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Building a “Canadian” Decolonization Movement: Fighting the Occupation at “Home”

Nora Butler Burke

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The following address was delivered by Nora Butler Burke, a member of the Indigenous Peoples Solidarity Movement (IPSM) in Montreal, on August 20, 2004, as part of an evening of speakers, film and music in support of the Kanehsatake Mohawk community. In her speech, Nora explores the idea of active “decolonization”, and the practice of self-determination by non-native individuals and communities. Her views outline eloquently many of the principles that the No One Is Illegal Campaign in Montreal have tried to assert in the past two years, undertaking our work within migrant and refugee communities while maintaining active solidarity with indigenous struggles in the Canadian state.

If you’ve been following the news, it would appear that the current situation in Kanehsatake has been unraveling over the past 7 months, from the time when James Gabriel, unannounced to the community, first attempted to establish his

own personal police force, with the stated purpose of “cracking down on organized crime”. However, if you speak to a Kanehsatake community member and ask when this problem began, you will likely be told that it’s a situation rooted much more deeply in the history of Mohawk-Canadian relations, that it dates back well before the time when Jimmy Gabriel came into power, and even long before the 1990 uprising known as the “Oka Crisis”. Many would likely say that the current conflict is merely symptomatic of a greater problem, that being Canadian colonialism.

The current “crisis” in Kanehsatake is in fact a new front in the war which Canada has been waging against Indigenous peoples since its very inception as a settler state in 1867. It is a battle of the Canadian state to seize Indigenous lands and to stifle the threat of strong and defiant Indigenous nations capable of mounting resistance to colonialism. The strategy of the Canadian occupation forces has been a long and drawn out process of assimilation and extermination, primarily carried out through means of a low-intensity warfare. In Canada, this war has often been waged by institutions, through the bureaucracy of Indian Affairs, in residential schools, through the imposition of band councils, and more recently by notorious multinational corporations and the likes of global trade regimes, such as the World Trade Organization. But this war is also being fought on the ground. As native nations, such as the west coast Secwepemc Nation, known by settlers as the Shushwap Nation, and the Anishnabek of Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows) stand up to corporate and state colonialism, time and again the repressive arm of Canadian colonialism threatens to be unleashed — whether it be the RCMP, the provincial police, the Canadian army¹. While these struggles have explicitly been

¹ Since September 11, 2001, the Canadian authorities have used anti-terrorism legislation to intensify their repression of Indigenous activists and warriors. (easterndoor.com)

tant that we not lose sight of our colonial reality, that we take aim at those very institutions within our society which perpetuate that reality. For it is not only in solidarity with Indigenous peoples that we are fighting to decolonise Canada, it is in solidarity with all peoples that we are building a movement for decolonisation now!

decolonisation movement. In Tyendinaga, a Mohawk community 4 hours south-west of Montreal, we have seen the establishment of the Mid-Winter Harvest Program. According to a statement from the community, “The Midwinter Harvest Food Program will provide healthy, culturally appropriate foods to First Nations, poor and homeless people; will defend our Territories against environmental destruction; will be on the land and appreciate its natural power and will seek to raise the fighting spirit of our people and give direction and purpose to the generations who will come after us”⁵ Elsewhere, on the Grassy Narrows reserve in western Ontario, youth from the community have been spending time at a road blockade where they have been learning about various aspects of their land and their culture. The blockade, erected over one and a half years ago, originated in direct resistance to the clear-cutting of their forests, and has evolved into a site of renewal of traditions and community strength, in particular for the youth of the community⁶. These are just a few examples of Aboriginal communities taking control and moving forward autonomously, on their own accord, without the involvement of the colonial state.

Closer to Montreal we find Kanehsatake — a community which, despite limited resources and a relatively small population, has held off a federally backed militarized incursion into their territory for more than 5 months. The Mohawks of Kanehsatake have been up against a slew of well-funded politicians, cops, lawyers, and colonial masterminds yet they have maintained the defence of their territory. This community, like many throughout Turtle Island, is standing up and fighting back to continued foreign aggression. It is crucial that we learn from these examples as they provide strong models for self-determination and resistance to colonialism. It is also impor-

⁵ www.ocap.ca/firstnations/groundbreaking.html

⁶ The blockade in Grassy Narrows, erected in December of 2002, continues to stand today. For frequent updates on the situation, you can check out www.friendsofgrassynarrows.com

kept out of the news, or are portrayed according to racist, colonialist stereotypes of native peoples, they are one of the greatest threats to the Canadian state, as they call into question its legitimacy and expose the truth that Canada, like other settler-colonial states, is founded upon stolen land which was expropriated from Indigenous nations through the act of genocide².

