Montreal police shot three unarmed men during a confrontation in a park in North Montreal. Fredy Villanueva, an 18-year-old Honduran immigrant, died shortly after he was shot. Residents in the area, which is among Montreal’s poorest, have complained about systemic racially-based police harassment in the community. Montreal’s Collective Opposed to Police Brutality (COPB) said that the Montreal police force and Quebec provincial police have a history of exonerating police officers who kill. Of 43 cases researched by COPB, the collective says that only two resulted in charges, and both officers were acquitted. Four days after the shootings, the police involved had yet to be questioned by investigators.

Hundreds of Bangladeshi garment workers attacked 15 factories, setting fire to several, vandalizing others, and blocking highways. Protests demanding unpaid back wages had gone unanswered, and several workers were beaten and shot at by private security forces. Sixty factories were closed down by the fighting, and some workers were paid their back wages.

Trade Unionists from Canada and Brazil met in Thompson, Manitoba, to discuss ways to support each other in negotiations with Vale, a Brazilian mining multinational company. In 2006, Vale acquired Inco, Canada’s second largest mining company, for $18.9 billion. “We discovered that we have several issues in common with our brothers and sisters in Brazil, including concerns around compensation... the environment and relationships with local communities, and health and safety,” said one United Steelworkers representative. Vale, the world’s largest producer of iron ore, announced second quarter profits of $5.01 billion.

The Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) criticized a government move to limit “fast-tracking” of citizenship applications for “certain classes” of temporary foreign workers. “By restricting this benefit to only professional, technical and skilled occupations, the government is setting up a permanent under-class of unskilled temporary foreign workers,” said AFL President Gil McGowan.

A massive chunk of arctic ice broke off of the Ward Hunt Ice Shelf in Canada’s arctic, which scientists said is part of an ongoing, irreversible weakening of arctic ice brought on by climate change.

Two large tornado-like waterspouts formed in the Saint Lawrence River near Montreal. Waterspouts usually occur in tropical regions. The river also saw increased levels of red algae, likely caused by heavy rainfall, and which contributed to the deaths of marine life, including seabirds, Beluga whales and sturgeon.

California-based researchers reported that populations of frogs and other amphibians have declined precipitously, in some cases by as much as 98 per cent. They cited climate change as one cause among many. Rainfall also spurred growth in the earwig population in New Brunswick, where a state of emergency was declared during several major floods. Farmers on Prince Edward Island reported several cases of blight, a crop-damaging fungus that thrives in humid conditions. Cape Breton farmers feared losing crops if heavy rainfall did not subside. In Quebec, it was a disastrous year for strawberries, but wet condition led to a bumper crop of blueberries.

A report released by the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) estimated that 700,000 Canadians will die prematurely in the next two decades due to illness caused by poor air quality. This year, 21,000 Canadians will die as a result of polluted air, the CMA estimated.

Mohawk traditionalists and a group of Quebec farmers formed a coalition to fight the expansion of Quebec’s Autoroute 30. Critics say the highway expansion will destroy land, raise dependence on the automobile, and increase pollution.

US-based agribusiness giant Monsanto divested from its bovine growth hormone (recombinant bovine somatotropin) products. The move comes after Monsanto’s attempts to ban the labeling of milk as “hormone-free” was met with resistance from citizens at the state level.

Violence in Afghanistan was at its worst level since US forces invaded in 2001. Aid agencies reported that 260 Afghan civilians were killed in July. Two Canadian aid workers were killed in a Taliban ambush. The US Secretary of Defense endorsed a $20 billion plan to double the size of Afghanistan’s army. The New York Times reported that the Taliban have demonstrated “a resilience and a ferocity” that is “raising alarm” in Washington and “other NATO capitals.” Fighting between Islamic separatists and government forces in the Philippines displaced over 130,000 refugees, and could lead to a humanitarian disaster.

Documents showing that the RCMP spied on feminist groups from the 1960s through the 1980s were discovered. Among the personalities appearing in RCMP reports was Maritime singer-songwriter Rita MacNeil.

US Congress reported that two thirds of US corporations paid no income tax in 2007 by manipulating data and using loopholes. Watchdog group Public Citizen also released research showing that oil companies avoided paying more than $1.3 billion in royalties due...
to a “bureaucratic oversight.”

