

Corporate power versus Native rights

by Collin Gribbons

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OTTAWA (CUP)---We're becoming more interested in oil these days. Canada - land of boundless resources, the great well of untapped energy supplies, provider of heat for the cold winters of the American midwest - is finally beginning to feel the energy squeeze. Some say it's because the National Energy Board has been conned all along by the oil companies into believing there were abundant reserves. Some claim the country has pursued a shortsighted extraction policy and an even worse course of foreign export. Whatever the cause, though, the cheap oil is running out and Canadians are starting to feel the pinch.

What the oil industry doesn't tell you in its slick public relations productions is that the land the pipeline is going through is already occupied and used by someone else. The Native people of the Northwest Territories are the inhabitants, and if development is not carefully controlled in the north, it will ruin their way of life.

"Don't think for a moment that because we now live in settlements we are no longer dependent on the land," says James Arvaluk, president of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (National Eskimo Brotherhood). "The Inuit still live in a hunting, fishing and trapping economy. The land, the seas and the wildlife are essential to us, as much as vegetables and bread are essential to you."

The same is true for the Indian people of the Northwest Territories - the Dene. Together, the Native people of the north are preparing to present claims to vast amounts of land in the north to the Federal

government. They have never been consulted as to what type of development would take place on their land. In order to ensure that they can control industrial activity to preserve their way of life, they are now making land settlement proposals to the government.

The Dene and Inuit are asking for hundreds of thousands of square miles of land in the Northwest Territories. On February 27, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada is scheduled to make its land claims submission to the Federal government. The Dene are expected to follow suit a couple of months later. They will demand outright ownership of some of the land - 250,000 square miles for the Inuit - and exclusive hunting, fishing and trapping rights to the rest.

Even now, with the advent of white technology in the Northwest Territories, the Native people use the land extensively. McMaster University Professor Milton Freeman and over 100 researchers spent over two years compiling the Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Study, an exhaustive, three-volume inquiry into the land use patterns of the Inuit people in the north. His team of researchers interviewed almost every adult Inuit hunter. And they found that, even though the people can work at construction jobs or other wage-earning activities for part of the year, they still depend on the land to make their living. The Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories has completed a similar study, which reaches the same conclusions. So the land is still very important to the people.

Freeman's study, in fact, found that

people range over thousand of square miles in search of game. In Resolute Bay, for example, the average hunter travels over 6,400 square miles in search of polar bear, and 1500 for caribou. Land use in the Territories is not intensive - it's extremely extensive, because of the land and the climate.

The Federal government, to the Dene and Inuit of the Northwest Territories, is not a body to represent people's needs. Inuit Tapirisat president James Arvaluk recently called the north "Canada's forgotten colony." To both the Dene and the Inuit, the government is a colonial power.

In attempting to pursue their own way of life, and preserve their culture, language and identity, the Native people are running into direct opposition to the Federal government and the developers it represents in the north.

"There are, in fact, two norths," says the Indian Brotherhood. "On the one hand, there is the north as the last frontier of the big developers for whom the name of the game is resource exploitation, and to whom we Indian people are a nuisance and a relic of the past. On the other hand, there is the north that is the homeland of the original people, now struggling to assert our right to self-determination and resolved to build a world in which we can flourish indefinitely."

The land claims of the Native people in the north are not a threat to southerners, as some hysterical writers would have us believe. Rather, they represent the just aspirations of an oppressed minority. They should be given the same support which Canadians have given to oppressed people the world over.

The issue is not money

"If someone told you to give up both your occupation and your lifestyle and said that your children and their children could never go back to that occupation, how would you react? What if your entire community were told to quit working, without any guarantee that new jobs would be available, could you accept a choice like that?"

These are the questions that Susan Mayo raised when introducing the subject of native land claims. "After all", she points out, "the white South is telling our Native People to abandon their traditional economic base and with it, their culture, with no guarantees that they will be able to find new jobs or re-structure their society in a meaningful way".

