

# Burning Colonialism

## Canadian Wildfires and Indigenous Resistance

Jeff Shantz

2023

2023 has officially been designated as the worst fire season on record in so-called Canada, with almost 20 million acres burned by summer's end. While these wildfires deeply ravaged many communities, they have most severely impacted Indigenous communities, many of whose territories are northern, rural, or wilderness.

Indigenous Services Canada reports that more than 21,000 people from 45 Indigenous communities have been forced from their homes so far in 2023. Indigenous people are 10 times more likely to die in a fire than non-Indigenous people.

The impacts are communal and threaten the very cultures of Indigenous communities. Often overlooked in colonial frameworks, the land scorched in wildfires sustains treaty rights, such as hunting and cultural practices, and Indigenous people warn that in the absence of serious transformations in relations with nature, the land and traditional ways of life are threatened.

### **ECOLOGICAL GRIEF**

Amy Cardinal Christianson, an Indigenous fire specialist from Treaty 8 Metis territory says that the impacts of wildfires leave a lasting form of "ecological grief." This involves both the immediate trauma of the major fires, but also the long-term trauma of destruction of lands and the bases of community sustenance.

The Treaty No. 8 area encompasses a landmass of approximately 840,000 kilometres, and is home to 39 First Nations communities in Alberta, Saskatchewan, the Northwestern Territories, and British Columbia.

Christianson says, "When you're trying to find yourself after returning after a fire evacuation, one of the things that really grounds you is being able to go out and participate in your cultural activities, but you can't do that. It's very difficult for people to cope." People returning to their lands and homes is not the end of the emergency as some assume.

According to Maurice Ratt, the emergency management coordinator for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, "We lose our traditional lands for things such as hunting and trapping. The animals are being chased away. There's scarce vegetation for smaller animals such as rabbits to forage for food."

Discussions of just climate transitions and green economies often focus on industrial work and jobs, but overlook forms of work and livelihood undertaken by Indigenous communities in sustaining themselves. Many live directly off the land.

### **INDIGENOUS FIRE WORK & SOVEREIGNTY**

Indigenous communities are economically deprived on a mass scale when it comes to addressing major fire emergencies. In so-called British Columbia, most of which is unceded territory, only a small number of Indigenous

fire services even have an emergency dispatch. When the heat dome fires razed Lytton, BC, to the ground, Chief Matt Pasco, who chairs the Nlaka'pamux Nation Tribal Council, told reporters that it took hours for emergency authorities to answer his requests for help and co-ordination as residents evacuated.

Indigenous communities are fighting for greater control over fire fighting capacities on their territories and resources to sustain them. They are currently impeded in these efforts as part of the ongoing colonial approach to fire management by the Canadian state. In addition to lack of funds and equipment, and blocked access to those, they face inconsistent, overlapping, and piecemeal systems of federal and provincial authorities that often exclude Indigenous communities.

Indigenous sovereignty and giving land back would address issues of healthy care of territorial lands. For Indigenous communities, this would mean moving from colonial fire management regimes and properly using fire on their territories. They rightly argue that the present-day wildfires, in addition to showing the horrors of capitalist climate crises, point up the failures of fire suppression policies and other industrial approaches that see fire as a force hostile to wildlands. The current approach is rooted in colonial orientations to nature which sees human progress as requiring the subjugation of the natural world.

As Christianson, the Indigenous fire specialist suggests, “Settlers brought a vision of removing fire from the landscape to Canada. But when you take away fire, these landscapes become overgrown.”

Indigenous fire workers suggest solutions such as cultural burns, using controlled fires to reduce tinder and contribute to healthier ecosystems. This can encourage biodiversity and thin out overgrown areas that might lead to larger fires. If this is a way forward, it should be Indigenous people leading it. Yet Indigenous people have been excluded from many fire management plans.

Dane de Souza, of Metis Nation, a former wildland firefighter, calls Indigenous approaches to fire a “beautiful truth” and argues that it takes on pressing significance in the context of climate crises that imperil life on the planet. In his words, “When we talk about climate resilience and sustainability, that’s Indigenous knowledge. What is being Indigenous? It’s a connection to the land.”

## **WILDFIRES, COLONIALISM & RESISTANCE**

The expansive and frequent character of wildfires and heat domes, are manifestations of deeper underlying crises—the existential threat of capitalism caused climate change. Indigenous communities have been at the forefront of struggles against extractive capital and fossil fuel industries.

Wet’suwet’en land defenders and Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs have been engaged in powerful struggles over several years on the Northwest coast against the Coastal GasLink pipeline being constructed across their territories to connect shale gas sources with two liquefaction and export facilities (LNG Canada and Cedar LNG) in Kitimat.

Gidimeen is one of five clans of the Wet’suwet’en Nation. Gidim’t’en Checkpoint was established to control access to Cas Yikh House territory within the larger Gidim’t’en clan territory on the Morice River. In 2020, allies carried out blockades across Canada in solidarity with the Wet’suwet’en.

Secwepemc land and water defenders have engaged in lengthy struggles to stop the expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline across unceded Secwepemc territory. Among their tactics is physically blocking access to pipeline construction by building 10 tiny houses along the 518 km pipeline route. So far, they have built six houses on Secwepemc territory near Blue River and Moonbeam Creek. The tiny houses serve a dual purpose. In addition to providing a physical barrier or blockade, the tiny houses provide community housing to Secwepemc families.

A challenge remains for anarchist organizers to build solidarity with Indigenous land and water defenders, as in “Shut Down Canada” blockades in support of Wet’suwet’en land defenders recently. This is the orientation of solidarity direct actions against colonialism and its climate crises.

Jeff Shantz is a longtime anarchist who lives in Surrey, so-called British Columbia (unceded Kwantlen, Katzie, and Semiahmoo territories). He organizes with Anti-Police Power Surrey and the Defund 604 Network. His latest book is *Organizing Anarchy: Anarchism in Action* (Haymarket, 2021).

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