A group of cyclists began a 1,000-km trek from tar sands operations near Fort McMurray, Alberta, to Calgary to raise awareness of the environmental impacts of the tar sands. First Nations leaders and conservationists met for the Keepers of the Water conference, where they developed strategies to protect the Athabasca watershed, which has been heavily polluted by tar sands operations. Communities downstream from tar sands strip mines and plants have reported alarming increases in cancer rates.

Saskatchewan’s government partially avoided the ire of protesters when they opted not to accept any of the bids for oil sands permits in the province. The government said the oils sands bids were not high enough, but accepted $243 million in conventional oil bids. New oil exploration in BC and Saskatchewan exceeded that of Alberta, where most of the oil patch rights have been sold.

The food crisis in Haiti continued, where cakes made of mud have become a staple food, eaten for their temporary filling effect if not for their nutritional value. According to the UN, over half of Haiti’s population is at risk of starvation, due to rising food costs and the decimation of the country’s food production by International Monetary Fund-imposed reforms in the 1990s.

US hospitals are deporting immigrants after they are discharged, the New York Times reported. Companies like MexCare are providing hospitals with “medical repatriations,” which are happening with “varying degrees of patient consent,” the Times reported.

The Conservative Government’s cuts to arts grants worth $40 million drew sharp criticism across Canada, with artists and promoters calling the move “disastrous” and signaling a potential “death knell” of local music industries.

Australia’s government announced it would end its policy of jailing all asylum seekers.

Six hundred Canadian military personnel carried out Operation Nanook in Nunavut. The yearly military exercise is in part designed as a sort of “sovereignty patrol,” according to Lt.-Col. Gino Chretien. The armed forces also held a panel discussion as part of the operation. According to Inuk Lawyer Aaju Peter, “I wanted to hear what the military and the police were doing with this whole assertion of sovereignty and how they were going about it. I also wanted to go to see how much Inuit representation there would be and what kind of questions that were going to be posed at this meeting. Unfortunately, I was on the only Inuit there.”

Investigative journalists working for Mother Jones outed Mary Sapone, aka Mary McFate, a spy with National Rifle Association connections, who was active as a gun control and anti-gun advocate for years.

Evo Morales won an important victory in a recall referendum in Bolivia, giving him a strong mandate to continue with his party’s political program. Prior to the referendum, violent protests by Morales’ opponents, including clashes with police, forced Hugo Chavez and Cristina Kirchner from meeting with the Bolivian president in the city of Tarija.

Exxon Mobil reported record-breaking profits of $11.7 billion in the second quarter of 2008. The US Supreme Court still has not ruled on whether or not Exxon will have to pay interest on the $507 million punitive

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Fractures appeared in the Ward Hunt Ice Shelf, the largest in North America.

Nick Buxton
Stiles’ protagonist, Jarod, is a struggling writer whose phone is simply ringing off the hook with job offers. His friend Elliot wants to pay him exorbitant amounts of money to write a screenplay, and it’s all Jarod can do to evade his would-be benefactor so he’s free to endlessly re-read his abortive short story attempts and fret about his unfinished novel. High doses of implausibility and inaction can kill just about any novel and Stiles’ choice of subject matter only furthers these problems. The “writing about writing” genre is an extremely tricky one to make engaging and Jarod spends a tedious amount of time bellyaching about what a chore it is to stuff his work into envelopes and mail it off to literary magazines. Although Taking the Stairs is written in the first person, Jarod’s personality remains curiously opaque. He fights with his girlfriend; he works odd jobs; he holds circuitous telephone conversation with people he’s trying to avoid. Stiles has included in Taking the Stairs several excerpts from Jarod’s oeuvres, which are bad without being atrocious enough for comic effect and it’s unclear just how much we are meant to sympathize with Jarod. Stylistically, there’s not much here to save this book from itself. “He says that when people jump off bridges, they land on their feet and their legs get jammed up inside their bodies and have to be pulled back out with a huge set of tongs,” is as interesting as it gets, unless you count the anatomical curiosity of the phrase, “She looks fine with her round spanish ass in a tight, tasteful blouse.” Must be quite the figure.

