

Unist'ot'en People & Territory Under Attack

Canadian Government, Mounties, Corporations & Courts Arrayed Against Native People's Land

Jeff Shantz

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As has been the case throughout colonial conquest, the military police force of the Canadian state, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) have facilitated the occupation of Indigenous lands by resource capital. Most recently, the state forced its way onto Wet'suwet'en territories in northern so-called British Columbia to secure access for a Coastal GasLink liquified natural gas pipeline (LNG).

One of the most significant mobilizations of opposition to extractives industries, tar sands, liquified natural gas, and their associated transportation infrastructures, especially pipelines, has been the camp established by the Unist'ot'en clan of the Wet'suwet'en Nation.

The Unist'ot'en established the camp on their traditional territories in 2012. They are careful to clarify that the camp is not a blockade or a protest but, in fact, an act of living on their own land, an expression of their sovereignty on unceded territory. That is, lands that neither the provincial government of British Columbia, the federal government of Canada, nor any corporation have any claim to or title over.

At the same time, the camp site forms a physical barrier, or block, to development across the area on which it is located. It is a physical, communal presence.

The Unist'ot'en Camp posed a serious focal point of opposition to the planned Enbridge Northern Gateway tar sands pipeline that would have delivered bitumen to the coastal waters near Prince Rupert, B.C. That opposition played a part in the Liberal Party federal government decision to cancel the project. The current threat is now the Coastal Gaslink project, a 670-kilometer pipeline that would transport natural gas from a station in the province near Dawson Creek to a new LNG Canada refinery near Kitimat—part of a \$40-billion LNG project.

The Unist'ot'en camp poses the most significant opposition to extractives and pipelines developments in British Columbia and, as such, is under physical, legal, and ideological threat from multiple levels of government and forces of the state. Most immediately, they face a massive mobilization of RCMP forces in towns near the camp. The RCMP is the ongoing historic force of military colonialism and dispossession and displacement of Indigenous people for the Canadian state project of conquest and control of their territories.

On December 14, 2018, a British Columbia Supreme Court Justice, Marguerite Church, issued an injunction temporarily ordering camp residents and opponents of the Coastal GasLink pipeline to allow workers access to an area the company wants to develop south of Houston, B.C. to allow the company to carry out work on the \$6.2-billion pipeline project.

The injunction came into effect on December 17, and is set to remain in place until no later than May 1, 2019 (a significant day for anarchists). Coastal GasLink wanted and sought a permanent injunction, but Justice Church ruled that the defendants didn't have enough time to respond to the company's notice of claim and so delivered the temporary order. Notably, the injunction came with an enforcement order authorizing the RCMP to uphold the injunction if there is continued opposition at the site.

After the temporary injunction was handed down to force access to the unceded Unist'ot'en lands, more Wet'suwet'en clans organized to establish an additional checkpoint on Morice River Road. The five clans of the Wet'suwet'en have come together to protect their territory.

On December 18, Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs visited the new Gidimt'en Camp to provide a solid front against the proposed pipeline developments. The Unist'ot'en Camp and the newly established Gidimt'en checkpoint have received support from all five hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en Nation.

The new checkpoint is supposed to be outside the injunction area, but the company had the courts expand the injunction coverage to include it. On December 21, 2018, the injunction was expanded to cover the entire forest service road, including the second checkpoint.

On January 4, 2019, word circulated that the RCMP was undertaking a mass mobilization of special forces for an invasion of the Wet'suwet'en territories to remove the people from their unceded lands.

On January 5, members of the RCMP's Aboriginal Police Liaison met with the Wet'suwet'en Hereditary Chiefs and threatened that specially trained tactical forces would be deployed to remove Wet'suwet'en people from their sovereign territory.

On January 8, the armed military force of the RCMP breached the gate at Gitdumt'en Camp and began forcefully removing people from the land. The RCMP first set up exclusion zones for the media and public, and cut WiFi and cell communications inside the area. At least 14 people were arrested at the site. This mobilization and assault were rightly identified as acts of war. It involves an invasion of sovereign territories by an external force. And that force, the RCMP, is an explicitly military organization.

Immediately in response to the state violence against the Wet'suwet'en land defenders, solidarity actions were held in over 60 locations globally. Follow up actions have taken place including a several hours long shutdown of the busy Port of Vancouver, an economic disruption aimed at imposing a cost on capital. There has been much organizing and strategizing to take struggles on a broad level to the Canadian state (federally and provincially) and to the extractives corporations themselves.

In late January, Coastal GasLink, escorted by the RCMP, moved onto Unist'ot'en territory beyond the camp site, ostensibly to do surveying. On January 23, Coastal GasLink bulldozed a trapline, a main source of sustenance for the community, during their construction work. On February 13, significant archeological findings, two stone tools, in an area disrupted by company work led to a halting of construction while archeological assessments are done. All of this has happened without consent of the Unist'ot'en.

They have made it clear that this struggle continues.

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