

Indian children deserve better treatment

Parents determined to achieve much needed reform

COLD LAKE—The parents of the Cold Lake reserve have been keeping 200 children from attending school since September 13th, while demanding a new school on the reserve. They want better roads, a healthy water supply and a new modern school. They say the government has been more interested in phasing out the school in the reserve than in improving roads.

On the Cold Lake reserve 170 children attend classes up to grade six in six classrooms. Children attending higher grades are transported by bus to the towns of Cold Lake, St. Paul, Bonnyville and Grande Centre.

Parents from the Kehewin reserve began their strike on September 14th, by pulling out 170 children from school. They want a grades 1-3 classroom and improved facilities on the reserve. The children have been attending a 22 year-old building for kindergarten. The rest are attending schools in the surrounding towns.

Mrs. Theresa Gadewa, Chairman of the Kehewin School Committee described the children's situation this way, "They feel out of place because they can not compete with the white kids and the sad part is they drop-out."

At a meeting Friday, September 17th, on the Cold Lake reserve the Cold Lake and Kehewin Bands were promised solid support from five Indian chiefs who said they would go back to their band councils to discuss and seek consent to pull their children out of schools. Harold Cardinal, President of the Indian Association of Alberta also gave his full support of the actions taken by the Indian parents.

A telegram had been sent to Ottawa

and Ottawa's response urged the parents to send the children back to school so as not to "jeopardize the children's progress" while a "proper investigation" would be carried out. Referring to the telegram, Mr. Cardinal remarked, "With the present 90% drop-out rate, there is no education for Indian children--this action is not jeopardizing the children's education."

Present at Friday's meeting were representatives from the St. Paul and Alberta Regional offices of the Indian Affairs Department. Mr. Bill Thomas, Regional Superintendent of Alberta for Indian Affairs Department, was in full agreement with the proposals but said it was up to Ottawa to take the final steps.

"The fact is I have not received any commitment whatsoever from Ottawa. I recognize what we have in Indian Affairs is not satisfactory, not even standard... I will work with you."

When asked for comment, Mr Walter King, Acting Superintendent of Education for the Saddle Lake-Athabasca district, said, "Indian people... are bringing their needs to the attention of district, regional and Ottawa officials in the most forceful way they can and I trust that their pleas will be given careful attention and consideration by all concerned."

The 200 parents present, from the Cold Lake, Frog Lake, Beaver Lake, Saddle Lake and Kehewin reserves courteously dismissed the representatives as ineffective, and will not settle for anything less than a personal commitment from Mr. Chretien, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. A telegram is to be sent to Mr. Chretien, asking him

to discuss the problems of the Indians.

A "24 hour, seven-day-a-week consultation with the St. Paul and Indian Affairs department at the C.N. Towers building" will take place in two weeks if no word is received from the minister.

The proposals exposed numerous problems which parents and the children face, and some of which are: children have to walk about half-a-mile to catch the school bus (during the winter some have frozen their hands), unhealthy water supply (at Cold Lake reserve their water comes from a grimy slough with a bog pasture feeding into it), inadequate housing and poor heating systems and obsolete schools.

Mr. Horace Gladstone, District Superintendent of Saddle Lake-Athabasca regions, informed that furnaces will be placed in Kehewin homes, roads will be built at Frog Lake, and that monies available for road construction at Cold Lake and Kehewin reserves, and cisterns are being considered to supply good water.

Mr. Harold Cardinal commended the representatives, "I think Mr. Thomas, Mr. King and Mr. Gladstone have attempted to bring to Ottawa the needs of the Indians."

Near the closing of the meeting, people clapped enthusiastically as parent after parent angrily advocated continual protesting. Chief Ralph Blackman of the Cold Lake reserve concluded, "The strike must go on... you people help us keep the strike. I think this is the only way to make Ottawa listen to our pleas. We've started, let's not quit. Let's get a firm answer."

... When the Indians killed the white man, well, it's a massacre, but the other way around, it's a victory.

The Indian's a savage, not hero, he's no person in a book. He's nothing!

Elsewhere, another 70 children were withheld from school on the Alexander Indian reserve, 35 miles northwest of Edmonton at the beginning of September. These parents were angry because Indian Affairs Department had promised a playground, which was not completed at the beginning of the school term.

The playground is now completed, however, the children will be removed again if Indian Affairs Department does not have a steel fence put up around the school by the end of September.

Also at the beginning of September, parents from the Heart Lake reserve and Metis parents from Imperial Mills withheld their children from school, protesting against the 30 miles one-way the children must travel to go to Lac La Biche School.

The parents from the Heart Lake reserve have had to move into Imperial Mills so the children could attend school, because there are no roads leading into the reserve, which is about nine miles from Imperial Mills.

The School and government officials assured the parents that a local grades 1-3 classroom would be available but students grade four and over would continue to travel by bus to Lac La Biche.

The parents agreed to let their children return to classes to withdraw them again if there is no action on setting up the local classroom in a month.

Imperial Mills is 166 miles northeast of Edmonton.

... When I hear some teacher once in a while say "Don't act like an Indian," you know, that really hurts me sometimes. How is an Indian supposed to act by his thinking, you know?

Some of the teachers were real okay but then there were one or two, you know, of the bunch that just didn't seem to even want to bother asking you a question because you felt like they were -- like you were too dumb to answer it anyway or something.

"My teacher hit me!"

GRIMSHAW, ALBERTA —On September 7, 1971, Annette Belcourt, a grade two student at Grimshaw Public School was taken to the hospital in Peace River. Earl Jones, President of the Metis Association in Grimshaw, and Mrs. Belcourt went to the R.C.M.P. station and laid a formal complaint. No charges have been laid. The complaint was directed against Mrs. Lyster, Annette Melcourt's teacher, for striking Annette. Annette is an epileptic but has not had any seizures, until her first day at school, since 1967. Earl Jones who brought Annette to the hospital stated, "When we took her to the hospital, she couldn't walk or sit up properly. To hear her talk was listening to someone who was learning to talk." Mrs. Lyster had been involved with another disagreement the year before with the same family.

When Annette arrived at home after school Mrs. Lorna Belcourt, her mother, said, "All she could say was, 'my teacher hit me.'" Mrs. Belcourt, the mother of seven children, six of whom have an epileptic history, went to see the principal of the school. The principal's reply was that "Annette was seen by Mrs. Newflet, crying with four other students." Mrs. Belcourt got no satisfaction. Mrs. Belcourt did take five of her seven children from school and is planning to take the remaining two and moving them to a different school. The Metis Association of Alberta was informed of the incident in Grimshaw.

There were delegates in Grimshaw to investigate but since then have left and the complainants are waiting for their return. Mr. Alfred Durocher heard of someone investigating about Annette. He stated when we met, "I thought you were from the Metis Association. They came once and said they would be back." Mrs. Belcourt wants to press charges against Mrs. Lyster.

R. Well at the time I dropped out because it was the first time I was in the city and I ran into a lot of prejudice in my school. At the start of that year there were ten of us native students and at the end there were just two or three. The rest quit . . . I guess I shouldn't have quit school . . . I should have fought this thing, you know and showed them I was proud of being native. But instead I turned away and I quit school.

I. Because of the prejudice?

R. Yes.



Deplorable living conditions... are part of substandard education.