— Linda Besner

If her work is any indication, S.E. Venart’s poems are made up of dispatches from a writing life that is underway with admirable vigilance. Woodshedding, her first collection, ferrets out space for its intellectual labours around the contemplation of the ordinary, but time moves neither too fast, nor too slow; the poems emerge from life’s infrequent furrows of solitude with refreshing tranquility. The poet shares this pursuit with bird-watchers, monks and joggers: inhabitants of what Venart calls “privileged openings,” pockets of inspiration that open up with circumstance (“There are sudden canopies/of silence between the low tones/of speedboats”), but which become worthy of safeguarding when the moment lingers (“Touch, I think, is mostly overrated//It makes for only the luckiest/misunderstandings. I prefer the syllables of birds.”).

The full end-stop between the line about touch and the next reflects the exalted status that Venart affords to this sense of aloneness and sequestration, but the poems encourage a certain level of interior play even amid the hustle and bustle of one’s daily commute. This dual mode, mingling worldly tumult with the concerns of the self, can be heard in a line from “Sightings”: “I’m back in the city, stopped for a red light, reading the off-ramp’s/sprayed messages,” which echoes an earlier poem, “Lanes,” ending with “The sun overcoming me. . . /throwing light down on me as I bring/flesh and soul together, and fall/again into the moving traffic of myself.”

When a musician friend of mine makes a trip “out to the woodshed,” he means to remain there; anywhere, that is, so long as he cannot be reached by phone, e-mail, Facebook message, or any of the other brazenly intrusive gizmos of this early 21st century; for as long as it takes to learn a part on his tuba. References to musicianship pervade Venart’s work—her own epigraph invokes the improvisatory play of a jazz musician—but as another definition of the collection’s title included in the epigraph attests, “woodshedding” also refers to the administration of a “sound parental thrashing.” Venart perhaps means that her work reveals itself only as another definition of the collection’s title included in the epigraph attests, “woodshedding” also refers to the administration of a “sound parental thrashing.” Venart perhaps means that her work reveals itself only with the avoidance of easy pleasures and through an embrace of an ascetic self-discipline. If so, her collection reflects this principle with uncommon beauty and maturity.

— Robert Kotyk

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Workers Rising
Hotel union strikes, demands social change, gets contracts

by Geordie Gwalgen Dent

“I feel great,” mused Abdul Husseini, a server at the Holiday Inn restaurant on Toronto’s airport strip. On July 15, he was in the middle of a hotel walkout, part of a series of spontaneous rolling strikes aimed at securing an agreement in three Toronto airport hotels. Two weeks and one strike later, tentative agreements had been reached at all three hotels.

Victory for Husseini’s union, UNITE HERE Local 75, was the result of an intense and aggressive campaign, targeting the remaining three member hotels without a contract: the Radisson, Holiday Inn and Fairmont Royal York. Most of the UNITE HERE hotels in Toronto had already settled with the Local 75 “standard contract,” according to Husseini, but Westmont Hospitality Group, who owns or operates these three hotels, had been holding out since 2007, leaving their staff some of the worst paid on the airport strip. “Cooks in my restaurant are paid $4 less than other hotels,” said Husseini.

Working standards in the hotel industry, where most workers are from immigrant communities, are not high to begin with. Heavy workloads, low job security and exploitation are rampant, according to union representatives. “Most days, I don’t have time to take a break,” Radisson Suite Hotel room attendant Delsie Morgan was quoted as saying in the Toronto Star. Morgan was making $13.17 an hour compared with $15 at other hotels.

At the same time, Toronto hotels are enjoying a period of strong economic growth. Westmont Hospitality Group, the Radisson Hotel, the Holiday Inn and the Greater Toronto Hotel Association did not return calls to the Dominion and publicly refused to comment on the strikes. However, speaking in the Toronto Star, Andrew Weir, Vice-president of Communications for Tourism Toronto stated that “hotel occupancy rates were up three per cent in May and another one per cent in June compared to last year.”

Even given the David and Goliath scenario, UNITE HERE’s July actions were unusually militant: spontaneous, rolling strikes are rare in the hospitality industry. More often strike-notice is used as a pressure tactic; it also gives the employer time to prepare for the possibility of a strike. Without notice, managers are left scrambling to cover positions, clean rooms and attempt to calm dissatisfied customers.

If tough tactics like these seem out of the ordinary for a hotel union, it’s not the only thing that UNITE HERE does differently. The seemingly quick victory in July is part of a long-term strategy to engage communities in making change.

Unique membership & leadership

When asked why he and his co-workers decided to organize with Local 75, Husseini says that “Local 75 is very well known in Toronto.” Husseini, who used to belong to the Steel Workers Union, says that UNITE HERE is much better than other unions when it comes to “dealing with communities.” “They provide services to their members: money for training, culture funds…they provide help for the young.”

