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Canadian state

United against state violence in Canada

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First Nations, Idle No More and Black Lives Matter activists in Toronto held a nine-day occupation in April of the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada office in order to shine a light on a sharp increase of attempted suicides in Attawapiskat and First Nation communities.

Since September 2015, 100 members of the Attawapiskat First Nation—a community of only 2,000 people—have tried to commit suicide and one person has died. On one night alone, 11 members tried to take their own lives.

The occupation, which began on April 13, demanded that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau visit Attawapiskat and called out the Canadian government's culpability for the deteriorating social conditions of First Nation people. Solidarity actions with Attawapiskat also took place in Regina, Saskatchewan; Vancouver, British Columbia; Winnipeg, Manitoba; and Gatineau, Quebec.

The Attawapiskat Nation is a remote nation, located on the shores of the James Bay in Northern Ontario, that has been in the headlines in Canada consistently in reference to broken promises and government failures.

Attawapiskat gained international attention three years ago when Chief Theresa Spence engaged in a hunger strike to demand a meeting with former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Spence's action—along with anger over a budget bill that deregulated environmental protections of seas and waterways, attacked Indigenous sovereignty and attacked workers rights—sparked the Idle No More movement.

Idle No More (INM) brought together thousands of people from all over Canada, spread internationally and has come to educate a new generation of activists about the connection between Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice.

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Long before the outbreak of INM, the Attawapiskat Nation regularly protested lack of funding and resources for education, housing, infrastructure, health care and jobs programs.

In 2000, the Attawapiskat elementary school had to be closed due to exposure to a diesel fuel spill that occurred in 1979, but still contaminated the area where the school was located. The government time and again retreated from promises to rebuild the school, and classes were held in portable trailers.

An education battle continued over the next decade and a half, led by Attawapiskat children and spreading across First Nations. The movement demands were not only for the school to be funded and rebuilt in Attawapiskat, but also for the rights of First Nations people to quality education across Canada. The movement was powerfully captured in the documentary film *Hi-Ho Mistahey!*

Another key demand in Attawapiskat has been for quality homes. Some people live in crowded and poorly designed trailer homes, and a few families live in tents or sheds. Then there is unemployment, which hovers around 70 percent, and the incredibly high cost of food: anywhere from twice to four times higher than further south.

Many politicians, including liberals, have asked over the years why First Nations people in Attawapiskat "don't just leave" the area they have called home for centuries. Pundits regularly complain that it's just "too expensive" to get resources to such a desolate place.

But since 2004, when Ontario's first diamond mine was set up by De Beers Canada on and around Attawapiskat Nation lands, the company has had no problem flying in tons of equipment and spending almost \$1 billion to set up its operation.

De Beers' yearly profits total in the tens of millions of dollars, while the lack of infrastructure and funding for Attawapiskat continues—a hypocrisy not lost on this First Nation community. In 2009, members set up roadblocks to De Beers' mining operations to demand greater resources for their community.

These are the conditions that need to be brought to light to give context to the gut-wrenching stories finally reaching the media about suicide attempts involving children as young as nine.

This experience might be extreme, but the crisis for the Attawapiskat Nation is shared by Indigenous nations throughout Canada and the U.S. The suicide rate for First Nations in Canada is up to 12 times higher than other Canadians. In the U.S., Indigenous communities face the highest suicide rate of any group.

Ever since Europeans first arrived, whatever treaties were made with Indigenous peoples were regularly broken. The Canadian government continues this history today with its drive towards more fossil fuel extraction, laying pipelines across the country—often times through Native land without consent.

Describing the April solidarity action in Regina, Warrior Publications reported that "the problems facing Attawapiskat are well known in Saskatchewan communities. Three First Nations in the province also declared mental health emergencies back in March. The problem is also rooted in Indigenous people not having control over their own communities."

Robyn Pitawanakwat, who organized the Regina protest, said: "The idea that we cannot administrate our own communities and our own funds is ridiculous. There are people who have never been to these communities deciding who gets the money, and it needs to stop."

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In the last several years during which the Idle No More movement arose, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has spread, crossing the border into Canada.

Like INM, BLM is an international phenomenon. During the uprising in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, solidarity actions took place in Toronto connecting the murder of Mike Brown and the struggle for justice to local cases of racist police violence in Canada, such as the police killing of Jermaine Carby in September 2014.

