Mass grave with 215 bodies found at Canadian “Indian” residential school

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The bodies of 215 indigenous children have been found in a mass grave on the grounds of the now closed Kamloops Indian Residential School in Kamloops, British Columbia. This horrifying discovery is yet further evidence of the brutality and inhumanity of Canada’s state-sponsored residential school system, which lasted into the 1970s and was aimed at eradicating indigenous culture and transforming Native children into a pliant workforce for Canadian capitalism.

Local indigenous people, including school survivors, waged a decades-long campaign for an investigation of the Kamloops school grounds. Last Thursday Chief Rosanne Casimir of the Tk’emlúps te Secwépemc people of southcentral British Columbia released a preliminary report.

To date 215 corpses, some of children as young as three years old, have been identified through ground penetrating radar. Their deaths were never documented. Casimir said more bodies may be discovered as other parts of the grounds remain to be searched. Similar grisly discoveries, albeit never on this scale, have been made over the years at other former residential school sites. Native leaders have described the Kamloops mass grave as “the tip of the iceberg.”

Community members have brought flowers and other mementos to the Kamloops school site. In Vancouver, artists lined up 215 pairs of tiny shoes on the steps of the city’s Art Gallery to remember the children and the crimes committed against them. Their action has inspired similar tiny-shoe memorials to spring up in cities and towns across the country. These largely spontaneous actions demonstrate the widespread horror and disgust among the population of all ethnic backgrounds to the mistreatment and abuse the Native population has suffered at the hands of the Canadian capitalist state.

The Kamloops Indian Residential School, the largest in the entire residential school system, was established in 1890 under the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, which ran it until 1969. It was then taken over by the federal government as a day school until its closure in 1978. Over the years, school survivors have provided detailed eyewitness accounts of the malnourishment, disease and systemic physical, sexual and psychological abuse to which they and other children who had been taken from their parents were subjected.

For over 100 years, a system of Indian residential schools operated in Canada under financial and administrative arrangements between the Government of Canada and the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and United Churches. In all, over 150,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis children passed through more than 130 residential schools in virtually every part of the country. An estimated 70,000 to 80,000 former students of residential schools are alive today.

The residential school system was established in 1876 under the notorious Indian Act, shortly after Confederation, the deal put together by railway promoters, bankers, corrupt politicians and British colonial officials whereby the principal colonies of British North America were united in an autonomous federal state. Funded by the Department of Indian Affairs and run by the churches, these schools were integral to achieving one of Confederation’s principal aims—annexing and establishing the dominance of capitalist property relations in what are today the four western provinces.

In the ensuing decades, the Canadian ruling elite dispossessed the native peoples of western Canada of their lands through a combination of repression, starvation and mass killings. Native peoples were herded onto “reserves,” while their children were taken away and placed in residential schools under the so-called “civilizing” influence of the churches and other state agents. The last of these schools closed in 1996.

The schools were modelled on youth reformatories and jails. Children were collected from their parents, sometimes at Royal Canadian Mounted Police gunpoint, and cut off from their families. Once delivered to the schools, they were subjected to a controlled and brutally disciplined environment that combined religious instruction with some basic skills training. They were subjected to humiliating and dehumanizing treatment so as to eradicate the influence of Native culture and inculcate obedience.

Children were routinely beaten for speaking their native language and berated as “stupid Indians.” The system was designed by the government to be self-sustaining, i.e., to cost it no money. Much of the “school day” was given over to backbreaking chores, including working in the fields. Yet food and school books were scarce and rationed. Little to no medical care was provided to the children. This, along with the barrack-style housing conditions and inferior food, contributed to the rampant spread of tuberculosis at the schools, especially prior to 1950.

Testimony from school survivors reveal the full extent of the horrors visited upon Native children by Church administrators backed by the might of the Canadian state. Here is one such account:

“I went to residential school in Muscowequan from 1944 to 1949, and I had a rough life. I was mistreated in every way. There was a young girl, and she was pregnant from a priest there. And what they did, she had her baby, and they took the baby, and wrapped it up in a nice pink outfit, and they took it downstairs where I was cooking dinner with the nun. And they took the baby into the furnace room, and they threw that little baby in there and burned it alive. All you could hear was this little cry, like ‘Uuh!’ and that was it. You could smell that flesh cooking.”