Few unions have such a high proportion of immigrants as members. “We’re part of the movement for immigrant rights in Toronto and the hotel industry,” says J.J. Feuser, a researcher with UNITE HERE Local 75. “Seventy per cent of our workers are immigrants to Canada.” The union also says 48 per cent of members are women and 53 per cent are visible minorities.

“It’s sometimes an interesting challenge organizing people from different communities with low union density,” says Feuser. “We have to be good at making people absorb the fact that they have rights.”

“Our focus is on developing leadership in the rank and file. In every case, workers sit on the negotiating committee at every level of negotiations. Our executive board and solidarity committee...works with the community and take on the role of organizer in the workplace,” says Feuser. This approach empowers the communities and individuals involved with the union, and according to UNITE HERE organizers, makes the union more powerful in the workplace and beyond. “Increasingly we can act on facing problems in the hotels, political fights, helping our members, etcetera,” says Feuser.

“We can do that on a dime.”

One of the fights UNITE HERE locals in Canada and the US took on last year is the “Hotel Workers Rising” campaign. The aim of the campaign is to improve working conditions across the board, but most significantly, to have all hotel-worker contracts settled on the same calendar year: 2010.

Though contracts at unionized hotels are common, the fact that so many are now coming up for renewal in 2010 means that UNITE HERE workers are in position to undertake connected labour actions across the continent. A general strike or attempt to increase wages across Canada and the US could be in the works. “[This is] continent-wide: Boston, Honolulu, and Los Angeles,” says Feuser.

With 100,000 of UNITE HERE’s 450,000 North American members being exclusively hotel workers, settling all hotel workers’ contracts by 2010 would be a significant accomplishment. According to Feuser, the union is already well on its way.
Land & Jail
Ipperwash, official racism and the future of Ontario

by Kim Petersen

On May 31, 2007, nearly 12 years after Dudley George was shot by an Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) officer, Sidney Linden released the four-volume Ipperwash Report.

In his remarks when he released the report, Linden, the commissioner of the Ipperwash Inquiry, noted that George was the “First aboriginal person to be killed in a land-rights dispute in Canada since the 19th century,” and stated: “If the governments of Ontario and Canada want to avoid future confrontations, they will have to deal with land and treaty claims effectively and fairly.”

At this time Linden also noted, “The single biggest source of frustration, distrust, and ill-feeling among aboriginal people in Ontario is our failure to deal in a just and expeditious way with breaches of treaty and other legal obligations to First Nations.” The Ipperwash Report explores the events that led to George’s killing and makes a number of recommendations to the provincial government.

Recent police actions against Indigenous defenders of the land and provocative statements by government officials contradict the recommendations of the Ipperwash Inquiry, as well as the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which called for a restructuring of the relationship between indigenous peoples and non-indigenous peoples through “a comprehensive agenda for change.”

Origins of the Ipperwash conflict

In 1942, the federal government expropriated land belonging to the Stony Point First Nation under the War Measures Act to build a military training facility called Camp Ipperwash. The Department of National Defence offered a conditional return of most of the land after the war, but later rescinded the offer. The dispute simmered until 1995, when approximately 30 frustrated defenders of Indigenous title barricaded the park.

The OPP faced off against the defenders. In a tragic series of events now referred to simply as Ipperwash, OPP Sergeant Kenneth Deane shot and killed 38-year-old Stony Point activist Dudley George. Deane was sentenced to 180 hours of community service.

In the Ipperwash Report, Linden ruled that the OPP, the government of Ontario, Premier Mike Harris and the federal government were responsible for the Ipperwash tragedy. He identified the number one priority as the “return of the former army camp to the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation immediately, with an apology and appropriate compensation.”

On December 20, 2007, Ontario Aboriginal Affairs Minister Michael Bryant announced that Ipperwash Provincial Park, located on the former army base about 40 kilometres northeast of Sarnia in southwestern Ontario, would be returned to the Ojibwas of Kettle and Stony Point First Nation. “In doing so, we are sending a clear signal that the McGuinty government is acting on the premier’s ambitious agenda on aboriginal affairs,” said Bryant.

