

Colonization, Self-Government and Self-Determination in British Columbia

Insurgent-S

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Contents

Colonization and the Class Struggle	4
A History of Conflict	5
Political Organizations and the Indigenous Struggle	5
Anarchists and the Indigenous Struggle	6

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Insurrectionary Anarchists of the Coast Salish Territories
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“When the people have taken violent part in the national liberation they will allow no one to set themselves up as ‘liberators’. They show themselves to be jealous of the results of their action and take good care not to place their future, their destiny, or the fate of their country in the hands of a living God. Yesterday they were completely irresponsible; today they mean to understand everything and make all decisions. Illuminated by violence, the consciousness of the people rebels against any pacification.”

— Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961

Currently, the federal and provincial levels of government, in partnership with multinational corporations, are accelerating their efforts to further displace and exploit the indigenous peoples of British Columbia (BC) and extend corporate access to Native lands and resources.

The BC Liberal government and the federal department of Indian and Northern Affairs have been pushing hard to impose their model of “self-government” on Native reserves through treaty negotiations with their State-controlled Native band councils, and media propaganda campaigns.

The self-government model will turn Native reserves into municipalities and band councils into municipal governments — expanding their role as the local representatives of the provincial and federal government. Reserves will become fee simple property which can be bought, sold, and leased like any other form of property. Self-government will not give power back to the people of indigenous nations, but will place more wealth and power in the hands of the elite band councils, while corporations move in to plunder the land. So, it is clearly an attack on indigenous self-determination.

The BC Treaty Commission and the First Nations Summit (composed of pro-treaty band councils) are the primary players in the BC Treaty Process, which aims at negotiating Self-Government Agreements. The BC Treaty Process is totally fraudulent, since band councils are imposed on Native communities and administered by the colonial government, and do not represent the interests of Native peoples. More importantly, the BC Treaty Process is a weapon of multinational corporations that want to gain more access to Native land and further exploit the people.

An Indian Affairs promotional supplement which appeared in the Vancouver Sun (November 1, 2003) outlined many of the effects of self-government and some current agreements and joint ventures that band councils are engaging in around BC.

The prominent feature article of the supplement focuses on the signing of a “Self-Government Agreement” between the band council of the Westbank First Nation and the Canadian government on October 3, 2003. After 14 years of negotiations the accepted agreement formalizes the Westbank First Nation Advisory Council — an organization whose members are elected by non-Native residents on Westbank reserves. The advisory council has direct input into all laws and regulations developed by the Westbank First Nation, and represents the interests of non-indigenous homeowners and businesses. In the supplement, Indian Affairs applauds the sharpness of the band council’s business sense, in that they allow more than 100 non-Native businesses to operate on Westbank land, while more than 8,000 settlers live on their reserves. Westbank Chief Robert

Louie is quoted as saying that “self-government will also benefit the non-Aboriginal business community.” According to Indian Affairs, self-government will blur the boundaries between reserve lands and the suburbs of non-Native communities, and the difference between First Nations and non-First Nations interests will become “less obvious”. In stating this, Indian Affairs reveal their intention to assimilate Native communities into settler-capitalist society.

Not coincidentally, in May of 1998 the Native Youth Movement (NYM) — an anti-treaty warrior society — carried out one of its first actions against the BC Treaty Process by occupying the Westbank band council office for two days, ending in 21 arrests. Westbank was the only band in the Okanagan region involved in treaty negotiations

The Indian Affairs supplement goes on to describe several “joint venture” projects between band councils and corporations throughout the province. One of these is the Haisla First Nation’s business partnership with Alcan, West Fraser Timber, Blue Mountain Watkins, Triumph Timber and Delta Research. The supplement claims that “when a community faces severe, chronic and historical unemployment, meaningful solutions have to be found in cooperation.” What it neglects to mention is that unemployment only exists because it is caused by corporations and governments forcefully removing indigenous peoples from their land, placing them on reserves and destroying traditional ways of life. The supplement also tries to minimize the reality of the horrible environmental impact that corporations like Alcan have had on the land and health of the Haisla. In reference to the joint venture with Alcan, Chief Steve Wilson is quoted as saying “we get access to capital and markets. They get access to land and resources they normally wouldn’t have.” To Indian Affairs, it’s the “epitome of a win-win situation.”

Colonization and the Class Struggle

The continuing process of colonization in BC is undoubtedly a class struggle, which the exploiters make every effort to disguise by promoting their indigenous puppet elite and playing on the racism of the European settler population.

The international capitalist project commonly called “globalization” has washed up on the shores of BC, represented by the party in power — Gordon Campbell’s Liberals.

The dismantling of the welfare system, massive layoffs in the public service sector and the escalating attack on Native peoples carried out by the BC Liberals should all be seen as part of this same international process aimed at increasing exploitation worldwide.

As multinational corporations fight to obtain BC’s vast resources of timber, oil, fresh water and hydro-electric power, industries will continue to move out of the cities into the rural areas, where Native peoples will be increasingly integrated into the productive process as a source of cheap labour.

