

Burgeoning native protests shake Canadian establishment and official native leadership

Carl Bronski**15 January 2013**

Idle No More, the burgeoning grassroots native Indian movement, is continuing its campaign of protests against Canada's Conservative government, which is seeking to pave the way for capitalist resource development by weakening and ultimately extinguishing collective native land rights. Marches, flash mobs, round dances and rallies were held this past weekend in dozens of cities from coast to coast, as well as on the many aboriginal reservations located in more isolated parts of the country.

In addition, First Nations chiefs from Ontario, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have called for a day of action this Wednesday, including a stepped-up campaign of road and rail blockades. In previous weeks, aborigines and their supporters have blocked international bridge and border crossings, strategic rail lines and major highways nation-wide, as well as mining and logging roads in Canada's north. For their own part, Idle No More leaders have called for a global Day of Action on January 28.

The escalation of Idle No More's fight against chronic native poverty, inequality, the abrogation of treaty rights and environmental degradation comes in the wake of a series of events last week that have brought to the fore issues surrounding the historic oppression and dispossession of Canada's native peoples, a renewed push by big business to develop huge northern fossil fuel and mineral deposits, and the growing social stratification amongst the native population itself.

The Idle No More movement arose outside the traditional, state-supported Indian leadership organized in the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and quickly snowballed. By early December, increasing numbers of disaffected reservation and inner-city aboriginal youth were joining with a section of university-educated native academics and professionals to denounce the Conservative government's attacks on aboriginal rights as outlined in its most recent omnibus budget bill (Bill C-45).

However, over the past month the national media increasingly focused its attention on an initially unassociated action: a hunger strike—now five weeks old—by Chief Theresa Spence, the head of the impoverished Attawapiskat reserve, which lies on the shores of James Bay in northern Ontario. Spence had set up a winter encampment on an island in the Ottawa River a short distance from the federal parliament and vowed to fast, possibly to the death, until a meeting was held between First Nations representatives and Stephen Harper and David Johnston, respectively the Prime Minister and the Governor-General (the Crown).

Harper and Johnston initially refused to agree to a meeting, a stance the government justified by pointing to its regular meetings with AFN leaders. But support for Spence and the grievances put forward by Idle No More gained increasing traction among wide swathes of the Canadian population. To undercut the growing movement, a barrage of right-wing invective was hurled against Spence and the grassroots mobilization in a series of editorial and op-ed pieces in the neo-conservative press. The *Calgary Herald* editorial board excoriated Spence for "blackmailing" the prime minister, characterizing her demands as "selfish". Christie Blatchford, a "star" writer for the *National Post*, went a step further,

accusing the Chief of "terrorism" and denounced native protests as an "inevitable cycle of hideous puffery and horse manure." Two further columns from Blatchford argued for urgent state action to suppress the native protest movement. In the first, she summarized the plot of a recently published novel by a retired Canadian Lt.-Colonel and Royal Military College instructor that described an armed native insurrection so as to bolster her claim that Canadians should be concerned that there are large numbers of native Canadian Armed Forces soldiers and veterans who have the skills necessary to attack vital pipelines and infrastructure projects. In the second, she claimed the "rule of law" is collapsing. As evidence she cited comments from Superior Court Justice David Brown complaining that police had failed to act on his order that they quickly put an end to a railway blockade on a native reserve near Sarnia, Ontario.

The more liberal broadcast and print outlets advised Harper to make a "magnanimous gesture" and agree to an early meeting with Indian leaders, so as to try to cut the feet from the burgeoning protest movement and isolate the "hotheads"—i.e. so as to politically prepare potential future police actions to break rail and road blockades. With few exceptions the liberal media subsequently joined in the transparent smear campaign that the government launched against Spence and the Indian protest movement as a whole last week.

This campaign took as its point of a departure a government-leaked audit of the administration of the Attawapiskat reserve. The audit found band council accounts at Spence's reserve had failed to follow standard book-keeping practices from 2005 to 2011, making it hard to trace what the money had been used for. Native grievances with the government were temporarily knocked from the front pages and replaced by all manner of innuendo including unsubstantiated accusations of misappropriation of funds. The fact that the audit made no such findings or that Spence did not take over as Chief until 2010 went largely unreported.

However, the innuendo against Spence sought to base itself, for reactionary purposes, in the very real and growing social-economic cleavages that exist among the aboriginal population. The Canadian state—and this is exemplified by the Indian Act, the racist, colonial-style, 19th Century legislation that continues to largely frame the relationship between the government and Canada's native peoples—has long sought to control the aboriginal population by hiving off a section of native leaders who serve to contain opposition in exchange for the perks and privileges of their offices. In recent decades this has also included the promotion of "native entrepreneurship," that is a small layer of, generally well politically connected, native businessmen.

The current explosion of native anger has revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the AFN leadership, which has developed an increasingly cozy relationship with the government. And as the protest movement has grown, it has heightened divisions within the AFN—a body comprising some 630 band council chiefs—as competing factions seek to regain control over the disaffected native youth, convince the government

that they are “reliable” and representative partners, and advance their own claims for AFN leadership.

