

Idle No More awakens unified resistance to threats to treaties, land and water



Aboriginal students organized an Idle No More march to St. Thomas University in Fredericton on Jan. 24th. Students and supporters braved minus 30 degree temperatures to take a stand against Bill C-45. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

By TRACY GLYNN

“People say we don’t know what we want. We know what we want!” said Alma Brooks, a long-time indigenous activist and elder from St. Mary’s First Nation, to a crowd of about 200 gathered at an Idle No More noon hour rally at Fredericton MP Keith Ashfield’s office on Jan. 11th.

Ashfield, who is also the Fisheries Minister, did not meet with the Idle No More demonstrators. In an interview earlier that day with CBC’s Harry Forestall, Ashfield said that, “Bill C-45 is something that’s necessary to move our country forward. There’s some positive changes for First Nations as well when it comes to their own land and the way they are allowed to lease their properties.”

Brooks, a woman who says she cannot remember a time when she was idle, remarked, “We signed peace and friendship treaties. We have never surrendered an inch of our land.”

Federal Omnibus Bill C-45 has sparked hundreds of Idle No More grassroots protest actions across the country including here in New Brunswick, the territory of the Wabanaki.

Critics of the 400-page bill say it is part of Harper’s dirty fossil fuel development agenda and that it violates Aboriginal treaties and rights, makes life harder for people forced to depend on Employment Insurance and destroys 30 years of progress on legislation that protects the environment. The Bill was approved by the Senate on Dec. 14th in a 50-27 vote.

Started by Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon and Sheelah McLean, four indigenous women in the province of Saskatchewan, last October, Idle No More has inspired both mass mobilizations and small actions in solidarity across the world in places like New Zealand, the Middle East, New York City, London and Spain.

Siknihtuk Mi’kmaq Rights Coalition members blocked CN trains from transporting goods on the Highway 126 Railway in Adamsville, between Moncton and Miramichi,

on January 4th.

The planned weekend long blockade was cut short when CN filed a court injunction to have it removed. The location was chosen because it is a historical trading post where Mi’kmaq people bartered their handmade baskets for goods with local settlers.

Gary Jo Augustine with Siknihtuk Mi’kmaq Rights Coalition said, “Our goal is to abolish Bill C-45 and to stop additional proposed Bills that directly affect us.”

Brian Francis, also with the Coalition, noted, “The Treaties are agreements that cannot be altered or broken by one side of the two Nations. The spirit and intent of the Treaty agreements meant that First Nations peoples would share the land, but retain their inherent rights to the land and resources.”

“First Nations have experienced a history of colonization which has resulted in outstanding land claims, lack of resources, unequal funding for educational and housing services, and residential schooling,” added Francis.

The Idle No More movement got a boost of attention and support when Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence started a hunger strike on Parliament Hill on Dec. 11th. Chief

Spence’s hunger strike was aimed at highlighting the dire problems in First Nations communities and at getting a nation-to-nation meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

A week after Chief Spence started her hunger strike, Mi’kmaq Sundance Leader Joseph Jean Sock from Elsipogtog and other indigenous leaders joined her in fasting. A number of Maliseet and Mi’kmaq people from New Brunswick made the trek to Ottawa to spend time with Chief Spence. Chief Spence ended her hunger strike on Jan. 24th.

Idle No More actions in New Brunswick have also included marches across Centennial Bridge in Miramichi and Westmorland Bridge in Fredericton, road blockades and traffic slowdowns across the province, a demonstration in front of the N.B. Legislature in December, lively marches and rallies in downtown Moncton and at St. Thomas University, rallies at MPs’ offices across the province on Jan. 11th, teach-ins and flash mobs and round dances with songs and drumming in busy shopping malls and markets in Fredericton and Moncton.

Many long-time indigenous and non-indigenous activists say the movement has strengthened their resolve and renewed their hope for a better world, while many youth are taking the opportunity to organize their first political actions through the use of social media.

Thom Nash, a St. Thomas University student who joined other Aboriginal university students in organizing an Idle No More march to St. Thomas University on Jan. 24th, said he was proud of the turnout, the unity between different bands and the support received from people at the university and in the wider Fredericton community. “People are starting to wake up and realize what is happening to our country. Now, they are willing to join us and we will fight together for the rights of generations to come,” said Nash who is from St. Mary’s First Nation but grew up off reserve.

The movement shows no signs of slowing down or going away anytime soon. Idle No More participants, who are braving minus 30 degree temperatures to publicly show their opposition, say they won’t stop until they have stopped Bill C-45.

Community Calendar

For details and updated event listings, visit nbmediacoop.org. To list your event, email: community@nbmediacoop.org.

NB Media Co-op Story Meetings. Join us at our monthly story meetings in Fredericton where we discuss politics and current events and decide what to put in this paper every month. To find out the meeting time and venue, email info@nbmediacoop.org.

Have a Heart Fundraiser for the Common Front for Social Justice. Feb. 12th, 7:00 p.m. Lions Community Centre, 473 St. George St., Moncton. Featuring Viola Leger as La Sagouine, music and door prizes. Advance tickets: \$15. Tickets at the door: \$20. Contact: 855-8977, fcjsnb@nbnet.nb.ca.