Immigrant, Muslim, Black and First Nation communities face similar repression, violence and racial profiling in Canada as their counterparts in the U.S.

The international crisis for refugees fleeing war, occupation, climate change and poverty has had a particular impact in Canada. While Canada has taken in more refugees than the U.S., it hasn't combatted the racism those immigrants

then face in their new country.

Andrew Loku was born in Lire in the Kajo-Keji district of what is now South Sudan and emigrated to Canada to escape a civil war. He was described as a sweet man with an understandable history of mental health issues because of his experiences living in a war-torn country.

Loku was killed in a hail of bullets last summer when cops started firing within seconds after they showed up in response to reports that Loku was allegedly wielding a hammer during an argument over noise in his apartment building. When there was no indictment for the cop who shot Loku, protests broke out in what activists called Toronto's "Mike Brown moment".

This case is far from unique for the Black population of Canada, which faces systematic racism and de facto racial profiling, through a practice known as "carding" that is similar to U.S. police departments use of "stop and frisk." As Erica Violet Lee, an Indigenous rights activist with the Idle No More movement who has also built solidarity with BLM Toronto, told Democracy Now!:

I was actually in Toronto when there was the giant rally about Black Lives Matter after the death of Andrew Loku, and recognizing...these issues are interconnected. The fact that Black people on this land are subject to extreme police brutality is directly related to the fact that the North-West Mounted Police, now the RCMP, were started to police Indigenous bodies, to keep us on reserves, to keep settlers safe.

So this is the history of this land that we're living with, and I think that the general Canadian public doesn't understand the type of violence that we face every day. You know, it's scary to walk down the street as an Indigenous woman, as a queer two-spirit Indigenous person, and it shouldn't be.

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There are a number of lessons that U.S. activists can learn from the way that First Nations, Indigenous and BLM Toronto activists are fighting together against the systematic and structural racism perpetuated by the Canadian state.

One lesson is that state violence and neglect towards oppressed populations means that our movements need to make demands to better material conditions where communities face substandard housing, schools and health care—because police violence is connected to dispossession and poverty.

Out of the occupation of the Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada office in solidarity with Attawapiskat, activists made over 20 demands to improve the community, "including a youth center, elder camp, emergency mental health responders, firefighters and libraries," reported the National Post

Another lesson activists in the U.S. are all too familiar with is that change isn't automatic under a government led by more liberal political figures—and that reforms need to be demanded and organized around instead.

For example, the new Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recently apologized for the "great injustice" of Komagata Maru, a 1914 decision by the Canadian government to turn away a boat of South Asian immigrants. But racism isn't just a thing of the past in Canada. It operates against today's immigrant populations—not only through racist policing, but in the recently passed federal budget that included minimal support for Indigenous youth.

Lastly, another lesson to be learned from the movements in Canada is how solidarity must be actively built among oppressed peoples if we don't want our movements to lose.

The need for solidarity has been central in the struggles in Canada, where Indigenous activists were a major presence in the 15-day occupation that protested the lack of accountability for the police murder of Loku.

#BlackLivesMatter co-founder Patrisse Cullors noted "the focus on Black and Indigenous solidarity as a key theme in BLM Toronto's work—a practice that's lacking in the U.S.," as the Vice website wrote.

Janaya Khan, a co-founder of the Toronto BLM chapter, explained in an interview for Vice:

We're deeply invested in dismantling the stolen land versus stolen labor narrative and recognizing that both of those things sort of happened simultaneously. Mass incarceration is impacting our populations with the same sort of speed and is dangerous in the same way. [Indigenous allies] held it down in the space and what came out of it, and what will continue to come out of BLM Toronto is "Black lives matter on Indigenous land."

Khan went on to argue that because of Canada's relatively small Black population, its Black Lives Matter movement must be part of a larger struggle—"one where we recognize Black liberation as an integral pillar to liberation as a whole."

In the U.S. over the last couple years, movements like #MuslimLivesMatter and #NativeLivesMatter have sprung up both in solidarity with BLM and against other aspects of racist state violence—but they have sometimes been incorrectly accused of "appropriation" or "co-optation."

The actions in Toronto show how bringing together different groups that face police and state terror strengthens all movements—and allows for education about various aspects of oppression that can break down harmful divisions on our side. The collective action and solidarity between Indigenous movements and BLM in Toronto needs to be celebrated and repeated.

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