AFN National Chief Shawn Atleo jumped at Harper’s grudging offer of a short meeting last Friday. But other AFN leaders held out for more, including for a meeting with Johnston, in the wrongheaded belief that the “Queen’s representative” should serve as the guarantor of the “unequal treaties” the native peoples were forced into in earlier centuries.

For a time late last week, it appeared that the meeting with Harper might end before it began. Ultimately it did proceed, but Chiefs from Ontario, Manitoba and the North-West Territories boycotted the meeting and joined with Idle No More protestors, in unsuccessfully trying to block the entrance to the building where the talks with Harper were to take place. Spence also declined to attend and announced the continuation of her hunger strike.

When AFN leader Shawn Atleo emerged from the meeting with Harper to simply announce that more talks with the Prime Minister would soon be scheduled, Manitoba Grand Chief Derek Nepinak denounced the politics as usual agenda of Atleo and the current AFN leadership. “The Idle No More movement,” declared Chief Nepinak, “has the people and the numbers that can bring the Canadian economy to its knees. It can stop Prime Minister Harper’s resource development plan and his billion dollar plans to develop resources in ancestral territories.” He concluded that the primary demand of the movement must be the repeal of Harper’s Omnibus Budget Bill—a bill that removes federal environmental regulation over most of the country’s lakes and rivers, curtails band council funding, and loosens regulation on the leasing of reservation lands to big business.

Nepinak was joined by Pam Palmeter. The runner-up to Atleo in last summer’s AFN leadership race, Palmeter has, in contrast to Atleo, strongly identified herself with the Idle No More movement.

A key factor in the current native protest movement as well as the divisions within the AFN is the drive by Canadian big business to exploit vast mineral deposits in the Canadian Shield and north and to further expand oil and gas extraction, pipeline construction, and hydro-electric mega-projects. It has been estimated that over the next decade exploitation of these resources on or near First Nations’ lands will generate at least \$600 billion for oil, mining, construction, and drilling corporations. Already, commodity extraction earns the provincial and federal governments some \$30 billion annually in taxes and royalties alone.

The Harper government and their corporate backers believe that the quickest and most lucrative way to exploit these business opportunities is to weaken or even end constitutional and treaty protection of native land rights. With this in mind, they have engaged in a series of meetings with Indian band council chiefs to extinguish First Nations “sovereign status” and end the concept of communal land use. Using the conditions of poverty on the reserves as a blunt force instrument, Ottawa is seeking to force land claim settlements that will turn reserves into simple municipalities subject to all the necessities of capitalist resource development—freehold deeds to be bought and sold, taxation of the inhabitants, and the creation of a population entirely dependent on selling its labour, often to a single large corporation, for its survival.

Several landmark settlements have already been concluded that have converted reserve land into mono-ethnic municipalities under provincial jurisdiction. There are currently 15 First Nations that have agreed to compromise or extinguish their “inherent and aboriginal rights” as guaranteed in the Canadian constitution by signing on to Modern Land Claim Agreements. There are at least 93 other First Nations that are currently in negotiations. Government negotiating teams are buttressed with the knowledge that native bands who eschew the whole process will see their funding cut and remain mired in the chronic impoverishment supervised by the Indian Act.

The Harper government is not the first to attempt to seek to rescind or gut the reactionary Indian Act from the standpoint of extinguishing native

land rights and forcing the quick assimilation of the native people into the capitalist labour market. In 1969, the Trudeau Liberal government floated a White Paper that advocated the elimination of the Indian Act and any separate status for the native peoples in the name of the native population’s “full social, economic and political participation in Canadian life,” that is full integration into Canadian capitalism. Opposition to the White Paper helped fuel the emergence of the nationalist “Red Power” movement and the government quickly retreated. In its stead, a program was developed by the ruling class over the ensuing two decades to create, through a land claims system, a thin layer of middle class and wealthy native elites who could serve as junior partners in capitalist development and a social buffer to suppress opposition to the poverty and squalor to which Canadian capitalism continues to subject the native population.

The growing social stratification in the aboriginal population underlies both the emergence of the Idle No More movement and the subsequent splits within the AFN. There are currently 82 band chiefs earning over \$300,000 per year in salary. 222 more are paid in excess of \$200,000 whilst a further 700 band council members earn over \$100,000 per year in salary. Many of these also have business interests in construction, transport, consulting, casinos and cigarette manufacturing. They exist side-by-side with hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of their band council constituents who live in abject poverty.

The last four decades of land rights struggles, based on the acceptance of capitalism and the promotion of native nationalism with a view to negotiating a new “relationship” with the Canadian state, have taken native people into a political and social dead end. The Harper government’s drive to more directly subjugate the aboriginal population to the capitalist free market is part and parcel of the global assault being conducted by international big business on the working class through wage and job cuts and the destruction of social programs. The same 2012 Conservative budget targeting native rights slashed tens of billions from Medicare over the next decade, raised the retirement age, and cut jobless benefits for all workers.

Many natives and youth mobilized by the Idle No More movement are beginning to investigate these crucial questions. What is required is a mass political movement of the working class, uniting native and non-native people, which challenges the very foundations of the profit system, and advances a socialist program committed to providing the resources for decent jobs, living standards and social facilities—including education, health, and housing—for all, regardless of ethnic or national origin.



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