It is not particularly challenging to describe at length the damage done during the 510 plus years of colonial conquest on Turtle Island. Similarly, it is rather easy to provide a long list of the various fronts on which this battle is being fought today — from the demands for justice for over 500 missing Aboriginal women across Canada, to the protection of burial grounds of the Huron Wendat Nation; from the assertion of Métis rights as Aboriginal peoples, to the fight against the 2010 Olympics, for which developments threaten to further settle unceded territory in what is known as British Columbia³. What is perhaps more daunting, especially for those of us who are non-native, settlers and immigrants, is to articulate the means by which we can take part in building a decolonisation movement — a movement of ultimate respect for the land on which we are living and the people to whom it inherently belongs.

² In December 2003, former Minister of Indian Affairs, Andy Mitchell, was given briefing notes which explicitly stated that it would be beneficial to keep Aboriginal issues out of the news as much as possible. (www.ocap.ca)

³ Over the past 20 years, more than 500 Aboriginal women have gone missing from communities across Canada, yet there has been little response, let alone recognition, to this fact — the media, the government, and the non-native population remain silent on the issue. For more info on a recent campaign launched by the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC), check out www.sistersinspirit.ca; The Huron Wendat Nation recently won their fight against the construction of a Catholic cemetery on their ancestral lands. (www.environmentaldefence.ca/pressroom/edcinnews/20040518.htm); for more general info on Métis issues, check out www.othermetis.net/ and www.metisnation.ca/; for more on the resistance to the 2010 Olympics, check out www.resist.ca/story/2003/1/30/13466/2305/ and www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=30&ItemID=5996

Perhaps the first step that we can take in allying ourselves with Indigenous peoples is to face up to our colonial past and present. And here I'd like to assert that Canada is not a post-colonial state, nor is it neo-colonial, as is the case in other parts of the world. In Canada, colonialism dominates⁴. While Aboriginal peoples continue to be forced or excluded from their lands, capitalist interests rush to invade their territories in attempts to seize resources from it. Indigenous nations remain culturally, economically and politically under attack within this colonial apparatus – a distinct experience which undoubtedly shares parallels with the experiences of other racialized and oppressed communities in Canada.

Beyond facing up to the past, as a means of owning our history, we must take responsibility for that history. While many of us are excluded from and denied much of the wealth of the Canadian state ourselves, those of us who are Canadian citizens none the less benefit from that wealth to some degree. What we can not take for granted is the fact that much of that wealth was accumulated at the expense of Aboriginal peoples. Therefore, any movement which seeks to address the injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples must also take into account the positioning of non-native people within this colonial state.

Decolonisation is not a process which entails solely the Indigenous nations of this continent. All people living in Canada have been distorted by colonialism. It effects us all, not only those whom it most severely oppresses. Therefore, a decolonisation movement cannot be comprised solely of solidarity and support for Indigenous peoples' sovereignty and self-determination. If we are in support of self-determination, we too need to be self-determining. Unless we exercise our own self-determination and fight our own governments, then

⁴ "Towards a Detente with History: Confronting Canada's Colonial Legacy" by Joyce A. Green (sisis.nativeweb.org)

we risk reinforcing the isolation of Indigenous communities and their resistance. A movement for decolonisation must be premised on a parallel process of self-determination. While Indigenous nations continue to assert their autonomy and nationhood, we, as non-native settlers, must also assert our own autonomy within our respective communities, and resist our governments' attempts to further consolidate its control over all communities, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

I think it is clear from what I am saying here, but I want to take a second to address a common misperception held by non-native people that decolonisation would require a mass departure of all non-Indigenous peoples from the continent. While I can't speak for any Indigenous people or communities, my understanding, based on conversations with and readings by many Indigenous activists, has been that the fundamental change which North American decolonisation would bring about would be a change in the nature of the relationship between immigrants and Aboriginal peoples. It would be to bring an end to our imperialist relationship, and an end to the colonial imposition of foreign systems, be they governmental, ideological, religious, or otherwise, on the many hundreds of nations which exist on this continent. Rather than attempting to re-establish the conditions of a pre-colonial North America, many see it as being much more realistic to abandon the current relationship between native and non-native peoples. The state has long defined that relationship, one which has been characterized foremost by oppression. It is time to cut the state out of this relationship, and to replace it with a new relationship, one which is mutually negotiated, and premised on a core respect for autonomy and freedom. Furthermore, decolonisation means ridding ourselves of the super-states of Canada and the United States. They only serve an elite few while maintaining a liberal system of economic and social apartheid.

There exist within Canada pockets of self-determining Indigenous communities who are perhaps at the forefront of the