

Canada's native peoples protest chronic poverty and government attacks

Carl Bronski
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The last weeks of 2012 have seen protests by Canada's impoverished native population snowball.

As Attawapiskat First Nations Chief Theresa Spence enters her fourth week of a hunger strike aimed at drawing attention to the federal government's failure to honor native treaty rights, aboriginal peoples across the country continue a series of road and rail blockades, demonstrations, and sympathy hunger strikes in what has become known as the "Idle No More" movement. This mobilization, although initially unassociated with Spence's protest, has dovetailed with the Chief's actions and served to highlight recent Conservative government actions aimed at opening up vast swathes of native land for capitalist resource-extraction projects.

Bill C-45, the Conservative's second omnibus 2012 budget bill, makes changes to the Indian Act and Navigable Waters Act that open the way for the de facto privatization of native lands and significantly reduce environmental regulation.

The discovery of huge, new mineral deposits in the Canadian North and the drive to push through pipelines to transport Alberta tar sands oil to the U.S. and Asian markets has spurred the Conservative government of Stephen Harper to seek to level all perceived "roadblocks" to mega-project development.

Bill C-45 removes most of Canada's rivers and lakes from the list of federally protected waterways, thereby significantly weakening environmental oversight. It also reduces funding to native band councils, which often use such monies to commission costly environmental and health studies. These measures are in line with Harper's earlier insistence that environmental hearings on the Northern Gateway pipeline to the British Columbia coast be "fast-tracked."

Amendments to the Indian Act will also make it far easier for corporations to lease lands on native reserves, eliminating such requirements as the need to secure the support of a majority of a reserve's residents, not just a few band councilors.

The government's corporate-friendly changes will generate a resource and land grab free-for-all that will enrich a few at the expense of the many.

Spence has made the most moderate of demands—a meeting between treaty chiefs, Harper and (perhaps) Governor-General David Johnston to discuss issues of chronic poverty on native reserves and the federal government's longstanding failure to

fulfill its obligations under Treaty 9, including the provision of proper health care and education. Negotiated at the beginning of the Twentieth Century when Canada was experiencing an earlier resource boom, Treaty 9 covers Attawapiskat and other Northern Ontario "First Nations" (Indian) bands.

Harper and Johnston have curtly refused Spence's meeting request. Undaunted, the Attawapiskat Chief has vowed to carry through her hunger strike to the death, if necessary. "I am willing to do what I have to do," she told reporters. "If I have to take my last breath, I will. But it's not going to stop there. There is a message out there from the youth who say, if the chief doesn't make it, they will still make more noise... My journey is going to continue."

However, over the past several days enormous pressure has been brought to bear on Spence to abandon her protest, by the corporate media, the political establishment and many of Spence's fellow Chiefs.

Spence's hunger strike and the Idle No More movement that sprang up virtually simultaneously were initiated over the heads of the official native leadership organized in the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). That body, led by Shawn Atleo, has been increasingly criticized for its close relationship to the Harper government and its attempts to "partner" with big business. This past weekend, Percy Bellegarde, leader of the Federation of Saskatchewan Nations, echoed the sentiments of many in the AFN in calling for Spence to end her action.

Canada's mainstream media has also weighed in against any movement outside of the control of the AFN. An editorial in *The Globe and Mail* demanded an end to Spence's hunger strike, stating that it smacked of "coercion" and went on to claim that Harper is a "friend" of Canada's aboriginal peoples because in 2008 he issued a meaningless "apology" for the Canadian capitalist state's abuse and neglect of the native peoples.

A look at the recent history of Spence's reserve sheds much light on Canadian capitalism's treatment of the aboriginal peoples and the renewed corporate drive to exploit their lands.

