

# Socialist Voice

Marxist Perspectives for the 21st Century

## The Crisis in Kashechewan: Water Contamination Exposes Canada's Brutal Policies Against Indigenous People

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VANCOUVER BC—The crisis on the Kashechewan Native reserve in northern Ontario has once again placed the brutal social and living conditions of indigenous people in Canada onto the center stage of politics. On October 14th, Health Canada alerted the reserve that their drinking water supply had tested positive for the deadly e. coli bacteria. At the time, over half the 2,000 residents were suffering numerous water-related illnesses, including diarrhea and painful stomach cramps, or they were suffering from horrific skin diseases such as scabies and impetigo caused by other contaminants in the water.

Television images and newspaper photos showing residents' bodies covered in rashes and scars made headline news across Canada, provoking shock and anger throughout the country. The minority Liberal Party government, already weakened by political scandal and unpopularity, was thrown onto the defensive and into a panicked response.

The mainstream capitalist media tried to frame the issue as one of 'mismanagement' or a 'confusion over jurisdiction' between the federal and provincial governments. But the crisis in Kashechewan is not new, and it is not limited to clean water. With rare exceptions, similar or worse conditions prevail in every indigenous community within the borders of what is now 'Canada.' They are a result of the suppression of the right of indigenous

people to self-determination—a result of several centuries of British, French, and Canadian colonialism, and in the most recent period, deepening neo-liberal attacks by the federal government and employers.

What happened in Kashechewan?

*“Paul Martin Was Here.” — A slogan, along with a skull and crossbones, written on the water treatment plant in Kashechewan*

Kashechewan is a reserve inhabited by James Bay Cree people and is located on the shore of James Bay in the province of Ontario. It is only accessible by boat or plane. The community has been on a boil-water advisory from Health Canada for over 2 years, and numerous such advisories have been in place for decades. Since April of this year alone, the Canadian government had shipped over \$250,000 worth of bottled water into Kashechewan.

According to Dr. Murray Trussler, a doctor who went to the reserve shortly after the e. coli contamination was discovered, the widespread presence of skin disease is largely due to a lack of clean bathing water. When shock levels of chlorine are fed into the water system in an attempt to kill the e. coli, this aggravates skin rashes and diseases.

The immediate cause of the water contamination is that the intake for the reserve’s drinking water supply is 135 meters *downstream* from the community’s sewage lagoon. Federal government officials refused to heed the community’s concerns over the choice of location of the water treatment plant, built just over ten years ago. Thus, even when the water treatment plant is fully functioning, the water supply intake is contaminated by sewage.

To further complicate matters, the tide from James Bay regularly pushes sewage back up the river from where it flows.

But the explanation of the tragedy doesn’t stop there. The Kashechewan reserve was built on a flood plain on a spot chosen by the Canadian government at the beginning of the 20th century. The area where the houses of the reserve are now located was built in 1957. In both cases, the elders of the community insisted these were bad locations. Both times they were ignored.

Almost every springtime, the reserve faces flooding problems, despite a large dike surrounding the community built by the federal government to 'protect' it. In addition to contributing to the contamination of the water supply, this flooding has caused severe mould problems in almost every single house and building on the reserve.

The federal government (which has exclusive constitutional responsibility for providing services on Canada's Native reserves) never provided adequate training for operating the reserve's water treatment plant. Numerous reports in the hands of both the federal and Ontario governments predicted that water contamination of Kashechewan was inevitable unless measures were taken to remedy the problem.

### Problems Beyond Clean Water, Problems Beyond Kashechewan

*"I never had a problem with the water. It's the unemployment and boredom that are killing me." — An indigenous youth living on Kashechewan reserve*

The contaminated water is only one of many problems facing the indigenous people of Kashechewan. Social problems are unavoidable as a result of the catastrophic economic situation on the reserve. Unemployment is as high as 87%, a legacy of an historic federal government policy that isolated indigenous people on remote reserves and denied us the opportunities for economic and social development. It was, in the final analysis, a policy of forced assimilation and cultural genocide.

Unemployment rates such as that of Kashechewan are common on virtually every one of the several hundred indigenous reserves in Canada. On average, unemployment and poverty rates in Canada are three times higher for indigenous people than for non-indigenous people.

More than 100 indigenous reserves within the borders of what is now called 'Canada' are under boil water advisories from Health Canada. Fifty of these are within the province of Ontario. A 2001 study by the Canadian government found that almost 75% of the water systems on reserves posed a threat to drinking water. The Kwicksutaineuk reserve, for example, located on Gilford Island off the coast of British Columbia, has lived with a boil water advisory for 9 years straight, and every single house on the reserve has been condemned because of mould problems.

A report published by the Canadian Population Health Collective in 2004, titled 'Improving the Health of Canadians', gives a general idea of what type of life an indigenous person born in Canada can expect. According to the report:

- More than one-third of indigenous people live in homes that do not meet the most basic government standards of acceptability.
- Average life expectancy for indigenous people is ten years less than that of the Canadian average.
- Indigenous children die at three times the rate of non-indigenous children, and are more likely to be born with severe birth defects and conditions like fetal alcohol syndrome.
- The suicide rate of indigenous people is six times higher than the Canada-wide average.
- Tuberculosis rates are 16 times higher in indigenous communities than the rest of the population, and HIV and AIDS infection is growing fastest among indigenous people.

For indigenous people, who comprise roughly four percent of the 31.4 million people within Canada, such statistics are more than representations or symbols. They are everyday reality. Humiliation, theft of dignity, and frustration at being forced to survive in such conditions in what is supposedly one of the wealthiest first-world countries in the world – these are the realities of life for indigenous people in Canada.