Meanwhile, the cities will steadily grow as islands of electronic-information technology — the decision making centres in which the service sector dominates the capitalist workplace. The demand for low-cost labour in this area will continue to be filled by third-world immigrants and refugees, who are systematically denied legal status and stable conditions of life, exposing them to brutal exploitation.

The ghetto of Vancouver’s downtown eastside — not coincidentally an unofficial Native reserve — will also remain an occupied police zone.

That is, unless a revolutionary struggle can develop, uniting diverse social sectors of the excluded class in the destruction of capitalist projects and structures.

In this context, indigenous sovereignty plays a crucial role in undermining the power and objectives of international capitalism, while creating the space for indigenous peoples to realize the satisfaction of their needs, which obviously go beyond mere survival to include joy, creativity, traditional culture and community.

A History of Conflict

The history of British Columbia is unique within Canada, as the vast majority of indigenous nations in the province have never signed treaties.

The Chilcotin War of 1864 – which successfully limited European settlement in Chilcotin territories – and the attack on Fort Victoria in 1844, led by the Cowichan warrior chief Tzouhalem, are signs that local indigenous resistance has a history as long as colonization.

The indigenous sovereignty struggle – the struggle for self-determination – was revitalized in BC during the early Seventies, as the Red Power movement swept the continent in the wake of the American Indian Movement rebellion at Wounded Knee. Red Patrols appeared on the streets of Vancouver's downtown eastside – a program which sought to limit police brutality by monitoring their activities.

In the wake of the indigenous uprisings of the Nineties at Kanehsatake, Ipperwash, and Gustafson Lake, the Native Youth Movement came into existence. Since 1995, NYM has carried out direct actions against the BC Treaty Process, and set up blockades on Native territory to stop corporate expansion. Currently, in BC, there are chapters in Vancouver, Secwepemc and Nuxalk territories. A St'at'imc Nation land reoccupation camp at Sutikalh has existed for more than three years.

Conflicts with police and Department of Fisheries and Oceans officers have broke out in the past few months at the Sto'lo/Pilalt Nation reserve of Cheam. Members of the Cheam First Nation blockaded a Canadian National railway that runs through their land on October 2, 2003, to oppose logging and a ski-hill development in the Elk Creek forest on Mount Cheam, which is spearheaded by Cattermole Timber and Resorts West.

Five Saanich First Nations, with support from the West Coast Warriors Society, are currently preparing to use direct action in preventing the establishment of a commercial fishery on their territory.

Political Organizations and the Indigenous Struggle

For anyone willing to look at the situation, it is easy to see that all political organizations, in BC and elsewhere, are always marginal to the struggle of indigenous peoples. In other words, no political party, trade union or activist group, including even the indigenous ones, can be said to represent or promote the interests of indigenous communities.

Although many political organizations make claims of solidarity with indigenous struggles, in practice there is not even a trace of it. In part, this is because political organizations are organizations of synthesis – meaning that they aim to integrate different individuals, groups and communities into a manageable and controllable whole, under their leadership. They see their

fundamental task as recruiting members, since an increase in membership is supposed to correspond to an increase in the political power of the organization. The struggle takes a backseat, and independent initiative and action are condemned. Orders and information are handed down from the top. The organization is an end in itself.

Because of their orientation of synthesis, political organizations tend to develop a narrow mentality which sees indigenous peoples as a uniform mass, not recognizing or acknowledging the significant differences between specific nations, the communities and social classes within nations, and the individuals within communities.

Meanwhile, the indigenous struggle continues on its own, according to its own needs. When corporations move in to destroy the land, the only meaningful solution reveals itself as self-organized direct action, as seen in the activity of the Native Youth Movement and the various other blockades and actions that have sprung up from indigenous communities under attack.

The heavy ideological bureaucracies promoted by political organizations are not only unnecessary, but also slow down and detract from the self-managed struggle of indigenous peoples. The unending cycle of pointless meetings, forums and symbolic protests waste time and energy and impose unnatural rhythms on the movement which are not its own.

But direct action is important for another reason — because the external forces of colonization and genocide create internal social problems in Native communities which must be faced. Feelings of apathy and powerlessness must be challenged by the advancement of an insurgent attitude amongst the new generation of Native youth, an attitude which calls into question class divisions within indigenous communities, and which promotes direct action, self-organization and attack on the corporations who are destroying the people and the land. Every small victory achieved through direct action reveals individual and collective strength and creates a sense of empowerment which uplifts the spirit of the people.

Anarchists and the Indigenous Struggle

If non-indigenous anarchists are to develop ways of interacting with indigenous peoples that are different from those of political organizations they must begin from direct communication, solidarity and trust. Anyone who really wants to act in solidarity with others does not stumble around inside their homes, uninvited, stinking of arrogance and ignorance, and taking up space. It should go without saying that cultural differences and the unique experience of colonization should be understood and respected.

The old racist and inaccurate idea of the “noble savage”, which a few petty anarchist philosophers still hold on to, is in need of a complete demolition. As mentioned earlier, there are substantial variations between indigenous nations and communities in terms of their internal social structure. So a generalized model can’t match up with reality.

Real solidarity can be put into practice through direct contact with the indigenous sovereignty movement, and attacks on common enemies — using the principles of direct action, self-organization, and constant struggle.

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