The Attawapiskat chief represents 2,800 Cree who live along the James and Hudson's Bay coasts in Northern Ontario. The isolated reserve suffers from abysmal housing, including severe overcrowding and mold-contaminated buildings that lack

running water and electricity; substandard, portable school structures, because a federally promised school was never built; sky-high prices and chronic unemployment; and massive sewage spills. United Nations health and education inspectors have twice compared conditions on the reserve to those in Third World countries. When in 2011, Spence declared a “state of emergency” on the reserve due to the lack of proper housing, the Harper government first denied there were any problems, then erroneously accused the native band of mismanagement and illegally stripped the elected chief and band council of management rights on their own reserve. This bureaucratic maneuver was eventually overturned by the courts.

Just 90 kilometers from the main settlement lies a one-billion-dollar diamond mine operated by transnational mining conglomerate De Beers. Despite being on Attawapiskat land, all royalties are remitted to the Ontario government in Toronto. Fully 80 percent of the labour force is recruited from outside the region. In 2009, the Attawapiskat launched a temporary blockade of the winter road to the mine to protest their impoverishment in the shadow of De Beer’s riches. De Beers, which is being acquired by mining giant Anglo-American, saw its latest reported annual profits increase by 48 percent to \$1.24 billion.

There are hundreds of Attawapiskats across the country. Life spans for native people fall far below the national average. Diseases such as tuberculosis are rampant in some communities. Education opportunities are deplorable—fewer than 50 percent of students on reserves graduate from high school. Almost half of all residences require urgent, major repairs.

Boil water advisories are, on average, in effect at any given time on over a hundred of the 631 native reserves. Suicide rates are astronomical. In one reserve that was evacuated because of a contaminated water supply, 21 youth between the ages of 9 and 23 killed themselves in one month alone. Incarceration rates for aboriginals are nine times the national average. A native youth is more likely to go to prison than to get a high school diploma.

Poverty conditions are not restricted to those living on reserves. Natives in urban centres, which comprise about half of the one million overall population, have the country’s highest unemployment rates, second only to the rates for native reserves. Nationwide, 48 percent of natives are unemployed.

The burgeoning Idle No More movement, which is largely comprised of native youth—reserve and urban—has launched a number of actions to protest Harper’s Bill C-45. Highways have been blocked in Northern Ontario and Alberta. Demonstrations have been held in Vancouver, Yellowknife, Whitehorse, Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa and Halifax.

In Sarnia, Ontario natives have blockaded a key railway line that transports propane shipments to and from the “Chemical Valley” which lies to the city’s south. An injunction requested

by CN Rail against the blockade has been issued but police have yet to remove the protestors. Last week, Canadian Propane Association CEO Jim Facette wrote to Sarnia Mayor Mike Bradley advising him to “take the necessary steps” to remove the blockade. “Sarnia is a key point of departure for the transport of propane to Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada,” he wrote. Should the situation not be remedied, he continued, significant business revenue would be lost. The local Aamjiwnaang native band has insisted that no permits have been issued to allow transport of dangerous substances across native land.

As the Idle No More movement gains momentum, a series of opposition political leaders have presented themselves in front of the television cameras to ostensibly support Chief Spence’s demand for a high-level native summit with Harper and the Governor-General. New Democratic Party leader, Tom Mulcair, has appealed to Harper to meet with Spence so as to diffuse the wider protests. But Mulcair’s transparent posturing belies his position on the key underlying factors motivating the protests: corporate rapaciousness, environmental degradation, widening poverty and the abrogation of treaty rights. He advocates a “pro-business, common sense solution” to energy development, including the tar sands, has dropped even the call the NDP made at the last election for a slight rollback of corporate tax cuts, and is touting Canada’s social democrats as the champions of fiscal responsibility.

Prior to Christmas, Mulcair made it known that his party would be even more miserly with the budgetary purse strings than the Harper government. “What’s a paradox,” he told the Canadian press, “is that these are essentially conservative themes that I’m evoking in the sense that it would be very conservative to say ‘Don’t look for a handout, be self-reliant, pull yourself up by your bootstraps’, that sort of stuff.”



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