A closer look at the issue and the report reveals that the Ontario government still has a long way to go, however. Linden presented an understanding of the “frustration” of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation that precedes the occupation of the park in 1995. In fact, he held, the grievance goes even further back than the federal government expropriation of Stony Point land in 1942:

The roots of the Ipperwash occupation go back as far as 1763, when King George III made the protection of Aboriginal land an official crown policy. The 1763 Royal Proclamation established an “Indian Country,” as it was then referred to, where aboriginal land was protected from encroachment or settlement. When Sir William Johnson came to Niagara Falls to explain the Royal Proclamation to 1,500 Anishinabek Chiefs and Warriors, he consummated the alliance by presenting two wampum belts, which embodied the promises contained in the proclamation.

Indeed, an understanding of history seems crucial to overcoming the division between Original Peoples and non-indigenous peoples.

Racism, from Mike Harris on down

On February 16, 2006, the Ipperwash Inquiry heard testimony from ex-Attorney General Charles Harnick who related what then-Premier Mike Harris had said: “I want the fucking Indians out of the park.”

Although Harris denied this accusation, Linden maintained that the comments were made.

First broadcast in 2004, tapes obtained through an access to information request by the CBC’s The Fifth Estate revealed racist banter among OPP officers as well:

“Is there still a lot of press down there?”

“No, there’s no one down there. Just a great big fat fuck Indian.”

“The camera’s rolling, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“We had this plan, you know. We thought if we could get five or six cases of Labatt’s 50 [beer], we could bait them.”

“Yeah.”

“Then we’d have this big net at a pit.”

“Creative thinking.”

“Works in the [US] South with watermelon.”

The day before George was killed, Sergeant Stan Korosec of the OPP emergency response team at Ipperwash was recorded

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on tape saying: “We want to amass a fucking army. A real fucking army and do this. Do these fuckers bigtime.”

“Cultural insensitivity and racism,” Linden says, was “not an isolated incident” within the OPP. However, Linden found it was politicians who had pressured the OPP away from its initial “go-slow” approach to the stand-off.

OPP Inspector Ron Fox was recorded saying, “We’re dealing with a real redneck government...They just are in love with guns. There’s no question. They don’t give a shit less about Indians.”

The criminalization continues

When Original Peoples have fought, demonstrated for, or pursued legal routes, they have been, for the most part, unsuccessful in securing control over their traditional lands. The federal and provincial governments, for their part, have long resorted to the criminalization and incarceration of Original Peoples defending their land claims.

This strategy has been used by the OPP in the case of Tyendinaga Kanienkehaka (Mohawk) leader Shawn Brant—as evidenced by repeat arrests against him without conviction.

Brant is a long-time activist, having demonstrated at Oka and Ipperwash. During the November 2006 Tyendinaga reclamation of a gravel quarry—allegedly stolen by the Canadian government—Brant was charged with making death threats to Canadian army personnel. On April 14, 2008, Brant was cleared of the charge by Justice Charles Anderson, who, according to Sue Collis, Brant’s wife, described the police and provincial roles in the affair as “problematic” and “troubling.”

On April 25, 2007, Brant was arrested for alleged involvement in organizing a blockade of a Via Rail line to stop construction on land in Tyendinaga Territory, a community situated on the Bay of Quinte in southeastern Ontario. Brant, arrested during an interview with the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, said:

“This is it. Justice for First Nations communities: lock us up. Anybody who speaks out, lock ‘em up. KI6, Bob Lovelace, lock ‘em up. That’s what it’s about: lock ‘em up. Don’t fix the problems, lock ‘em up.”

On June 29, 2007, the Aboriginal Day of Action, Brant organized the blockade of a CN rail line and Highway 2, running through Tyendinaga Territory. According to CBC’s The Current, the OPP had deployed “heavily armed units” to the sites of the blockades, and OPP Commissioner Julian Fantino allegedly warned Tyendinaga that, “The OPP would go in with everything they had, whether or not there were women and children.”

These actions were contrary to the recommendations of the Ipperwash Inquiry and, as activist group No One Seeks War pointed out, “...disregarded their common practice of obtaining injunctions before considering using force against indigenous occupations.”

Brant was charged with mischief and breach of bail conditions.

On April 25, 2008, Brant was arrested and detained for assault and possession of a weapon (a fishing spear) in a confrontation precipitated by James Lalonde and Mike Lalonde—two residents of Deseronto—against Tyendinaga women and girls.

