

Canadian aboriginal leadership collaborates with police

By Carl Bronski
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A February 15 report in the *Toronto Star* has detailed the close collaboration between the federal Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Ontario and Quebec provincial police forces with leaders of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) to “exchange information about protests and develop common stances” in the run-up to a 2007 day of action launched by aboriginal activists to draw attention to the abysmal living conditions of native people in Canada.

The revelations further highlight the growing abyss between the official leadership of the aboriginal community and the hundreds of thousands of natives facing deprivation both on Indian reservations and in the country’s inner cities. This dissatisfaction was most recently expressed by the Idle No More movement, which arose late last year outside the traditional, state-supported Indian leadership organized in the Assembly of First Nations and quickly snowballed. By early December, increasing numbers of disaffected reservation and inner-city aboriginal youth were joining with a section of university-educated native academics and professionals to denounce the Conservative government’s attacks on aboriginal rights and living conditions as outlined in its most recent austerity budget (Bill C-45).

Last January, current AFN Grand Chief Shawn Atleo attempted to head off the burgeoning movement through his attendance with other chiefs at a hurriedly called one-day “summit meeting” with Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Harper, who had initially declined even this perfunctory meeting, reversed his position when saturation media coverage of a two-month hunger strike by Northern Ontario chief Theresa Spence, coupled with coast-to-coast demonstrations, convinced him that the AFN could in fact be useful in demobilizing the native protests.

The meeting, which predictably bore no fruit, nonetheless heightened divisions within the AFN itself—a body comprising some 630 band council chiefs—as competing factions sought to regain control over the disaffected native youth and advance their own claims for AFN leadership. To burnish their credentials with the native activists, a significant minority of the chiefs refused to accompany Atleo to the summit. Immediately after the Harper meeting, a politically weakened Atleo temporarily withdrew from the AFN leadership on sick leave. Spence ended her hunger strike shortly thereafter. Idle No More protests, lacking a political perspective that went beyond simply pressuring the government to reverse course, dissipated.

The February exposure of the depth of collaboration between the police and the AFN to suppress the earlier 2007 native protests will further undermine the standing of the official aboriginal leadership and reveals the extent of anti-democratic measures embedded in the Canadian state.

As the *Toronto Star* report points out, “the RCMP’s heightened collaboration with the AFN coincided with the start of a sweeping federal program of surveillance of aboriginal communities engaged in land rights activism that continues today.” Then under the leadership of Grand Chief Phil Fontaine, the AFN coordinated a joint media strategy with police officials that included bi-weekly meetings prior to the day of action. On the day itself, an officer from the RCMP was actually granted access to the AFN’s headquarters even as the police were deploying snipers against an unarmed Mohawk blockade of eastern Ontario transportation routes. Fontaine had complained to police about “the growing resolve” of rank-and-file natives to support the 2007 blockades.

Collaboration with the police did not end with the sharing of information. As the *Star* reports, “although an assembly of chiefs had given the AFN the mandate to call for a national day of protest that would involve blockades, the Mounties and the AFN decided to rebrand it as a day for “building bridges – not blockades.”

Government briefing notes showed how important the AFN’s cooperation was to the police. As the *Star* reports, “Their intelligence units ‘capitalized on the relationships in place with the AFN’ as well as with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, (the government) Aboriginal Affairs (department), and private companies to monitor ‘communities of concern’ and ‘people of interest.’”

As Mohawk activist and Idle No More supporter Russell Diabo stated, “The Canadian government managed to get the AFN under Fontaine to work against its own people, using them to contain discontent of First Nations and to try to prevent it from spilling into a broad social movement. Will the AFN turn against Idle No More and support police interventions?”

Neither the current AFN leadership nor the RCMP would respond to reporters’ inquiries on whether the two organizations continue their close collaboration. But an RCMP spokesperson did tell the *Star*— perhaps overcome by a fit of liberal inclusiveness—that his organization “will collect information on any group involved in protest activity, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity.”

Fontaine also has remained silent on his collaboration with police officials. Succeeded by Atleo as AFN leader in 2009, Fontaine joined the Royal Bank of Canada as a special business advisor to assist the bank in penetrating aboriginal markets and has since signed on with the prestigious law firm Norton Rose OR LLP.

The growing social stratification in the aboriginal population underlies both the emergence of the Idle No More movement and the subsequent splits within the AFN. There are currently 82 band chiefs earning over \$300,000 per year in salary. Two hundred and twenty-two more are paid in excess of \$200,000, whilst a further 700 band council members earn over \$100,000 per year in salary. Many of these also have business interests in construction, transport, consulting, casinos and cigarette manufacturing. They exist

side-by-side with hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of their band council constituents who live in abject poverty

The last four decades of land rights struggles, based on the acceptance of capitalism and the promotion of native nationalism with a view to negotiating a new “relationship” with the Canadian state, have taken native people into a political and social dead end. The Harper government’s drive to more directly subjugate the aboriginal population to the capitalist free market is part and parcel of the global assault being conducted by international big business on the working class through wage and job cuts and the destruction of social programs. The same 2012 Conservative budget targeting native rights slashed tens of billions from Medicare over the next decade, raised the retirement age, and cut jobless benefits for all workers.

Many natives and youth mobilized by the Idle No More movement are beginning to investigate these crucial questions. What is required is a mass political movement of the working class, uniting native and non-native people, which challenges the very foundations of the profit system, and advances a socialist program committed to providing the resources for decent jobs, living standards and social facilities—including education, health, and housing—for all, regardless of ethnic or national origin.

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