#### Canadian Colonialism Directly Responsible for Kashechewan Crisis

The problems of water quality in Kashechewan, including the original locations of the reserve and of its water treatment system, are not a matter of 'oversight' or 'engineering mistakes'. They are a result of the colonial relationship that exists between indigenous people and the Canadian government.

The indigenous people living in what is now Kashechewan were forced to live there as a part of the process of the Canadian government occupying Cree territory, destroying their traditional economies, and forcing them onto reservations. The government of the time explained unconvincingly to the elders back in 1912, that the location was 'great' because it was a traditional hunting ground. Considering, however, that by this time the Cree of the area had been squeezed out of their hunting and fur-trading economy by the Hudson's Bay Company monopoly in the area, this was pure nonsense.

As with the subjugation of other indigenous nations by the British, French, and then Canadian colonial powers, this was how the suppression of the Cree nation's right to self-determination played out in real life. The Canadian government stole Cree lands and resources in the interest of promoting the hegemony of Canadian capitalism while suppressing any independent political, economic, or cultural development.

The problems facing the indigenous people in Kashechewan flow directly from this process of occupying and oppressing indigenous nations. This was, and continues to be, an inherent aspect of Canada's development as a nation-state. The suppression of the right of indigenous nations to self-determination became fundamental to Canada's eventual growth into a wealthy imperialist country.

'Fix' Our Problems? No Thanks!

One of the federal government's first responses to the crisis was a massive 'emergency' airlift of over half the community to towns and cities throughout Ontario in order to receive medical care. Then it announced a plan to 'rebuild' the entire reserve over the next ten years, including over 300 million dollars in funding for new houses and expanded drug and alcohol counseling programs.

At best, these are temporary measures to cool things down until the widespread anger generated across Canada within indigenous communities and their supporters dies down. At worst, it is an attempt to yet again forcibly displace an indigenous community in an attempt to break its spirit. On the surface, these might sound like great plans, but after more than a century of false promises from the same government, most indigenous people aren't going to fall for these cheap tricks. It will take more than a few new houses and a 'better' location to deal with the real problems facing any indigenous reserve in Canada.

Just ask the Innu youth of Davis Inlet, Labrador. They were forcibly removed in late 2002 to Natuashish, a new 'community' built by the federal government at a cost of over \$200 million, only to have all the same problems with gas-sniffing and breathtaking suicide rates arise again. Because of the inherently colonial and oppressive nature of the Canadian government, no 'solution' that it puts forward for the water crisis in Kashechewan can truly be in the interest of the indigenous people living there.

## The Importance of Indigenous Self-Determination in Building a Revolutionary Movement in Canada

The quick response of the Canadian government to the Kashechewan crisis (once it hit the news, that is) is a result of the fear by the Canadian ruling class of the fight of indigenous people for self-determination. Militant struggles in recent years—by Mohawk communities in Quebec in 1990, at Ipperwash, Ontario in 1995, Gustafsen Lake in British Columbia in 1996, and Burnt Church, New Brunswick in 2000—serve as reminders to the rulers that their hegemony over land, resources and labour is perhaps but a fleeting condition.

Indigenous people have rights to our land that have never been ceded. These self-determination rights loom large for the Canadian ruling class because they challenge the very foundations of its legitimacy, and that of its nation-state. Is it any coincidence that the two major crises facing the current federal government—Kashechewan and the so-called “sponsorship scandal”—both involve the self-determination of oppressed nations within Canada, in one case that of indigenous people, and in the other of the Quebecois?

The wealthy classes around the world are engaged in ever-sharper competition with each other as their economic order teeters on the edge of a sharp decline. They are fighting over access to markets, cheap labor and natural resources. They are also driven to attack the salaries, social conditions and democratic rights of the people in their own countries. Canada’s rulers are part and parcel of this declining order. They will continue to carry out fresh attacks against indigenous people. As a result, we cannot trust promises to improve the conditions of peoples living in conditions like those on Kashechewan and Natuashish, just as the residents of New Orleans are learning through bitter experience that U.S. government promises to improve their shattered lives are worthless. The only improvements we can expect are those we fight for.

The recent youth rebellion in France, the growing antiwar consciousness of people in the United States, and the decision of the people of Kashechewan to go public with their crisis and shame the federal government into action are encouraging signs of growing resistance to this declining international

order.

So long as our right to self-determination is suppressed, indigenous people will face more Kashechewans, more poverty, and more humiliation. Only by fighting for the right to govern ourselves, to decide where and how we will live on our lands, what type of economic development will truly serve our communities, can we find away out of this generations-long nightmare that has been brought down on us by 'great' Canada.

For other peoples in Canada who also seek social justice and an end to the evils of capitalism, support to the right of indigenous people to self-determination is essential.

It is crucial for building a united movement of all the oppressed in Canadian society. The same is true in other imperialist countries, such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, where the struggle of oppressed nationalities contains a similar dynamic and importance.

The working class in Canada has the potential to make revolutionary change due to its relationship to the means of production. Workers have the power to take control of society because we produce its wealth. The significant growth in the numbers of indigenous peoples in the labor force in Canada, particularly within the major cities, creates a front of potential unity that is crucial to forge.

Another front of revolutionary struggle arises from indigenous peoples' relationship to the *land*, because this struggle for the land puts indigenous people into direct conflict with the capitalist rulers.

A society free of injustice and discrimination will be achieved within Canada when those who are the victims of the current order succeed in creating unity and forging an alliance for political power. That new power can succeed only if it champions the right of indigenous people to a just equality and true sovereignty in the building of a new society.

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