In 2015, a WSWS report summarizing the findings of the Truth and

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Reconciliation Commission that the Canadian government established due to pressure from school survivors and their supporters noted:

Between "5,000 and 7,000 children died whilst in the custody of these residential schools from disease, malnutrition, fires, suicide and physical abuse. Many were buried even without a name recorded. Parents were not notified as a matter of course. … Healthy children were consciously placed in dormitories with children suffering from tuberculosis. Sick and dying children were forced to attend class and sit up in church. Malnutrition was rampant. Testimony from school survivors recounted how hungry children would raid the slop-buckets of livestock for additional sustenance."

The residential school system was only one part of a broad-based policy to repress and dispossess the aboriginal peoples. An overt policy of starvation was used to drive First Nations from their ancestral lands on the Prairies. Treaty rights were unilaterally abrogated by the Canadian government. "Pass Laws" were enacted that made it illegal for indigenous people to leave the reserve without the approval of the government's Indian agent. Authorities from South Africa tasked with framing their own system of apartheid were so impressed by Canadian policy towards the aboriginal peoples that they based elements of their own racist system on it. Only in 1960 were "status Indians" granted the right to vote and other basic citizenship rights.

Responding to the discovery of the mass grave, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau ordered flags to be flown at half-mast. Indigenous Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett described the residential school system as part of "a shameful colonial policy."

The shedding of crocodile tears by leading representatives of Canadian imperialism should fool no one. Their attempts to portray the horrific discovery at the Kamloops Indian Residential School as the "legacy of colonialism" are a sham. In reality, references to "colonialism" or "settler-colonialism" in the abstract are designed to blame the entire population or so-called "white society," for crimes, including genocide, that were perpetrated by Canadian capitalism. In so doing, they absolve the profit system of its responsibility for the horrors inflicted on the Native peoples.

Along with this, Trudeau, his Liberal government, the trade union-backed NDP and much of the corporate media are promoting a reactionary "native reconciliation" agenda, which behind phony rhetoric about "justice" and "respect" aims to "reconcile" the native population to continuing Canadian capitalist oppression. It consists of granting a narrow strata of privileged indigenous professionals and business people, many of them associated with the Assembly of First Nations or other state supported groups, increased access to positions of power in the institutions of the capitalist state or on the boards of major energy, mining and other resource companies.

The crimes committed against First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples were not accidental or incidental to the consolidation of the Canadian nation-state and Canadian "democracy." On the contrary, they arose from the very nature of Canadian capitalism, from the clash between capitalist private property and the communal social relations of indigenous society.

The legacy of the Canadian state's violent dispossession of the Native people reverberates to this day, both in isolated Native communities in the north and in many of the poorest neighbourhoods of major Canadian cities like Winnipeg and Vancouver. Native life expectancy is 15 years shorter than that of other Canadians. More than half of all Native children live in poverty. HIV and AIDS rates are higher on some western reserves than in the most vulnerable of African countries. In the far north, diseases such as tuberculosis are rampant in some communities. Overcrowding in dilapidated homes is endemic. Almost half of all residences on reserves require urgent, major repairs.

Education opportunities are deplorable—fewer than 50 percent of students on reserves graduate from high school. For decades the federally-funded schools on Native reserves received 30 percent less funding per capita than other Canadian schools; and, despite promises by the Trudeau government to raise funding to the national average, a substantial funding gap remains. Numerous native communities do not have access to potable water, with boil water advisories still in effect, in scores of the 631 reserves at any given time. 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 less than 5 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 centres, which comprise about half of the rapidly growing 1.7 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.

These disastrous social conditions have fuelled mounting protests in recent years, from the Idle No More movement to the Wet'suwet'en protests and railway blockades of early 2020. The Canadian capitalist state has responded with its customary ruthlessness and brutality, including by deploying armed police against demonstrators and surveilling First Nations communities.

During the Wet'suwet'en protests, there were extensive discussions within establishment circles about deploying the military to crush the protest movement—a move that ultimately proved unnecessary. The Canadian ruling elite's readiness to employ savage repression against the indigenous population is of a piece with its growing assault on the democratic rights of all working people, including the systematic criminalization, through anti-strike laws and police violence, of social opposition from the working class.

The terrible plight of Canada's First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples underscores the pressing need for the working class to advance a socialist program to abolish the system of capitalist private property, which has been at the root of the oppression of the Native population in Canada for the past 150 years. Rejecting all attempts to pit working people against each other along national or ethnic lines, the working class must fight to secure the social and democratic rights of all of the oppressed, of which Canada's indigenous population is the most vulnerable section.

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