Brant has become emblematic of federal and provincial policing against Original Peoples: if they struggle for their land, they will be thrown in jail. According to some observers, the OPP is involved in a disinformation campaign and trumped-up charges that undermine the very basis of the Ipperwash Inquiry recommendations.

On July 30, the Toronto Star online headlined: “OPP forgets lessons of Ipperwash.” The political and legal persecution of Brant was exposed through comments made to Brant by Commissioner Fantino during an illegal wiretap of Brant’s phone between July and August 2007.

Brant’s lawyer, Peter Rosenthal, criticized Fantino for the wiretap and his controversial statements. Rosenthal called on Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty to investigate whether Fantino was appropriate for the commissioner’s post (which Fantino continues to hold at time of writing).

Among the statements Fantino made to Brant, as revealed by transcripts of the OPP wiretaps, are:

“I don’t wanna get on your bad side but you’re gonna force me to do...everything I can within your community and everywhere else to destroy your...reputation” and, “Your whole world’s gonna come crashing down on this issue.”

Fantino also urged Brant to “pull the plug” on the blockades or “suffer grave consequences.” At a news conference, Rosenthal said Fantino threatened Brant “with premature death at the hands of [an OPP] sniper.”

Rosenthal warned, “If somebody does read that transcript, who’s aware of Ipperwash, they would recognize that there’s danger in allowing Fantino to be head of OPP and the danger we talk about is life and death.”

Fantino issued the following statement in response: “Consistent with the recommendations from the Ipperwash Inquiry, the OPP continues to work collectively with legitimate First Nations leadership and communities to ensure that both the interests of participants during lawful protests and public safety can be served in the best way possible.”

This is part one in a series of articles about the systemic incarceration of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
Battle for the Amazon
Brazil Supreme Court case pits farming in the Amazon against Indigenous rights

by Charles Mostoller

The Brazilian Supreme Court has delayed a ruling that could have far-reaching effects on the Amazon and the thousands of indigenous people who live there. In question is the legality of a process that created an Indigenous Territory in northern Brazil, and the case threatens to reverse decades of progress on indigenous and social rights throughout the country.

After more than two decades of struggle for recognition, five indigenous groups in Brazil’s northern Roraima state won the rights to their ancestral lands in 2005. Their efforts culminated in the creation of a new Indigenous Territory, Raposa Serra do Sol, which covers a large swath of the Amazon Rainforest on the border with Guyana.

In a decree signed by Brazilian President Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva, over 18,000 indigenous Makuxí, Wapixana, Ingariko, Taukepang and Patamona peoples were granted 1.7 million hectares. Non-indigenous peoples were compensated and forced to leave the area. Although this might have brought an end to the long struggle for recognition of their territorial rights, the indigenous peoples of Raposa have faced fierce opposition from entrenched economic interests in Roraima.

In particular, a group of seven wealthy rice farmers has refused to leave the region, throwing the reserve into chaos. Known as fazendeiros, these large-scale farmers have rejected compensation and relocation, despite having arrived in the area less than 15 years ago.

A recent spate of violence against the indigenous peoples in the Raposa Territory has increased tensions. In April, an indigenous leader was attacked when a bomb was thrown at his house. In May, six Macuxí children and four adults were attacked and shot by armed men working for a rice farmer, and local mayor Paulo Cesar Quartiero. Quartiero was detained by police and later released, despite the discovery of a large weapons cache on his property.

Earlier, in April, the Supreme Court suspended an operation by the federal police to remove the remaining seven illegal occupants of the reserve: the fazendeiros had set up blockades and destroyed bridges in order to fight their eviction.

“Even with all the destruction carried out by the rice growers, the Supreme Court decided in their favor,” Macuxí chief Dionito Jose de Sousa told the Associated Press in April.

According to Catarina Vianna, a member of Makunaima Grita, a Brazilian group dedicated to helping the indigenous people at Raposa Serra do Sol, the current struggle is a basic one for the peoples of Raposa.

“This is really a local conflict. It’s about use of water, about the farms getting bigger and bigger,” she said by phone from London. “Now the indigenous people are saying, ‘Enough, this has been recognized as our land.’”

With the support of the Roraima state government, the fazendeiros and state Governor José de Anchieta have appealed to Brazil’s Supreme Court to break up the Raposa Territory and free up large amounts of the land.

“The farmers want the indigenous land to be divided into islands. They don’t want the indigenous land to be a continuous tract of land. But legal experts in Brazil maintain that there is no legal basis to annul the 2005 demarcation,” said Vianna.

