

TEN INDIGENOUS STRUGGLES

Canadian climate and environmental activists should support

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2010

CLIMATE JUSTICE MONTREAL

A SPECIAL RECLAIM COLUMBUS DAY STATEMENT

In 2009, Indigenous communities throughout the world called for a global mobilisation “In Defence of Mother Earth” on October 12 2010, reclaiming “Columbus Day” and transforming colonial holidays into days of action in solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

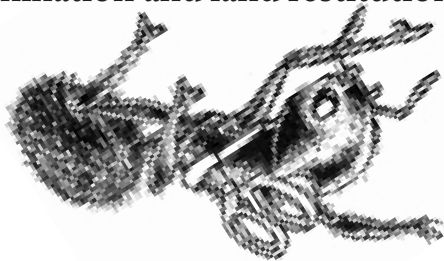


With increasing droughts, floods, natural disasters and the hottest summer on record behind us, ever more Canadians are realizing the present and future peril of climate change. But our political and economic system has locked us into dependency on infinite economic growth. It produces elites whose vision is pathologically short-sighted, rarely extending beyond the next financial quarter or electoral term.

So rather than scale back, as we know we must, Canadian elites are presiding over a final stage of colonial resource pillage – a frantic grab for the dirtiest and hardest-to-extract fossil fuels and minerals in ever-harder-to-reach geographic zones.

These new mines, oil wells, pipelines, swathes of clear-cuts and hydro-dams are almost always on or near unceded or treated Indigenous territories. These sites of extraction have thus become sites of resistance – because living and depending on these lands, Indigenous peoples are their first and fiercest defenders. And in the face of resource depletion, biodiversity loss, and climate chaos, their struggles are taking on vital importance.

Indigenous communities are resisting because their resistance protects and embodies alternatives – for sane resource management in Haida Gwaii, for conservation of watersheds in Gwich'in, for sustainable forestry in Barriere Lake, for reimagining our relationship to the environment from coast to coast to coast. Where polluting and carbon-emitting projects have been halted or delayed, minimized or regulated, we can usually thank Indigenous peoples. During these struggles, they have won a unique set of tools – Supreme Court precedents, constitutional rights, and international legal instruments – that establish a framework for self-determination and land restitution in Canada.



If politically implemented on the ground, this could mean the reshaping of our geography. We need to encourage and welcome it.

After all, who else is proposing to set up multi-generational institutions of responsible land stewardship? Certainly not our corporations. Who else is conceiving of human and environmental welfare in terms of the next seven generations? Not our politicians. What

this means is that supporting Indigenous struggles will not just pay off Canada's enormous moral and legal debt: it is also our best hope to save entire territories from endless and senseless extraction and destruction.

Where should we look for the courage and tenacity to save our burning and broken planet? Not in parliament, business chambers, or universities. You'll find it on the blockades in Grassy Narrows, where they watch-over the longest-running blockades against clear-cut logging in Canadian history; on the lakes of Big Trout Lake, where they daringly maneuver boats to prevent company planes from landing to prospect for minerals; and on the international campaign trail with Fort Chipewyan, as they shame Canada for the poisoning of their people.

These ten Indigenous struggles, which could easily be twenty or thirty others, are challenging the status quo of fossil-fuel addiction and resource pillage in this country. Standing up to governments and corporations, struggling for their mountains, waters and climate, Indigenous communities deserve the support of everyone who cares about the health of our planet. As these communities battle to regain control over their lands, they struggle for us all.

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① **Gwich'in:** The Gwich'in, whose traditional territory overlaps with the Peel Watershed Region – a 68,000 square kilometer stretch of land near the Northeastern edge of the Yukon – are fighting mining corporations and the provincial government for total protection of their traditional territories. Mining companies currently hold over 8,400 mining permits in the watershed, the five tributaries of which make up North America's largest network of mountain rivers. Mining companies are pushing for an 80% conservation agreement that maintains grandfathered leases, while local communities are working for the full protection of their lands. <http://www.thebigwild.org/act/peel>

② **Tsilhqot'in:** The Tsilhqot'in people have a long history of fierce resistance and independence. In 2007, they set an important precedent in the British Columbia court by proving their aboriginal title and rights to 2,000 square kilometres of their lands, potential supplanting provincial jurisdiction over land-use planning, but the federal and provincial have ensnared them in legal appeals. Today, they are confronting a proposal for an enormous open-pit gold-copper mine on their land. The mine would turn a lake that is sacred to the Tsilhqot'in and that holds 90,000 unique rainbow trout into a tailings dump, replacing it with an artificial lake. Some community members have pledged their life to stop it. <http://teztanbinyca/>

③ **Wet'suwet'en:** Located in near the town of Smithers in central interior British Columbia the Wet'suwet'en First Nation is currently engaged in a struggle to stop several oil and gas pipeline from being built across their traditional territory. Grassroots community organizers have taken a stance against not only the pipelines, but the entire tar sands gigaproject, working in solidarity with other frontline communities and solidarity activists against "refineries, terminals, tanker traffic, and the systemic scope that is Carbon Marketing, Offsetting, and REDDS". <http://on.fb.me/bekx2K>

