

As COVID-19 crisis deepens on Native American reservations Sioux tribe faces down South Dakota over sovereignty

By Evan Cohen
15 May 2020

In a display of contempt for Native American tribal sovereignty and the health of impoverished reservation residents, South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem last Friday demanded the Sioux tribe lift checkpoints it had set up to stop the introduction of the coronavirus into tribal territory. The governor threatened the tribes with a federal lawsuit if they didn't comply within 48 hours.

In early April, Oglala and Cheyenne River Sioux tribes located on reservations in southwest and central South Dakota established a series of roadblocks on state and local highways that run through their reservations. The checkpoints were established before reservation residents had detected cases of COVID-19 in an effort to prevent the astonishing cases and deaths seen on the Navajo Nation in the American Southwest. Both tribes also limited non-residents from entering their reservations and made entry conditional on answering health questionnaires.

On May 12, the Oglala Sioux tribe president Julian Bear Runner announced an executive order locking down the Pine Ridge Reservation for 24 hours, after two COVID-19 cases were detected.

South Dakota has seen jumps in new cases, including at the Smithfield Foods Sioux Falls meat processing plant, which saw protests against dangerous working conditions last month.

As of Thursday morning, South Dakota has 3,732 cases and 39 deaths. In the populated counties around Sioux Falls, infection rates are as high as 1 in 62. Among Native Americans in South Dakota, there are at least 184 cases of COVID-19.

Governor Noem's contempt for the health of the South Dakota working class exemplifies the response of the ruling class as a whole. Noem said that 70

percent of South Dakota would be infected and worked to guarantee those numbers by refusing to issue stay-at-home restrictions or limits on interstate travel. Referring to the checkpoints, Cheyenne River Sioux chairman Harold Frazier told *Time* magazine, "We have every legal right to do what we're doing.... We're just trying to save lives, and the lives of all the reservation, not just our [tribal] members."

Due to the impoverished conditions on the reservations in South Dakota, the coronavirus is poised to decimate the Sioux. Like the Navajo Nation, the Oglala Sioux tribe is located on the Pine Ridge Reservation, which encompasses some of the poorest counties in the US. Recently, the social devastation facing workers in Pine Ridge was dramatized in the 2018 film *The Rider*.

Speaking to local news, Debra White Plume, a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe, summarized the dangers the pandemic poses: "I am worried that it could spread like wildfire."

The Sioux are no stranger to ruthless oppression at the hands of the US government, and Governor Noem's claim is the latest in a series of blatant treaty violations by federal and state governments. The Lakota Sioux resisted the brutal US occupation and forceful assimilation into the 1890s, and the conditions imposed by US imperialism more than a century ago persist today.

The Dawes Act of 1887 forced Native Americans to adopt capitalist property relations, destroyed tribal governments, and opened up Native land to white settlement. In 1890, the US government violated the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, breaking up the Great Sioux Reservation into five smaller reservations. While

separating children from their families and re-educating them in brutal boarding schools, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, with the backing of the US Army, forced tribes like the Sioux to farm arid, inhospitable land.

In the winter of 1890, after crops failed, the US government halved rations and forced the Lakota into starvation. On December 28, 1890, Lakota people who registered their resistance by participating in the religious Ghost Dance movement were forcibly relocated to a camp on Wounded Knee Creek, in the Pine Ridge Reservation, and massacred by the US Army. Historians estimate that as many as 300 Lakota, most of whom were women and children, were killed.

In 1973, during a revolutionary upsurge of workers around the world, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) held an open meeting in the town of Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, protesting the tribal president's corruption and abuses and the US government's failures to fulfill treaties. The protest resulted in a 71-day standoff with the US Marshals and Federal Bureau of Investigation that was punctuated by violent exchanges of gunfire and the deaths of two Native American supporters, as well as the alleged murder of civil rights activist Ray Robinson.

More recently, in 2016, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe attempted to block construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline under Lake Oahe, which supplies the tribe's drinking water. In the fall of 2016, after the US government dismissed the tribe's concerns, tens of thousands of protestors gathered in Standing Rock in opposition. Their camps were surrounded by law enforcement and the Army National Guard, and protestors were assaulted with water cannons, flash grenades, and beatings. Six hundred protestors were arrested, dozens sustained serious injuries, and the pipeline received bipartisan support.

Though the US legal system has historically proven to be a dead end for tribes, the South Dakota Governor has no legal power to demand the removal of checkpoints on highways that pass through tribal land and that reservation residents deem necessary for public health. This Wednesday, Noem claimed that "any tribal interaction with traffic otherwise passing through the reservation is unlawful and could actually increase the risk of spreading the virus on the reservation." Noem, who has demonstrated her

indifference to spreading the virus, is worried about disruptions to business. In reality, the checkpoints have allowed contact tracing that identified the known cases on Sioux land.

In addition, the US Constitution outlines a government-to-government relationship between tribes and the federal government in the commerce clause, which authorizes Congress "to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with Indian Tribes."

While the US Department of the Interior directed tribes to discuss travel restrictions on government-owned roads with state authorities, South Dakota's malign negligence and refusal to limit travel has led cases to spread to every corner of the state, demonstrating the futility of negotiating with the state for road closures. According to Cheyenne Sioux chairman Harold Frazier, "these roads are maintained by the state, but they don't own them."

History also shows that identarian movements, legal proceedings, and standoffs with US imperialism end in defeat for Native American workers and poor farmers. Only by turning to the working class as a whole, by expanding the struggle against the pandemic into a struggle against capitalism and for socialism, can the residents of the reservations resolve the historical questions and brutal conditions they face.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>