decide where and how we will live on our lands, what type of economic development will truly serve our communities, can we find away out of this generations-long nightmare that has been brought down on us by 'great' Canada.

For other peoples in Canada who also seek social justice and an end to the evils of capitalism, support to the right of Indigenous people to self-determination is essential.

It is crucial for building a united movement of all the oppressed in Canadian society. The same is true in other imperialist countries, such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, where the struggle of oppressed nationalities contains a similar dynamic and importance.

The working class in Canada has the potential to make revolutionary change due to its relationship to the means of production. Workers have the power to take control of society because we produce its wealth. The significant growth in the numbers of Indigenous peoples in the labor force in Canada, particularly within the major cities, creates a front of potential unity that is crucial to forge.

Another front of revolutionary struggle arises from Indigenous peoples' relationship to the land, because this struggle for the land puts Indigenous people into direct conflict with the capitalist rulers.

A society free of injustice and discrimination will be achieved within Canada when those who are the victims of the current order succeed in creating unity and forging an alliance for political power. That new power can succeed only if it champions the right of Indigenous people to a just equality and true sovereignty in the building of a new society.

Reading from the Left

Anti-Semitism, Zionism, and the Defense of Palestinian Rights

by Suzanne Weiss

Canada's Assault on Afghanistan: Behind the Lies and Cover-ups

by Roger Annis and Ian Beeching

COMINTERN: Revolutionary Internationalism in Lenin's Time

by John Riddell

Cuba in a Time of Transition

by John Riddell, Phil Cournoyer, Fidel Castro, and Duroyan Fertil

Confronting the Climate Change Crisis: An Ecosocialist Perspective

by Ian Angus

The Fight for Indigenous Rights in the Andes Today

by Hugo Blanco

From Resistance to Power! Manifestos of the fight for Indigenous Rights in Central and South America

For the Land! The Roots and Revolutionary Dynamics of Indigenous Struggles in Canada Today

by Mike Krebs

Global Warming, Biofuels and World Hunger

by Fidel Castro

Haiti and the Myth of Canadian Peacekeeping

by Roger Annis

Venezuela Eyewitness

by Suzanne Weiss and John Riddell

Venezuela and the International Struggle for Socialism

by John Riddell, Roger Annis, Ian Angus and Federico Fuentes

Why Washington Hates Iran: A Political Memoir of the Revolution that Shook the Middle East

by Barry Sheppard.

Available online in .pdf at
www.socialistvoice.ca