

# **Struggle for the Land**

**Racism, Class, and Solidarity in the Six Nations Land Reclamation**

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On February 28, 2006, members of Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy reclaimed 40 hectares of lands belonging to their community. The land, which was under construction as part of a new residential subdivision, had been sold to a developer, Henco Industries, despite the fact that the government knew it was contested land when it allowed it to be sold. In addition, the government did not appropriately follow the specified procedures of its own "Grand River Notification Agreement" to properly inform Six Nations of actions, environmental and otherwise, undertaken within the area under question. Such has been the history of governments in Canada in disregarding Indigenous land rights.

The ongoing reclamation of the Douglas Creek Estates site is one part of an ongoing struggle over the Haldimand Tract lands originally granted to the Six Nations by the British Crown in 1784, following the 1783 Treaty of Paris that ended the American War of Independence, as a gesture of appreciation for Six Nations support of the British against the Americans during the war. Under the original Haldimand Grant to the people of the Six Nations, the Cayuga, Oneida, Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca and Tuscarora, the British ceded control over nearly 950 000 acres of land within traditional beaver hunting grounds. Both the British Crown and later the Canadian government, however, very early on encouraged the illegal sale and confiscation of land and revenue belonging to Six Nations. In certain cases government representatives, or so-called "Indian Agents" simply sold the land, as though it were theirs, for personal gain.

While Six Nations has always been a national confederation, and continue to be so, with whom the British Crown engaged in nation to nation agreements, the Canadian government violated this status, imposing by force its own "Indian Act" which defines and delimits the rights and institutions available to Six Nations people as individuals and as a community. It has further imposed the exclusive sovereignty of the Crown over and against all Indigenous sovereignty.

Originally covering six miles on each side of the Grand River throughout the river's length, the lands were steadily alienated from Six Nations by the Canadian Crown until only a much smaller Six Nations Reserve of 46 500 acres, or 4.9 percent, remained of the original Haldimand Grant. Beginning in the 1830s the Crown unilaterally determined that Six Nations' rights to the Haldimand lands ended for all but the lands of the much smaller reserve.

These changes have left the present day Six Nations as the largest First Nation in Canada in terms of population, almost 11000 people living on reserve, confined to a shrunken and inadequate parcel of land. At the same time the large and rapid growth of urban and suburban developments around the Six Nations reserve have placed incredible pressures on the Grand River watershed, the farmlands and woods upon which Six Nations people rely both materially and culturally. Six Nations reserve is down river from some of Ontario's largest urban centres, including Guelph, Kitchener-Waterloo and Brantford. Public works and utilities, for which Six Nations are responsible on their lands, have been over-taxed by the impacts, including contaminants, siltation, soil erosion and loss of vegetation, of developments over which they have no control.

Many commentators suggest that the current struggle is one of Indigenous land claims but members of Six Nations with whom I have spoken suggest that the Canadian government is the one making land claims since this is clearly Six Nations land to which the government is laying claim. Six Nations have long opposed the Crown's claims that it can deed lands in the area.

At the same time Six Nations have made it clear that they are not now, nor do they intend to make claims against previously alienated lands on which people are currently residing. This is point around which there has been much public confusion as opponents of Six Nations have

tried to fear monger around threats that Natives will be “coming for your land next.” Six Nations efforts, however, are strictly directed against new developments on currently undeveloped lands.

In 1995, the Six Nations filed a statement of claim in Ontario Superior Court with regard to around half of their outstanding claims against the Crown. In 2004, the court case was suspended, initiating negotiations over a much smaller subset of files. Little progress has been made on these cases to this day (Lawson, 2006: 12). Had the government developed a comprehensive and respectful land claims settlement process and negotiated honestly with Six Nations the situation would have taken a different course.

Indeed the historic government practices of breaking or ignoring their agreements with Native people were continued in various ways with regard to the Douglas Creek lands. A 1995 agreement between the Government of Canada and Six Nations required archaeological and ecological studies of contested lands prior to any development. While neither study formally took place, preliminary dig on the Douglas Creek lands in 2000 unearthed a village estimated to be approximately 600 years old. Yet the meaningful consultation between the government and Six Nations as required in a 2004 protocol never happened.

With all other avenues seemingly closed off or violated Six Nations members felt there was no option left, to have their issues addressed, than to occupy the lands themselves. The reclamation continued, garnering little attention outside of Native communities, until the dramatic events of April 20, when the Canadian state chose to take its favoured path in dealing with Indigenous land rights. In the early morning of April 20, the Ontario Provincial Police, a racist organization with a recent history of violence against Indigenous communities, including the outright murder of Dudley George during a reclamation at Ipperwash, raided the site at Douglas Creek and arrested 16 people.

The April 20<sup>th</sup> attack by the OPP served to backfire on authorities. Not only did it lead to a re-taking of the site by a larger and even more energized group it also sparked a series of other solidarity actions by Natives from other communities. The police raid, and the remarkably strong response by Six Nations to the raid, also brought wider attention to the struggle and encouraged many activists to become more actively involved in solidarity work.

## **Racist Violence**

In numerous struggles over Indigenous land rights governments at all levels in Canada have off-loaded the costs of crisis onto third parties, often local non-Native residents in nearby towns. As Lawson (2006: 14) suggests ‘the high visibility of protest in many aboriginal land cases (just as with labour disputes) can mobilize the non-protesting third parties as a kind of spontaneous human shield for the status quo.’ This typically occurs when non-Native locals are mobilized to oppose or counter a reclamation for example.

Such has certainly been the case in Caledonia. On April 4, 2006, almost 500 non-Native residents from the town of Caledonia, which borders the reclamation site, and surrounding areas turned out for the first major mobilization against the reclamation. Aggressive demonstrations organized by a section of non-Native Caledonia residents soon intensified. April 24, saw a rally by non-Native residents draw a reported 3000 people. Later that same day a smaller group of angry protesters attempted to rush the Six nations barricades. On April 28, around 500 took part in another demonstration against the reclamation. Around this time a flyer recruiting for the Klan

turned up but was discovered to be a fake. On several occasions white protesters from Caledonia have tried to breach police lines to overtake the reclamation site.

On another occasion white residents of Caledonia attacked people from Six Nations by driving golf balls at them. When a Caledonia resident who supports the reclamation attempted to witness these activities she was surrounded by the angry Caledonians and her life was threatened. On November 5, 2007, the unfinished home being used as an organizing and meeting space at the reclamation site was firebombed and burned to the ground.

The activities of non-Native residents of Caledonia have gone beyond demonstrations near the site. There have also been reports of verbal and physical assaults against people from Six Nations who have visited Caledonia or who live there.

In addition to acts of physical and emotional violence carried out against Six Nations people, the racist mobilization by groups like the Caledonia Citizens Alliance has worked to create a climate in which the most reactionary and militaristic politicians, at all levels of government have been emboldened to make aggressive and provocative statements against Six Nations and the reclamation. It also serves to ramp up tensions and create the conditions that might clear the way for a military invasion by the Canadian state. This is especially so given the aggressive stance of the ruling Conservative government, a government that has moved to embrace a more openly imperialist politics both globally (as in Afghanistan) and domestically. Thus the importance of developing an explicitly anti-racist pole of support within Caledonia that might work to de-legitimize the efforts of what is a well-organized and resource rich opposition movement.

## **Solidarity Work**

There have been primarily four types of solidarity action that have been organized by non-Native supporters of the reclamation: maintaining a physical presence at the site; organizing speaking tours and delegations; holding solidarity demonstrations; and anti-racist organizing within Caledonia. Of these, non-Native activists have put most of their time and energy into the first three activities, with the majority of energy and resources going toward site visits..

Volunteering at the site, however, does little to alter the overall balance of forces that will determine how the struggle over the Douglas Creek Estates will be played out. In addition it does not make a contribution to the reclamation site that would not otherwise be made by the people from Six Nations who are already there.

It is the fourth option, organizing within Caledonia, is the work that could have the greatest impact in terms of defusing the racist hostility being directed against Six Nations and the reclamation and in limiting the state's capacity for maneuvering towards a military intervention. Below I discuss an important example of that sort of initiative. Unfortunately most white activists have been highly reluctant to engage in this sort of crucial work.

Indeed, there has been very little open discussion within non-Native groups undertaking solidarity work about the most effective strategies that they might pursue. The sorts of strategic political discussions that would decide how organizational resources might best be mobilized and distributed to support the reclamation have been generally absent. Discussions about whether resources should be put into getting people to the site or in getting them to Caledonia to do anti-racist or other work in the town have typically not happened. As well support from non-Native organizations has tended to operate on an individual basis as members with access to vehicles

take their friends out to spend time at the site. This has happened in the absence of any discussion of who might be delegated to represent groups on the basis of specific skills or the willingness to undertake specific tasks (such as getting out and talking to Caledonians). Additionally there has been little political accountability in which people who go to the site, representing solidarity groups, report back on the work they are doing and whether other work might be prioritized.

It is clear that if the participation of non-Native allies is restricted overwhelmingly to a presence at the reclamation site, the battle will likely be lost as the racist position comes to dominate the discussion and shape the context within which the Canadian state will mobilize its forces. Because military intervention requires the pretext of ungovernability and violence in the area, non-Native activists can play an important part in ensuring that this scenario is not played out. Doing so means organizing an alternative to the Native versus non-Native portrayal of events.

## **Another Caledonia Finds Its Voice**

The people of Six Nations and Caledonia share workplaces, schools, friendships and families. Because of the intimate relationship between Six Nations and Caledonia over generations many are concerned that the anger and violence being instigated by a core group of people within Caledonia not be allowed to create wounds that may never heal. There is clearly another, silent, Caledonia beyond the aggressive clamour of the Caledonia Citizens Alliance. A real challenge has been to find a means by which that silent, and indeed silenced, Caledonia might find its voice.

The importance of white activists showing a willingness to talk to non-Native Caledonians on the other side of the barricades is shown most forcefully in the emergence of the Community Friends for Peace and Understanding, an ally group that emerged to support the reclamation and to work against racism within Caledonia. This group came about after some white activists who had been at the site waded into one of the angry crowds protesting against the reclamation. Talking to people in a non-confrontational way the activists found that some Caledonians were actually appalled by the anger and racism of their fellow townspeople. Through this dialogue it became apparent that the stark Native versus non-Native opposition that had taken on a hegemonic position in almost all media representations did not tell the real and complex story of how people in Caledonia felt about the reclamation. It also confounded the view of many white activists that Caledonia was a town of backwards racists, a view that allowed activists to feel good about themselves but discarded a huge opportunity for organizing.

Following the initial meeting at the barricades a core of people came together in Caledonia to strategize how best to break the racist hegemony of the Caledonia Citizens Alliance while also providing support to the reclamation. The group that emerged from this, calling itself Community Friends for Peace and Understanding, has, since its inception in May, 2006, undertaken a variety of tasks in solidarity with Six Nations. Over a relatively brief period of time it has grown to include members from several labour unions, including the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Steelworkers, as well as members of McMaster University who have met at a table with people from Six Nations involved in the reclamation. The perspective of Community Friends is that negotiation and peaceful resolution of the conflict can only be achieved through an honest recognition of Six Nations land rights.

In contrast to the view that non-Native support for the reclamation locally was marginal, more than 120 people have participated in Community Friends meetings and have tried to connect

with others outside of meetings. Despite the threat of violence they have engaged with and peacefully discussed issues with their neighbours who have protested the reclamation. Members have gone to Citizens Alliance meetings to raise an alternative perspective on the reclamation and to address concerns of Caledonians. They have set up a phone line and voice mailbox to allow concerned community members to get information about activities in Caledonia. Members of Community Friends have made themselves available for one-on-one meetings with people in Caledonia to discuss support for the reclamation. They have also helped to organize face-to-face group discussions between people from Caledonia and Six Nations to promote dialogue, understanding and reconciliation. Members have, again despite the concerns for safety, gone door-to-door in the areas of Caledonia nearest the reclamation site and have talked directly with residents in order to listen to their concerns and to discuss the issues. Group members have also delivered food, clothing and monetary donations to the reclamation site.

