

Manitoba aboriginal youth suicides exemplify systemic crisis

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Leaders of the Pimicikamak Cree First Nation in Northern Manitoba declared a state of emergency on their Cross Lake reserve last week after the suicide of fourteen-year-old Finola Muswaggon.

Muswaggon was the sixth person in the community of 6,000 to kill themselves since December 12. Five of those who took their lives were teenagers. The sixth was a young mother of three children.

The community is in a state of shock, said Band Councilor Donnie McKay. In the previous weeks alone, the local nursing station had recorded 140 attempted suicides said McKay. Acting Chief Shirley Robinson told reporters that of the 1,200 students at the local high school, 170 are currently on suicide watch. “Our front-line workers that we have in our nation are all burnt out,” said Robinson. “The teachers are exhausted. The school counsellors are exhausted. The ministers are tired. The leadership is tired.”

The ongoing tragedy at Cross Lake follows on the heels of a much publicized school shooting at a Dene nation reserve at La Loche, Saskatchewan where a seventeen-year-old student killed his two cousins at home and then entered his high school, shot dead a teacher and a teachers’ assistant and wounded seven students before being apprehended. La Loche, a community of 3,000, and the surrounding region has the highest suicide rate in Saskatchewan—a rate five times the provincial average.

“This is the La Loche of northern Manitoba”, said Cree Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson, “except the shooter (at Cross Lake) is society.”

In point of fact, the “shooter” in the centuries-long string of tragedies that have afflicted aboriginal communities across the entire country is Canadian capitalism. The Canadian nation-state was consolidated through the subjugation and systematic dispossession of the native people. Those who survived were reduced to abject poverty, shunted onto reservations, and until 1960 denied basic citizenship rights, including the right to vote.

The statistics concerning mental health and suicide amongst Canada’s aboriginal people are a horrific tragedy and a searing indictment of the country’s economic and political elite.

Suicide is the leading cause of death for indigenous youth and adults up to 44 years of age. Aboriginal youth take their lives at a rate five or six times greater than their non-aboriginal

counterparts, with suicides amongst First Nations children as young as ten-years-old not uncommon. Suicide rates amongst Inuit youth are among the highest in the world, at eleven times the national average. The scourge is not limited to populations on the economically isolated native reserves. More than one of every five natives living off-reserve has reported contemplating suicide.

Manitoba’s New Democratic Party (NDP) government has now dispatched several emergency mental health-care workers and counsellors to Cross Lake and the federal Liberal government has pledged to cover the costs for this intervention, but only for eight weeks. Prior to this temporary deployment, which was prompted by last week’s declaration of a state of emergency, Cross Lake had only one part-time federally funded mental health therapist.

In addition to emergency assistance, Pimicikamak band leaders have reiterated longstanding demands for funds to build a hospital and recreational facilities in the community and for assistance in creating ongoing employment opportunities.

Currently, eighty percent of the Cross Lake population is unemployed. There is a serious housing shortage and no community or recreational center. Many children are in the care of child welfare services.

Many of the social ills afflicting the community stem from a massive hydro-electric project that was initiated under a previous NDP government in the 1970s and implemented by its Conservative successor. As a result of changes to water-levels, flooding and diversions perpetrated by government-owned Manitoba Hydro, transportation routes and wild-life habitats in the Cross Lake area have been disrupted and often destroyed. Even now, decades after the project was completed, flooding routinely displaces people from their homes.

“The hydro project has contributed to mass unemployment and mass poverty for our people,” said Chief Catherine Merrick. “It has piled on top of the other difficulties we have faced.”

In 2014, after decades of appeals to provincial and federal officials for action to address the devastating impacts on the local economy caused by the hydro-electric project, members of the reserve occupied the Jenpeg generating station that sits at the edge of the reserve. Only after six weeks of occupation did

NDP Premier Greg Selinger agree to come and offer a personal “apology” for the provincial government’s role in destroying the community’s traditional economic base. Government promises of revenue-sharing of Jenpeg profits, environmental cleanup, and relief from massive winter electricity bills have yet to be fulfilled.

In addition, many of the older people in Cross Lake are products of the Canadian state’s residential school program—a horrific, century-long practice of forcibly removing native children from their homes and incarcerating them in religious run schools cum work-camps, often hundreds of miles from their parents. Cross Lake was itself the site of one such school until 1969.

The Canadian government-appointed Truth and Reconciliation Commission concluded that the removal of one-third of all native children to these schools over generations met the definition of “cultural genocide” and is responsible for continued family dysfunction in many native communities.

Between 5,000 and 7,000 children died whilst in the custody of the residential schools from disease, malnutrition, fires, suicide and physical abuse. In some cases, healthy children were consciously placed in dormitories with children suffering from tuberculosis.

Discipline was harsh, with children systematically humiliated and physically abused by teachers who would berate them as “stupid Indians.” Children were often corporally punished for speaking their native language. Many were also sexually abused.

The social crisis engulfing Cross Lake arises from conditions common to aboriginal populations across the country. Life spans for native people fall far below the national average. Diseases such as tuberculosis are rampant in some communities. HIV and AIDS rates are higher on some western Canadian native reserves than in the most vulnerable of African countries.

More than half of all native children live in poverty. Education opportunities are deplorable—fewer than 50 percent of students on reserves graduate from high school. The federally-funded schools on native reserves receive on average 30 percent less funding than other Canadian schools.

Numerous native communities don’t have access to potable water, with boil water advisories in effect, on average, at over a hundred of the 631 native reserves at any given time.

Overcrowding in dilapidated homes is endemic. Almost half of all residences on native reserves require urgent, major repairs.

Incarceration rates for aboriginals are nine times the national average. A native youth is more likely to go to prison than get a high school diploma. Although they make up just 4 percent of Canada’s population, 25 percent of those held in federal prisons are aboriginal.

Poverty conditions are not restricted to those living on reserves. Natives in urban centers, which comprise about half

of the rapidly growing 1.2 million native population, have the country’s highest unemployment rates, second only to the rates for native reserves. Nationwide, about 50 percent of First Nations people and Inuit are unemployed.

The vast mineral deposits in the Canadian North and the drive to further expand oil and gas extraction, pipeline construction, and hydro-electric mega-projects continue to place aboriginal communities directly in the firing line of exploitation by governments and the giant corporations they represent. 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. What little revenues that are distributed to First Nations seldom reach the general population.

Many native youth mobilized by the 2013 Idle No More protest movement have begun to investigate the full gamut of questions surrounding the endemic poverty and exploitation of the aboriginal peoples. But what is required is not a retreat into the dead-end of a native nationalism that seeks a “new deal” with the Canadian bourgeoisie, through expanding “native” political structures within the Canadian capitalist state and the development of small pockets of native entrepreneurs. Rather, a mass political movement of the working class, uniting native and non-native people, must be developed so as to challenge the very foundations of the profit system and bring about the socialist reorganization of economic life so as to provide the resources for decent jobs, living standards and social facilities—including education, health, and housing—to all, regardless of ethnic or national origin.



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