

# Leonard Peltier and Big Mountain

Five hundred years of resistance continues

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1992 marks the five hundred year anniversary of the Columbus expedition, which many governments and corporations are celebrating as “An Encounter of Cultures.” To counter this, a loosely organized movement under the banner of “500 Years of Resistance,” seeks to overturn the prevailing mythology about the Columbus voyages. Many people in Europe and the Americas are organizing cultural and educational events toward that end.

The indigenous people of North America are survivors of a holocaust of immeasurable proportions. Reexamination of American history is a moral necessity for the US as a whole, and a challenge for the individual. When many non-Indian people look at events of the past, they acknowledge that what occurred was an atrocity motivated by racism and greed, but they believe these things ended with the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890.

If an examination of the past is going to have any meaning for the future, however, it is necessary to look beyond 1890 and assess the fate of Indian people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, about which most non-Indians know little or nothing. The Indian Wars did not end 100 years ago but have continued throughout this century in a more sophisticated form with just as disastrous consequences for Indian people.

In a discussion of these issues, it must be remembered that US treaties are “law”/“laws” made between sovereign nations. The US does not make treaties with individual states or minority populations. This is often forgotten or trivialized, but the issue of native sovereignty is at the heart of every traditional land struggle in North America. Also, when the reservation system was set up, Indians were pushed onto unarable or ungazable lands. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was discovered that large mineral reserves (coal, shale oil, natural gas and, most importantly, uranium) lie under this “undesirable” land.

So again Indian people found themselves in the way of “progress.” The US government throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century has colluded with private interests, particularly the energy conglomerates, and violated every treaty made with the Indian nations in order to grab what little land these people have left. A central plank in this strategy was the establishment of the tribal council system, which gives the appearance of Native autonomy but is in fact controlled by the US Department of the Interior. Most Indian tribes oppose tribal councils, but they are the only Indian voice recognized by the federal government and are empowered to sell or lease tribal land. In recent years the government has acted with particular ruthlessness at Big Mountain in Arizona and Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

Big Mountain is a community in the Black Mesa region of the Navaho Reservation where hundreds of Dine families (Dine is the traditional Navajo’s name for themselves) are currently facing imminent forced removal from their homes on Indian land so that the Peabody Coal Co. can expand its strip-mine operation there, already the largest in the world. The people who live in some of the last traditional Native communities in North America have been fighting relocation for the past sixteen years.

In 1974, Congress enacted Public Law 93-531, which mandated the relocation of 10,000 Dine people. This was supposedly done to resolve a land dispute between the Navajo and Hopi who have lived side by side for centuries. However, the dispute was a hoax fabricated to secure title for the execution of mineral development leases on Black Mesa. PL 93-531 was itself the capstone on several decades of lies and legal maneuvers too numerous and complex to describe here. Neither is there space enough to describe the fate of the thousands of Dine who have already relocated, more than half of whom are now homeless, or the hardships and harassment endured by those who have chosen to remain on the land.

Nevertheless, it remains US law. Relocation was supposed to have been completed by July 8, 1986. Things have moved slowly—in part because both Peabody Coal and the US government have maintained a public posture that denies the reality of what is happening—but they are now coming to a head very quickly. The Bush administration wants the situation wrapped up this year because Peabody Coal has negotiated some big deals with Japan which require immediate expansion of mining. The sale of this coal is expected to help narrow the trade deficit with the Japanese, so there is every reason to believe the ax will fall for good in the summer of 1992. The dramatic increase in harassment of people on the land last fall bears this out.

The Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota sits on top of the largest uranium deposits in the US. Uranium mining has long been opposed by the traditional Lakotas. But in the early 1970s, Pine Ridge had a tribal council headed by Dick Wilson who favored uranium development and routinely murdered or assaulted his opponents. This situation led the traditional Lakotas to ask the American Indian Movement (AIM) for help, which resulted in the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973.

In the backlash of the next three years, scores of Indian people at Pine Ridge were murdered and hundreds more were victims of violent assaults. The vast majority of these crimes have never been investigated, even though the FBI had jurisdiction over them and, at the time, maintained in the Pine Ridge area its highest ratio of agents to civilians found anywhere in the country. The FBI was providing Wilson's vigilante squad with intelligence about AIM members and an impressive array of military assault weapons because the federal police were massed at Pine Ridge for the purpose of destroying AIM.

This reign of terror reached a climax on June 26, 1975, when two FBI agents opened fire on an AIM camp near Oglala, South Dakota, initiating a shoot-out in which both agents and AIM member, Joe Stuntz, were killed. Predictably, Stuntz's death has never been investigated. On the day of the shoot-out Dick Wilson was in Washington, DC illegally signing over one-eighth of the reservation for uranium development.

The deaths of the two agents led to more terror at Pine Ridge and eventually AIM member Leonard Peltier was sentenced to two consecutive life terms for aiding and abetting their deaths. He has spent the past 15 years in federal prison for a crime he did not commit, convicted and sentenced on the basis of evidence and testimony which the government acknowledged over a decade ago was false. Leonard was recently denied an evidentiary hearing in his latest effort to get a new trial, and there is now a renewed effort to get Congress to convene hearings on the matter.

The two situations briefly described here reflect a pattern whose outlines can be traced all over the continent. The Columbus Quintcentennial raises the issues of historical injustice and cultural genocide, but with eyes squarely on the past. Our tears will not help Crazy Horse and will do even less for his descendants. Reality in Indian country today means nearly total unemployment, forced sterilization, forced relocation and malnutrition. It means having the highest rate of infant mortality and the lowest life expectancy. It means chronic injustice and political assassination. These are acts of war, pure and simple, and the citizens of the US need to recognize not only the occurrence of these things, but also the degree to which they profit from them. This is especially true of people who consider themselves part of the movement for social change in this country, because the moral integrity of the movement rests on its ability to face the wrongs still being done to the Native people of North America. The struggles to stop relocation at Big Mountain and to gain justice for Leonard Peltier are both good places to start.

For more information about Leonard Peltier or to donate towards his legal expenses, contact: The Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, PO Box 583, Lawrence KS 66044, (913)842-5774.

To contribute directly to Dine resisters at Big Mountain, contact: Support for Future Generations, PO Box 22134, Flagstaff, AZ 86002.

—Authors: Mary McLaughlin (Seattle Leonard Peltier Support Group, Arthur Miller (Bayou La Rose, Red Knife Defense/Support Committee), and Pete Murney (Support for Native Sovereignty, Seattle Big Mountain Support Group)

## **A call for International Days of Action to support Native Peoples**

\*June 26<sup>th</sup>—Anniversary of the Oglala shoot-out. Day of action to Free Leonard Peltier.

\*July 6<sup>th</sup>—Anniversary of the relocation deadline at Big Mountain. Day of action for Big Mountain.

\*October 12<sup>th</sup>—Day of Action in honor of 500 years of Ongoing Native Resistance in the Americas.

Please join these actions any way you can. Send information about your activities to: Support for Native Sovereignty, PO Box 2104, Seattle, WA 98111.

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