Kent County Frack-Free Speaker Series. Bass River Hall. Third Tuesday of the month at 6:30pm. Feb. 19: Who owns and benefits from Crown Lands with Kedgwick filmmaker Charles Theriault. March 19: NB’s energy policy: for our changing world, inside and outside NB with Jim Emberger, Taymouth Community Association. April 16: Water Matters! with Stephanie Merrill, Conservation Council. All presentations will be in English. Storm dates: Fourth Tuesday of the month. Donations encouraged. Contact Johanne at 785-4683, Nancy at 785-2258 or email upriverwatch@gmail.com. Hosted by Upriver Environment Watch.

Cinema Politica’s documentaries take us to places like Afghanistan, Palestine, Jamaica, the Congo, indigenous territories and prisons where dehumanization and destruction wreaked by capitalism and colonialism warrant our examination, analysis and action. In Fredericton, films are screened on Fridays during the fall and winter at 7 pm at Conserver House, 180 St. John St. In Moncton, films are screened the first Monday of the month at the United Way Boardroom, Suite T210, 22 Church St. In Sackville, films are screened monthly on Wednesdays at Mount Allison University. Check out film schedules of the locals or start your own chapter at: cinemapolitica.org.

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Private sector and government profit from theft of Native land

(continued from page 1) ...the community has gone without running water, endured divisive attacks from the government, and suffered the environmental consequences of unchecked extraction.

Sour gas flaring next to the community resulted in an epidemic of health problems, and stillborn babies. Moose and other animals fled the area, rendering the community's previously self-sufficient lifestyle untenable overnight. In 2011, an oil pipeline burst, spilling 4.5 million litres of oil onto Lubicon territory. The Lubicon remain without a treaty, and the extraction continues.

The Lubicon Cree are subsidizing the oil and gas sector, Alberta and Canada.

What will Canada do without its subsidies?

From the days of beaver trapping to today's aspirations of becoming an energy superpower, Canada's economy has always been based on natural resources. With 90% of its settler population amassed along the southern border, exploitation of the land's wealth almost always happens at the expense of the Indigenous population.

Canada's economy could not have been built without massive subsidies: of land, resource wealth, and the incalculable cost of generations of suffering.

Overall numbers are difficult to pin down, but consider the following: Canadian governments received \$9 billion in taxes and royalties in 2011 from mining companies, which is a tiny portion of overall mining profits; \$3.8 billion came from exports of hydroelectricity alone in 2008, and 60 per cent of Canada's electricity comes from hydroelectric dams; one estimate has tar sands extraction bringing in \$1.2 trillion in royalties over 35 years; the forestry industry was worth \$38.2 billion in 2006, and contributes billions in royalties and taxes.

By contrast, annual government spending on First Nations is \$5.36 billion, which comes to about \$7,200 per person. By contrast, per capita government spending in Ottawa is around \$14,900. By any reasonable measure, it's clear that First Nations are the ones subsidizing Canada. (2005 figures; the amount is slightly higher today.)



Alma Brooks and others gather in an action in support of Idle No More at Fredericton MP Keith Ashfield’s office on Jan. 11th. Photo by David Coon.

These industries are mostly take place on an indigenous nation's traditional territory, laying waste to the land in the process, submerging, denuding, polluting and removing. The human costs are far greater; brutal tactics aimed at erasing native peoples' identity and connection with the land have created human tragedies several generations deep and a legacy of fierce and principled resistance that continues today.

Canada has developed myriad mechanisms to keep the pressure on and the resources flowing. But policies of large-scale land theft and subordination of peoples are not disposed to half measures. From the active violence of residential schools to the targeted neglect of underfunded reserve schools, from RCMP and armed forces rifles to

provincial police tear gas canisters, the extraction of these subsidies has always been treated like a game of Risk, but with real consequences.

Break the treaty, press the advantage, and don't let a weaker player rebuild.

Idle? Know More.

The last residential school was shut down in 1996. Canadians today would like to imagine themselves more humane than past generations, but few can name the indigenous nations of this land or the treaties that allow Canada and Canadians to exist.

Understanding the subsidies native people give to Canada is just the beginning. Equally crucial is understanding the mechanisms by which the government forces native people to choose every day between living conditions out of a World Vision advertisement and hopelessness on one hand, and the pollution and social problems of short-term resource exploitation projects on the other.

Empathy and remorse are great reasons to act to dismantle this ugly system of expropriation. But an even better reason is that indigenous nations present the best and only partners in taking care of our environment. Protecting our rivers, lakes, forests and oceans is best done by people with a multi-millennial relationship with the land.

As the people who live downstream and downwind, and who have an ongoing relationship to the land, Cree, Dene, Anishnabe, Inuit, Ojibway and other nations are among the best placed and most motivated to slow down and stop the industrial gigaprojects that are threatening all of our lives.

Movements like Idle No More give a population asleep at the wheel the chance to wake up and hear what native communities have been saying for hundreds of years: it's time to withdraw our consent from this dead end regime, and chart a new course.

Dru Oja Jay is a writer, organizer, Media Co-op co-founder and co-author of Paved with Good Intentions. This piece was originally posted on the Media Co-op.