

Canada: Attawapiskat First Nation declares state of emergency over attempted youth suicides

Laurent Lafrance
16 April 2016

The chief and eight councilors of the Attawapiskat First Nation—a Cree community on James Bay in northern Ontario—declared a state of emergency last weekend after 11 teenagers attempted or threatened suicide during the previous 24 hours.

This tragedy, which has drawn attention and concern around the world, is testament to the atrocious, inhumane conditions that confront indigenous communities across Canada.

The day after the state of emergency was declared, another group of 13 young people, including a 9-year-old girl, were sent to the hospital after being overheard discussing a suicide pact. Attawapiskat, which has a population of around 2,000, saw 28 suicide attempts in March alone, and more than a hundred since last September.

The suicide crisis in Attawapiskat is the latest in a series of tragedies that have engulfed aboriginal reservations in recent months. In early March leaders of the Pimicikamak Cree First Nation, located at Cross Lake in northern Manitoba, declared a state of emergency after six people took their own lives in less than three months. In January, a troubled adolescent shot dead four people and wounded seven students on the Dene nation reserve at La Loche, Saskatchewan.

Attawapiskat First Nation Chief Bruce Shisheesh said the state of emergency had been declared because “community front-line resources are exhausted and no additional outside resources are available.” With the emergency declaration, local, provincial and federal authorities, including Health Canada, have been legally compelled to provide support.

The only full-time, provincially funded mental-health position in Attawapiskat has been vacant since last summer, in part because of a housing shortage. Overburdened by the rash of suicide attempts, three of the reserve’s four health care workers were recently sent to Thunder Bay for counselling and rest.

The ruling elite and the media have responded to the

Attawapiskat crisis with crocodile tears. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted, “The news from Attawapiskat is heartbreaking. We’ll continue to work to improve living conditions for all Indigenous peoples.”

The House of Commons held a six-hour emergency debate Tuesday with the stated aim of finding “solutions” to the social crisis gripping aboriginal communities. In reality the debate was directed at whitewashing Canadian capitalism’s dispossession and criminal mistreatment of the aboriginal population and at sowing illusions that the Liberal government will significantly improve the living conditions of Canada’s native people, both on and off reserve.

Even sections of the corporate media were forced to concede the emergency debate will do nothing to end the chronic poverty and social deprivation that afflict native communities across Canada.

The MPs, reported *Global News*, “shared personal stories and made moving speeches, but in the end, didn’t agree on much other than the need to do something. Specifically what, they didn’t say. How and when? Also unclear.”

The federal government has now deployed some 18 health care workers to Attawapiskat to provide temporary crisis relief, while the Ontario Liberal government has pledged a derisory \$2 million for a youth fund. This princely sum is to be divided among the seven First Nations, including Attawapiskat, that make up the Mushkegowuk Council.

For two decades, Liberal and Conservative federal governments callously implemented a two-percent annual cap on First Nations’ budgets. Due to inflation and population growth of upwards of 40 percent, this cap translated into a huge decline in government support for what were, with only rare exceptions, already the county’s poorest communities.

Whereas the Harper Conservative government ignored and bullied native people, fueling widespread protests, the Liberals under Trudeau have pledged to bring about “reconciliation.” In reality, this change is largely cosmetic,

and has as a key element the cultivation of a privileged petty bourgeois native elite that can be used to contain and suppress social anger among the impoverished native population.

Like the Conservatives before them, the Liberals are anxious to secure native support for oil pipeline projects and to integrate the native reserves much more fully into contemporary Canadian capitalism so as to more profitably exploit their natural resources and pools of cheap labour.

In their first budget, the Liberals pledged an additional \$8.4 billion over five years for improved public services, housing and basic infrastructure for native people. However, \$3 billion of this money won't kick in until after the next election, meaning it is both tied to the Liberals' re-election and their pledge to bring the federal budget back into balance in the medium term. Even if the Liberals do fulfill all their pledges, per capita education spending on Native children will still fall well under the Canadian norm.

During Tuesday's debate, Charlie Angus, who is both the NDP's critic for Indigenous and Northern Affairs and the MP for the constituency in which Attawapiskat is located, said: "There's nothing new here. This is the culmination of years of problems and underfunding and calls for help and it's now tearing the life out of some of our young people."

What Angus didn't discuss is how the various NDP provincial governments have themselves contributed to the appalling conditions facing native people. For instance, a massive hydro-electric project initiated in the 1970s under the NDP in Manitoba brought about flooding that destroyed transportation routes and wildlife habitats in the Cross Lake area, the impacts of which are still felt today.

The truth is, the oppression of the aboriginal people is the product of the capitalist profit system, which all the parliamentary parties are committed to uphold. Indeed, the Canadian capitalist nation-state was consolidated through the systematic dispossession of the native people. Relations between the federal government and the First Nations are still largely framed according to the racist 1876 Indian Act, which codified them as an inferior group and wards of the state.

Contemporary conditions on native reserves, which were frequently truncated so as to pave the way for lucrative resource extraction projects, are akin to those in the Third World. Many lack basic infrastructure, including clean drinking water, adequate housing, modern schools and recreational facilities. Levels of disease, suicide, poverty, and substance abuse far exceed the Canadian norm.

The current state of emergency in Attawapiskat is in fact the fifth in that one community since 2006 alone. In 2011, so severe was the housing crisis whole families were sleeping in wooden shacks or makeshift shelters without clean water

and electricity. One year later, Attawapiskat struggled with a serious problem of contaminated drinking water. Two years later, half of Attawapiskat's population had to be evacuated because of flooding.

What the political establishment really thinks about the crisis in Attawapiskat was summed up by former Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who was visiting Parliament Hill Tuesday to meet with the government's representative in the Senate, long-time government mandarin and promoter of Canadian investment in China, Peter Harder. When asked by reporters about what should be done with crisis-ridden native communities, Chretien said "sometimes" First Nation communities should be moved because "isolation" makes it difficult "to have economic activities in some of these areas."

In 1969, when he was the Indian Affairs minister under former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (the father of the current PM), Chretien introduced the infamous 1969 White Paper on Indian Policy which proposed eliminating the distinct legal status of "Indian" so as to fully integrate indigenous people into Canadian capitalism.

The Canadian bourgeoisie's callous mistreatment of the First Nations and other indigenous peoples and its renewed drive to integrate aboriginal communities into the capitalist "free market" are part of its broader assault on the entire working class through the destruction of jobs, wages and public services. They can be successfully combatted only through the independent political mobilization of the working class—native and non-native—and the establishment of a workers' government that will radically reorganize socio-economic life so as to make the fulfillment of social needs, not capitalist profit the animating principle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact