

USA - Standing Rock: a battle won but the war continues

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“Any white person who brings the elements of civilization had the right to take over this continent, and it is great that some people did, and discovered here what they couldn’t do anywhere else in the world and what the Indians, if there are any racist Indians today, do not believe to this day: respect for individual rights.” [1]

Neoliberal guru Ayn Rand, speaking to the graduating class of West Point Military Academy in 1974, celebrating the expropriation of indigenous lands as the United States expanded westwards from its original thirteen states. This expropriation could only be achieved through massacres, violation of treaties, forced relocation to reservations, and an underlying racist belief that Native Americans were savages that only the white man could civilise. It was no accident that Rand chose to speak to a meeting of newly graduated army officers given the role the US Army played in the 19th Century against Native Americans.

All this is a matter of historical record, acknowledged in modern times not only by those on the left but also by many left leaning and even not so left leaning liberals in the United States. In recent decades this has extended into the media with some Hollywood Westerns portraying Native Americans in a more positive light than before. None of this, though, ultimately represents the interests of the US ruling class.

Rand spoke of Native Americans having no respect for individual rights, but all forms of bourgeois ideology have little if any sympathy or respect for collective rights. Certainly not collective rights as originally understood by Native Americans before colonisation, where lands were not privately owned but held as commons for the benefit of the whole community.

Past injustices continue into the present day, Native American communities are amongst the most economically marginalised and socially deprived in the United States, with rates of poverty and prison incarceration on a par with African Americans. [2] If anything the situation is getting worse as today, in 2016, Native Americans are disproportionately more likely to be killed by law enforcement agencies than any other racial group - including African Americans [3].

This forms the historical and political backdrop to the current opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. The recent decision by the Army Corps of Engineers to refuse a permit for the DAPL to be drilled under the Missouri River near Standing Rock, announced on December 4, is an important victory.

The decision was obviously a political one, a retreat made in the face of adverse publicity both nationally and internationally and an indigenous led movement against the pipeline being constructed by the reservation. The indigenous camps by Standing Rock were only established in April but now thousands of Native Americans from the Sioux and other nations as well as other supporters are based there, now including many US military veterans!

Even though their protest has been peaceful they have faced constant intimidation and violence from

so called law enforcement, including but certainly not limited to the use of rubber bullets and water cannon in sub-zero temperatures. But far from intimidating those in the camps it all appears to have blown up in the face of the US ruling class.

Though the recent ruling was a victory it may only be temporary , the decision to refuse the permit can be appealed against as almost certainly it will be. Then of course looming ever closer is the Presidency of Donald Trump. Both as a climate change denier and a rapacious capitalist Trump has made it clear that he wants to see more coal mined, more gas fracked, and more oil drilled. Therefore not surprisingly Trump wants to see the DAPL completed.

Trump also has a personal interest in the pipeline being a stockholder in both Energy Transfer Partners who have 75% and Phillips 66 who have 25% ownership of the pipeline. Many banks and other financial institutions throughout the world also have a stake in the DAPL and have loaned funds towards the estimated \$3.8 billion cost of building the pipeline. In Britain this includes three major high street banks, Barclays, HSBC, and the Royal Bank of Scotland, the latter of which the British state still has a majority shareholding. [4]

If it is finally completed, the DAPL will transport around 470,000 barrels of crude oil a day through an underground pipeline 1,172 miles long from the Bakken oilfields in North Dakota to an oil tank farm in Illinois. Part of the proposed route of the pipeline goes under the Missouri River near Standing Rock and this is the source of the conflict. As the Standing Rock Sioux get their water supply from the Missouri any leakage from the pipeline under the river will pollute the water they depend on.

The point is that hazardous incidents including leakages from pipelines are a common occurrence. In the United States in the past twenty years alone there have been around 9,000 significant pipeline related incidents, resulting in 548 deaths, 2,576 injuries, and over \$8.5 billion in damages. [5] All this data comes from the US federal government's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration. So if the DAPL were to go under the Missouri it would very probably be a question of when rather than if the oil would leak into the river.

As things stand most of the DAPL has been completed with the section near Standing Rock accounting for much of the uncompleted parts. Any abandonment of the DAPL would therefore lead to a tremendous financial loss to numerous capitalist interests. As neither side is likely to concede without a fight the stakes could not be any higher.

The Native American nations in the United States are not only nations, they are also oppressed nations that should have but clearly do not have the right to self-determination. On that basis, the Standing Rock Sioux should have the inalienable right to determine what happens on their traditional lands including the right to veto projects such as the DAPL.

It is not impossible that the DAPL may be rerouted away from Standing Rock but would this be a victory? Not necessarily be so. It would not solve the environmentally hazardous nature of the DAPL and other pipelines which are dangerous i whether they go through indigenous or non-indigenous lands.

The conflict at Standing Rock has brought two key political struggles to the forefront and has combined these struggles, though most participants may not (or not yet) see it in these terms. That is against the national oppression of Native Americans and against the environmentally destructive nature of US capitalism. It is necessary that these two struggles are not separated but remain combined and indeed combine with other struggles such as Black Lives Matter. This now is even more necessary than it was before as US ruling class politics will move even further to the right

under the Presidency of Donald Trump.

Patrick Scott

P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/standing-rock-a-battle-won-but-the-war-continues/9352>

Footnotes

[1] Libertarian superstar Ayn Rand defended Native American genocide: “Racism didn’t exist in this country until the liberals brought it up” <http://bit.ly/2gX3HVC>

[2] Life on the Pine Ridge Native American reservation <http://bit.ly/2g1rxNy>

[3] The Counted: People killed by police in the US <http://bit.ly/2gXfK7u>

[4] How to Contact the 17 Banks Funding the Dakota Access Pipeline <http://bit.ly/2ga45Rm>

[5] 30 Years of Oil and Gas Pipeline Accidents, Mapped <http://bit.ly/2h4uAVY>