This comes at a time when President da Silva has signed a decree to station troops permanently on all Indigenous Territories on the border. There has been talk among top officials in the Brazilian Armed Forces about foreign meddling in the largely-indigenous border region. Citing risks to national sovereignty, it appears the military feels threatened by the formation of Indigenous Territories.

“The military has an agenda,” said Vianna, “to protect Brazilian sovereignty. It’s been their main discourse since the dictatorship in the 60s and 70s. They are against the demarcation of continuous indigenous lands near the border because they want to control what happens [there], and they’re afraid that what
they call ‘foreign interests’ will use the Indians to then exploit the Amazon.”

The military is using the conflict in Roraima to support these goals, suggesting the presence of drug traffickers and guerrilla groups in indigenous lands, and has called for the Supreme Court to annul Raposa Serra do Sol’s boundaries.

According to Tim Cahill, a researcher on Brazil with human-rights organization Amnesty International, the military has long tried to taint social movements in Brazil by claiming connections to foreign guerrilla groups.

“In relation to the accusations of money coming in from Venezuela and FARC rebels – I have no evidence for or against it,” he said. “But it’s fair to say that whenever there’s some criticism or attack to be made against social movements in Brazil... the FARC are always dragged out, although very little evidence is ever provided to prove these allegations. So it seems once again that it’s an attempt to criminalize social movements in Brazil and discredit their work [that benefits] the poor and the marginalized.”

Cahill says that the military – which has total access and freedom of movement in Indigenous Territories – does not have a good reputation among indigenous peoples.

“Indigenous people across the Amazon have persistently complained to Amnesty and denounced violations committed by soldiers who work indigenous areas – sexual abuse, physical abuse, and intimidation,” he said. “There seems to be a clear contradiction in the sense that indigenous areas are meant to limit the access into those areas to guarantee their safety and protection. Yet when the Army goes in there, time and time again we see that [indigenous] rights are violated.”

However, the military is unrepentant and has made it clear that no group’s rights supersede those of the Brazilian Armed Forces.

“We want to be clear on something fundamental – Indian lands are Brazilian lands,” said Defense Minister Nelson Jobim, according to a May Reuters article. “There are no nations or Indian peoples, there are Brazilians who are Indians.”

The Brazilian Ministry of Defense was contacted for this piece, but declined to comment.

Cahill believes the real causes for the current conflict over Raposa go deeper than the military’s security concerns. He says that this case represents a key moment in the face-off between indigenous rights and the interests of big business in Brazil, and big agrobusiness in particular.

“This is something we see not only in the Amazon, but across Brazil,” he said. “The cultural, social and economic rights of indigenous peoples tend to come into conflict with the economic interests of big agro-industry. And big agro-industry has been the driving force of the recent economic boom that’s occurring in Brazil, and we’ve seen that there’s a lot of political and judicial support for their interests.”

“In this case, it’s not that the military has allied itself with the farmers,” said Vianna. “Rather, two separate interests have come together. This handful of farmers – they’re extremely wealthy. It’s not about them. It’s about how Brazil will use the Amazon. Are they going to just leave it to the Indians, who won’t develop it? Or does Brazil have a plan for developing the Amazon? This is a discourse of economic development.

“That’s why the farmers are using economic arguments. They are saying, ‘What we do is good for the state and national economy.’ They call themselves the ‘Nationalist Resistance.’ They consider themselves those who represent the nation, against the Indians who are supported by ‘foreign interests.’ They never say who these ‘interests’ are. But by conflating the local conflict into this language of nationalism and development – of developing the nation – they were able to get closer to the military’s cause.”

Rogério Duarte do Pateo, a Sao Paulo-based member of Makunaima Grita, signalled that the consequences of the court’s ruling could extend far beyond Raposa’s borders.

“A decision against Raposa would create the legal precedents to revoke all indigenous titles to land in Brazil,” he said. “Any other territory could be contested, [such as] the Yanomami, Kayapó.”

Both Pateo and Cahill believe a decision against Raposa would not only violate the Brazilian Constitution, but it could put at risk the gains made over the last 30 years in terms of indigenous rights, throughout Brazil.

“What is on the line here is Article 231 of the Brazilian Constitution and the indigenous rights that are laid out in that article,” Pateo said. “It’s not that the court decision will directly affect the Constitution, but the arguments that are being used go against Article 231 – it seems that the justice system is going to favour the big landowners – and this will open up the way to revise Article 231.”