Ms. Mayo is one of the local organizers of the national Land Claims Week, March 7-13. The week is an attempt to bring the land claims issue, especially with respect to the Northwest Territories but also in Nova Scotia, to the attention of the Canadian public. The local organizers have arranged the visit to Halifax of Rod Hardy (President, Metis local for North Mackenzie-Great Bear Region), Eddy Koyina (Regional Vice-president, National Indian Brotherhood), and Meeka Wilson, of the Inuit Tapirisat. They will be speaking on March 10, at the Weldon Law building and March 11 at a workshop on the issue.

According to the organizers, the position of the Native Peoples is quite clear. They have lived on their land for thousands of years, carefully respecting the fragile environment of the North so that they could support themselves. Of little interest to the South, the land was never surrendered to the federal government. However, now that oil and gas have been discovered in the North, the federal government and

the oil companies have assumed that they can do what they wish with the land. This could spell disaster for the Native Peoples since exploration and pipeline construction will not only disrupt their hunting and fishing, but bring in large numbers of white workers who will create major social problems for the small Native communities of the N.W.T.

The Native Peoples therefore want to establish their legal ownership of their land so that their right to control development will be recognized. The land claims are not intended to prevent development but rather to control its speed and direction to minimize the disruption and to get the most benefit for the Native Peoples.

"It is crucial that the land claims be recognized before construction of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline begins if environmental and social damage are to be minimized. The past record of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development is one of lip service to the interests of the Native People and almost complete freedom for the oil companies to do what they want in the North. Therefore, the Native Peoples feel that their own interests will be taken care of only if they themselves control the development. But this won't happen unless their land claims are respected by the governments and companies involved," says Ms. Mayo.

"We do not want a repeat of the James Bay project where, despite the court's recognition of the land claims, the project was allowed to continue because so much money had been spent by the time a court decision was reached. The natives who were being dispossessed by that project had no say in its development and were left in a weak position, negotiating for com-

ensation after the fact. Such arbitrary treatment of our original citizens is not only unacceptable, but immoral".

Whether or not it is immoral, the federal government is under considerable pressure to allow a start of construction on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. Although it established the Berger Commission to enquire into the impact of the pipeline, the federal government has said that it may not wait for the Berger report, nor will it feel bound by the report.

Since the government does not seem to feel any moral obligations, the Native Peoples are hoping to get political support from the rest of the country. They have won a number of legal battles, but recognize that the ultimate decisions are political. "It is important for the people of southern Canada to tell the government that they don't want our Native Peoples to carry a huge social burden to subsidize energy waste in the rest of Canada and the U.S.," says Ms. Mayo, "since the justification for a quick start on construction is the need for additional energy supplies for the South. If the federal government allows further development of the North without a just land claims settlement, they are saying that they will sacrifice our Native Peoples for the comfort of the rest of us in North America. We think that when Canadians recognize the issue, they will find that totally unacceptable".

The organizing committee is also working with the Union of Nova Scotia Indians which has a number of land claims. The Union is seeking compensation for lost lands and plans to use the funds to combat the many problems the MicMacs are facing, such as high unemployment high dropout rates from school, and high mortality rates for both young and old.



Native Land Settlements Week March 7-13

The Native Peoples of the N.W.T. are currently preparing to negotiate land settlements with the Federal government. They are seeking land settlements which give them a voice in deciding the future of their homeland and how it can be shared by all Canadians.

Native People from the N.W.T. and Nova Scotia will attend various events in Sydney, Antigonish, Truro and Halifax to discuss "Native Land Settlements" on the following dates:

Nova Scotia - March 9, 10, 11.

A Workshop....

At the present time there are fifty-seven land settlements being negotiated in Nova Scotia. In conjunction with **Native Land Settlements Week** the Nova Scotia Division of CPAC has planned a workshop to be held on

THURSDAY, MARCH 11, 1976
9:30 A.M.

**4th floor
1588 Barrington St.**

Native resource people from N.W.T. and Nova Scotia will be in attendance. The workshop is for anyone interested or concerned about native land settlements and particularly for planners, environmental groups and government officials.