Representatives from Six Nations have been involved in each of the meetings and the direction is being taken from them, in terms of publications, events, public statements and so on. They have been quite clear that this is crucial work that in their view has some sense of urgency about it. They have stressed the need for education and work towards understanding as necessary, but something which for obvious reasons they cannot go alone on.

## **Class and Conflict in Caledonia**

It is also important in understanding events in Caledonia and the response of Caledonians who have opposed the reclamation that this is not strictly about anti-racism. There are a complexity of issues and these are of course in many ways intertwined.

The opposition to the reclamations of the Douglas Creek estate lands is driven fundamentally by the greed of real estate developers who are transforming the countryside into a sprawling suburbia in order to reap profits for themselves. One of the women from Six Nations with whom I have spoken at length has pointed out throughout the reclamation that a victory for the developers is going to effect farmers and small shop owners when the flow of big boxes, WalMart and so on follows the subdivisions. This is an unsustainable way of life that does little for working class people in towns like Caledonia, few of whom are able to afford houses in the new subdivisions, and benefits primarily realtors, lawyers and bankers. It needs to be remembered that the Haldimand Tract lands are situated in the heart of one of the most profitable and booming real estate markets in all of Canada and the communal land stewardship as practiced on reserves, and entrenched within the Indian Act, have long been viewed as an impediment to capitalist development.

There is a recognition of some of the underlying economic issues and concerns among Caledonians, but there needs to be some way to reach people and develop an understanding that goes beyond the sort of dualistic one that is presented in the mainstream media or from groups like the Caledonia Citizens' Alliance. In other words its not that a defeat of Six Nations and victory for the developers saves Caledonian businesses or property. There are other alternatives (i.e. a defeat of Six Nations and victory for the developers costs people their livelihoods, negatively changes the character of the town and so on). The Community Friends have suggested the farmers who want to keep producing food on the land rather than see it paved over or contaminated,

along with those Caledonians who value their town's identity as a close rural community, have compelling reasons to support their neighbours on Six Nations and the reclamation.

Recently, a potentially important coalition has been formed by Six Nations members and non-Native residents concerned about the loss of farmland in the Grand River region. Amy Lickers, a community Planner with Six Nations, has emphasized the importance of land preservation for Six Nations: 'Farmland plays a major part in our cultural awareness of who we are...If you look at the greater picture – when you start accumulating all of the development – it is a cause for concern' (quoted in Zronik, 2007: 6), Lickers noted that new developments in the area have had a negative impact on water quality, environmental health and food security across the region. These concerns are shared by coalition partners from the Brant County Federation of Agriculture, the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario and the Ontario Farmland Trust.

Indeed there are numerous broad class and status struggles within Caledonia that have played no small part in this and it is important to clarify some of the divisions that are simmering between long time residents and the city folks with dollars who have moved into the subdivisions. People I have spoken with at Six Nations have identified these as important issues in terms of changing relationships over the past 10 to 20 years. Longtime residents of Caledonia, who have close personal or familial ties with people from Six Nations, have quite different perspectives from the many people who have recently moved to one of Caledonia's new subdivisions and who work outside of town.

It is not coincidental that the Caledonia Citizens' Alliance was formed by members of the local Chamber of Commerce and includes among its membership many of the local developers and business people who have a vested interest in developing and profiting from Six Nations land. It is not surprising that the CCA has used the force of its protests to make demands on the government for financial compensation for purported business losses supposedly stemming from the reclamation. Less surprising perhaps is the fact that the government has agreed to pay some form of compensation to them.

Against the suburban sprawl, that destroys animal habitat and farmlands, the people of Six Nations have offered an alternative of close and responsible stewardship of the land. Their community has a long history of protecting nature and respecting the environment throughout the area. As they have pointed out to all who would listen, a recognition of their rights will ensure the protection of lands around the Grand River and their destruction by further suburban sprawl and increased road traffic.