④ **Lubicon Lake:** The First Nation in northern Alberta has seen their traditional lands overrun by massive oil and gas exploitation which has destroyed their traditional lands and way of life. To protect their fragile boreal forest homeland from even greater depredation, the Lubicon have fought back to defend their land and lives by patiently building a global network of organizations and individuals to support their legal battles, boycotts, lobbying, negotiations with the Canadian government and - when all else failed - blockades. Despite 20 years of condemnation by United Nations human rights bodies, the right of the Lubicon people to maintain their culture and rebuild their society is still not respected by the federal and provincial governments and industry. They have been subject to economic sabotage and draconian internal interference. And even more destructive forms of development – including oil sands extraction – are planned for the future. www.lubicon.org/

⑤ **Pimicikamak :** Five hundred kilometres north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Pimicikamak Cree have been struggling against the consequences of hydro-electric damming on their lands. The dams have turned pristine rivers into power corridors, ancient lakes into holding tanks and a sacred homeland into an industrial complex. Manitoba Hydro company promised clean and green development when they and two levels of government signed a 1970s agreements with Manitoba indigenous communities. Pimicikamak is now fighting to force Manitoba Hydro to live up to its treaty commitments and to restore their lands and waters. The community is teaching us that hydro development, far from being a panacea for climate change, harms lands and Indigenous peoples, and also destroys the boreal forest, the world's largest terrestrial carbon reservoir, causing the release of global-warming methane gas. www.pimicikamak.com/

⑥ **Grassy Narrows:** Mercury contamination of their river system in the 1960s by a paper mill upstream devastated their economy, plunging the community into extreme poverty from which it has never fully recovered. After decades of petitions, letter writing, speaking tours, environmental assessment requests, and protests failed to halt the destructive clearcut logging of their traditional territory, grassroots women and youth put their bodies on the line and blocked logging trucks passing by their community. The blockades are the longest running in Canadian history, now in their 8th year. 3 major logging corporations have bowed to pressure and committed not to log against the wishes of the community, and logging has been suspended on Grassy Narrows territory as of July 2008. But under pressure from corporate lumber giant Weyerhaeuser, the province appears ready once again to give the green-light to logging in the fall of 2010. The community is determined to prevent this. www.freegrassy.org

⑦ **Baker Lake:** Baker Lake, a mostly Inuit community in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut, has a long history of struggles against uranium mining and exploration. In the late 1970s, legal action was taken against the Canadian Government and a variety of uranium exploration companies. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, they successfully fought against a proposal to mine uranium from the Kiggavik ore body, located on the post-calving grounds of caribou herds. But the Aveva mining company still wants this ore, and ignoring community concerns about impacts on caribou, health and nuclear weapons development, have launched an aggressive public relations campaign. Feeling their views are not represented by the Inuit Organizations, Inuit from Baker Lake and elsewhere in Nunavut have formed Nunavummiut Makitagunarningit (Nunavummiut can rise up).

⑧ **Barriere Lake:** The Algonquins of Barriere Lake continue to hunt, fish, trap, and harvest on more than 15,000 square kilometers of territory north of Ottawa in north-western Quebec, which they have sought to protect from clear-cut logging through a landmark conservation agreement. The 1991 Trilateral agreement undermines the Canadian government's Comprehensive Claims policy, which forces First Nations to extinguish their unceded title to the land in exchange for paltry sums of lands and money. For this reason, the federal and provincial governments and multinational industry have conspired to avoid implementing the agreement, instead criminalizing the community and attempting to abolish their traditional governance system. The community attributes the strength of their Algonquin language, their culture, and their protection of the land to the endurance of this own governance system, the Mitchikanibikok Anishinabe Onakinakewin. barrierelakesolidarity.org

⑨ **Bear River:** The First Nation has their own vision for a food and livelihood fishery, based on a long historical relationship to the natural world that is premised on respect and self-sufficiency to avoid hunger and sickness for all people. This relationship is known in the Mi'kmaq language as "Netukulimk". But the commodification and privatization of the commercial fishery sector continues unabated, leaving no room for community sustainable practice and knowledge. It has become clear to Bear River that these fishing agreements serve only to integrate First Nations into a commodification process, watering down their treaty rights. Bear River has chosen not to sign any fishing agreements with the federal government, continuing instead to pursue its vision of a small scale food and livelihood fishery by aligning themselves with other local non-Indigenous fishermen who have also been impacted by privatization and commodification, and by continuing to learn and practice "netukulimk". http://www.defendersoftheland.org/bear_river

⑩ **Innu:** The Innu have for years been struggling against the exploitation of minerals, hydro-power, animals, and timber on their lands, and military low-level flying exercises and bomb testing. Today, some Innu communities are facing proposed plans to build the Lower Churchill Hydro Project, which would mean the construction of two hydroelectric dams on their territory, causing vast environmental devastation. The project is slated to flood 12% of the Lower Churchill Valley, increase mercury levels in the water, and destroy some of the most diverse wildlife habitat in Labrador – home to black bear and caribou, among other animals. Since the traditional Innu way of life is based on hunting and fishing, this project, if not stopped, will also affect the ability of the Innu to live their lives freely and choose their own ways of living. <http://www.indigenoussolidaritymontreal.net/struggles/fep>

⑪ **Defenders of the Land:** This network of First Nations in land struggle working with urbanized Indigenous people and non-Native supporters in defense of Indigenous lands and rights was founded at a historic meeting in Winnipeg from November 12-14, 2008. Defenders is the only organization of its kind in the territory known as Canada – Indigenous-led, free of government or corporate funding, and dedicated to building a fundamental movement for Indigenous self-determination and rights. They have called for a second annual Indigenous Sovereignty Week, a series of educational events and action that took place last year in two dozen cities, towns and communities, between November 21-27, 2010. www.defendersoftheland.org