

# INDYPENDENT READER

*toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .*

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## Defenders of the Land, Private Property Abolitionists

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Indigenous peoples in Canada have marked the geographical limits of capitalist expansion through more than five centuries of permanent resistance. Due to the geography of residual Aboriginal lands, they form a final frontier of capitalist penetration for natural resource extraction, agribusiness, and urban/suburban development. While much of the focus of the economic crisis has centred on foreclosures and job losses in the manufacturing and service sectors, a renewed push for resources – e.g. tar sands, timber, fisheries, mining, suburban sprawl – may tread in the old vices of colonialism, but it has also been ushered in by a new political economy of indigenous dispossession, and with it, spurred a new phase of resistance.

The Zapatista uprising made headlines around the world in 1994, but all across this land, indigenous peoples were also rising up against an “opening up” of their territories for free-market investment. For example, by 1995, the resource industries of BC entered a new phase of expansion at the same point that Aboriginal people were in the midst of establishing claims to what would amount to 110 percent of the provincial land base. Confrontation in Gustafesen Lake by the Secwepemc Nation was accompanied by waves of blockades across the province. In Toronto, native protesters occupied a Revenue Canada office for 29 days, and the occupation of Stoney Pt Provincial Park in Ontario ended tragically with the death of protester Dudley George, killed by

police.

A series of policies posing as solutions to self-determination struggles were also introduced. While “self-government” policies appear to promote political autonomy, they are designed to download the “Indian problem” onto native communities by reducing federal involvement and promoting “self-sufficiency” through competitive economic development – key features of the neo-liberal agenda – forcing cash-strapped communities to enter into “fiscal partnerships” with corporations to finance their reserves.

Despite an escalation of militarized responses and assimilationist policies, collectively held indigenous lands continue to pose major barriers to capitalist expansion. The reclamation of a suburban development site in Caledonia, Ontario by the Six Nations of the Grand River Mohawk nation; the recently formed grassroots network to stop the tar sands that links indigenous communities, such as the Mikisew, the Athabasca Chipewyans, and the Lubicon Cree, along the pipelines; the NO2010 anti-Olympics campaign led by the Native Youth Movement (NYM) and Coast Salish indigenous nations along the coast and interior of British Columbia; the jail time served by leaders of Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug (KI) and Ardoch Algonquin First Nations (AAFN) to stop destructive mining on their territory and by the Acting Chief of the Algonquins of Barriere Lake to gain back control over their forests – these stories of indigenous people defending their land are not clashes between the market and the state that dominate the news daily. These are struggles over property relations – over the jurisdiction of indigenous homelands and their struggles against both the state and market to maintain control over them.

As Deborah Simmons writes in *After Chiapas*: “From this perspective, Aboriginal resistance may be understood as a crucial aspect of the conflict over the process of continental restructuring and the emergence of a new capitalist order.” To suppress indigenous peoples struggles is to eliminate the great obstacle they pose to capitalist accumulation and to maintain the racist assertion that Europeans discovered this “primitive” land.

Colonialism didn’t begin with capitalism, but capitalism has always needed colonialism to survive. Canadian colonialism at home and imperialism abroad are dynamics at the heart of capitalism; they are regimes of state-corporate power that fulfill the search for new markets, new pools of labour, and new commodities. A spotlight must be shone on these frontiers of property – the “blood and dirt” sources of wealth and sovereign power governing this nation. Activists can play a critical role in guiding this light in a number of ways. I work with the Algonquins of Barriere Lake ([www.barrierelakesolidarity.blogspot.com](http://www.barrierelakesolidarity.blogspot.com) [3]), a small community 3 hours north of Ottawa who are fighting to have a governing say over 10,000 square kilometers of their traditional territory. Canada and Quebec signed a landmark resource co-management agreement with the First Nation almost 20 years ago, but has refused to implement the ground-breaking plan. Barriere Lake Solidarity provides support through fundraising, film-making (e.g. <http://blip.tv/file/1391794> [4]), direct action, and political campaigning. Collective members have also set up a radio station in the community,

Mitchikinabiko'inik Nodaktcigen (Radio Barriere Lake), and helped pilot a handicraft business of direct sales from the community to city dwellers.

At a recent conference in Toronto organized by No One Is Illegal (NOII) called City is a Sweatshop, BC activist Harsha Walia described how NOII-Vancouver was linking Aboriginal dispossession to migrant justice work – how indigenous communities were offering sanctuary on reserves to migrants threatened with deportation, as well as bringing communities together in protest for each other's rights, and asking real questions about who gets to decide which settlers get to make Canada their home. This movement also highlights the common racial injustices in the treatment of brown-skinned migrants and the treatment of Aboriginal people as uncivilized and uncultured peoples.

But the most galvanizing indigenous campaign today is a nation-wide boycott of the February 2010 Olympics games to be held in Vancouver-Whistler ([www.no2010.com](http://www.no2010.com) [5]). The campaign is led by the Native Youth Movement (NYM) and Coast Salish communities and their allies. In a province that never signed treaties with the indigenous nations and is comprised almost entirely of unsurrendered lands, the Olympics have provided an opportunity for the government to spur a construction and development boom in Vancouver, Whistler, and parts of the interior. According to the provincial government's ministry of economic development, in the summer months of 2007 alone, 843 major capital projects were planned or underway throughout British Columbia, valued at US\$108 billion dollars. As no2010 reports: "All the expansion in transport infrastructure (highways, ports, railways, bridges, etc.) is meant to assist in greater resource exploitation, including ski resorts, mines, logging, natural gas, oil, etc." The urban poor of Vancouver, which is comprised of one of Canada's largest urban native populations, 2010 has already meant "hundreds evicted from low-income housing, more homelessness, criminalization, and increased police repression." No2010 is also part of a broader Resistance 2010 campaign that will also challenge the exploitative resource exploitation, market expansion, and social control of the G8 summit and the Security & Prosperity Partnership (SPP) meeting in Canada that year.

Finally, challenging property rights is another way to challenge colonial policies in the urban context. I work with a group called Abandonment Issues, which is a Toronto-based project pushing for the adoption of a Use It or Lose It bylaw that would ensure all vacant/abandoned property would be expropriated and turned into affordable housing. One of the central objectives of this project was to push up against people's understanding of private property rights and to pose questions about why some people got to have shelter, while other did not – what is the meaning of this distribution of ownership? What does it say about our society that we'd rather protect a land speculator, sitting on a vacant property with the hope that its property value will escalate, rather than see that building – not as an investment or a commodity, valuable only in the profits reaped by its transferability – but as a place where people could live, who are otherwise on the streets, or trading sex for shelter. If we can re-think how property rights reflect our relationships to one another – take it out of the realm of law and economics, into the realm of social justice and community control – we can unravel the social relations of power that govern through monopoly ownership and purely commercial interests.

Now is an important time in Canada for indigenous solidarity and resistance. The formation of a national network of indigenous leaders called “Defenders of the Land” is developing, and a growing awareness in cities across the country has meant more activists are rising up and taking action. The challenge upon us now is to enlarge the way we think of the city to include these spaces of resistance that underpin the subsistence of all of our lives.

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[3] <http://www.barrierelakesolidarity.blogspot.com>

[4] <http://blip.tv/file/1391794>

[5] <http://www.no2010.com>