The reclamation has taken place in a context in which Canada's current Conservative government is making known its interest in a broad privatization of Native land, an issue that is central to the conflict at Caledonia. In a recent public response to the deplorable housing conditions on many reserves, a direct result of colonialist government policies, former Federal Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice suggested that individuals should be able to buy and sell reserve land, an option that has never been available under the cooperative and communal forms of ownership that are instituted on reserves. "To have a circumstance where 617 First Nations across the country are living as collectivities without private property ownership, I don't think is constructive," Prentice suggested. According to Prentice, it is the long standing tradition of communal land ownership, not government social and economic policies or racism, that economically hurts First Nations people. Prentice continued, revealing his underlying concern: 'Many First Nations are sitting on extremely valuable property that is not achieving its highest and best use.' Unwavering, even momentarily from his paternalistic assertions Prentice added: 'It's important for

any citizen of Canada to have the ability in their own community to buy and invest in property, mortgage it, service the mortgage and move forward. It's the whole basis of wealth creation in our society.' Bringing the Douglas Creek lands within Six Nations control would make them communally owned resources rather than private property for individual sale for personal gain. The difference between cooperatively controlled, multi-family dwellings and privately owned single family dwellings shows part of the distinction in vision between Six Nations and the government and developers. Indeed the construction of highly expensive single family units, as preferred by for-profit developers, adjacent to a community in great need of additional and decent affordable housing stands as a visible reminder of ongoing inequalities.

Assembly of First Nations Chief Phil Fontaine responded by noting that the buying and selling of reserve land would result in the alienation of First Nations' lands. He also pointed out the absurdity of Prentice's claims that a lack of private land ownership causes poverty on reserves and reminded the Minister that the real causes are the lack of funds for basic human needs such as clean water and schools. While Six Nations would seek to build community housing, or community services, such as a clinic, on portions of the contested land, leaving the rest for farming or tree planting, the government prefers and supports private, market-based uses. The struggles over Douglas Creek Estates reflect a clash between community values and market value.

Federal governments dating back to the first Canadian government of 1867 under John A. Macdonald have tried to break reserve lands into individually owned private plots. This has been historically, and continues, in cases such as the Douglas Creek developments, to be an attempt to undermine the strength and traditions of Indigenous communities, especially communal ownership of reserve lands and housing.

## Conclusion

James Lawson (2006: 14) notes that capitalist accumulation still depends, as Minister Prentice is no doubt aware, on reliable property rights and stable government, even if it was born in North America in the presence of neither. As Lawson (2006) suggests, many Indigenous communities still retain economic interests and political commitments that regularly conflict with the twin fictions of Canadian law: exclusive Crown sovereignty and the presumption that all land rights flow from the Crown (such that reserves are considered Crown land for example)

It is important to think about how to prevent a convergence of state and local property interests from confining conflict within a logic, of private property or exclusive Crown sovereignty, that benefits their interests. Non-Native allies can make a useful political contribution by organizing within white settler communities to demonstrate that Indigenous struggles, like the Douglas Creek reclamation, are not a matter of conflict between Native people and non-Native people. Such a position only benefits the government and developers looking to gain quick, and illegitimate, access to contested lands to which they do not hold title. Rather it is crucial to show that these conflicts are based on larger issues of human rights and social justice. These are political issues, not "law and order" issues to be coercively resolved through the threat of violence or the actual use of force.

Media images of racist violence obscure the fact that there are many non-Native people, in Caledonia and beyond, who support Six Nations and Indigenous land rights more broadly. Making that support visible can play a significant part in limiting the government's capacity to frame

the issue in a way that would lend itself to a military response. As the Community Friends suggest, the days when the Canadian government or non-Native vigilantes could drive First Nations people off their land must come to an end. Yet as events, including the police raid and the Citizens' Alliance rallies, have shown, throughout the period of the Douglas Creek reclamation, making those days history cannot be taken for granted and will require much organizing and planning over the part that might be played by non-Native allies.

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