“The 1988 Constitution allows indigenous people the process to set out and identify their ancestral lands,” said Cahill. “There’s a real fear that this will set back cases across the country of indigenous peoples who continue to fight for the rights to their land, and who, through this process, continue to seek the provision of their basic human rights and cultural rights.”

According to a ruling against the Raposa territory would not only undermine the recent successes in relation to indigenous rights, but would “mark the future of development in Brazil in relation to the Amazon,” giving a clear signal to logging, hydroelectric and agricultural companies that the Amazon is up for grabs.

The ruling was to be announced on August 27, but was delayed when one of the judges requested more time to look into the case.

“Will we continue a predatory model of exploitation that doesn’t respect the law?” Pateo asks. “Or will Brazil be transformed – definitively – into a country that develops itself sustainably, and respects human rights?”
Justice in Colombia?
The Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal reads its verdict

by Dawn Paley

July 23 marked the end of a two-and-a-half-year process carried out by the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal (TPP) in Colombia. A panel of international judges, including a Supreme Court justice from Italy, a handful of university professors, a Nobel Laureate and authorities from the Guambiano and Mapuche Nations, presided over the final session of the TPP.

The Leon de Greiff auditorium at Colombia’s National University was packed to the rafters for the occasion, with participants and supporters of the process spilling out into the Plaza del Ché, the well-known gathering place in the centre of campus.

Before beginning the session, TPP General Secretary Gianni Tognoni invoked the memory of Eduardo Umaña Mendoza, a Colombian member of the TPP jury who was assassinated during a previous session of the Tribunal.

The final verdict, read to the large crowd, summarized much of Colombia’s recent history, condemning the Colombian government, 43 multinational corporations and the US government for their roles in the violence that has long dominated the lives of Colombians. The audience, made up of people from a broad spectrum of social movements and organizations from across the country, listened raptly during the reading of the sentence.

A brief interlude by a group of students – members of “Estudiantes Junto Al Pueblo” – during which at least two dozen youth in black ski masks entered the auditorium and addressed the crowd, added a spontaneous energy to the proceedings.

The judges withdrew while spokespersons for the student movement voiced their concerns, which included the assassination of student leaders, the corporatization of the university and the persecution of activists within universities.

One student then stood in front of the crowd and, taking out a traditional wooden flute, played a simple, haunting tune that drew recognition and loud applause from the audience. The students then withdrew.

History of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal

Inspired by the Russell Tribunals, the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal issued its first verdict in 1979, addressing the situation in Western Sahara (which is to this day occupied by Morocco). The TPP has since carried out exhaustive studies and issued verdicts in accordance with international law on subjects ranging from the Armenian genocide to the rights of asylum seekers in Europe; from Chernobyl to Latin American dictatorships.

The Tribunal’s verdicts are carried out by high-level judges. The ramifications of their rulings are significant, as explained by Adolfo Perez Esquivel, winner of the Nobel prize in 1980 and currently a judge in the tribunal. He gave the example of the US intervention in Nicaragua during the rise of the Contras in the 1980s, which was studied by the TPP in 1984. The Tribunal’s verdict, which condemned the US involvement, “influenced the International Criminal Court ruling in favour of Nicaragua in 1986.”

During the information-gathering process leading up to the July 23 verdict, members of the TPP travelled around Colombia, listening to testimony and studying evidence from people whose lives had been affected by multinational corporations. This evidence was tied together to produce the final document.

The recently concluded TPP was looking specifically at the role of multinational corporations in Colombia. According to Esquivel, the TPP is necessary because “the world’s power is concentrated in large corporations, which operate with total impunity...” and “many countries consider themselves to be outside of the reaches of international law.”

The verdict

The 41-page sentence explains in detail the ways that multinational corporations are connected to violations of people’s right to life and physical integrity, as well as other human rights violations. To name a few of the 43 corporations included in the verdict:

Reading the final verdict: The Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal condemned the Colombian government, 43 multinational corporations and the US government for their role in the violence that has long dominated the lives of Colombians.

Dawn Paley
Occidental Petroleum was named as a particular beneficiary of the activities of the Colombian army in the regions of their operations.

Cemex and other cement companies were named for violating people’s constitutional rights to a clean environment.

Monsanto and Dyncorp were charged with taking away people’s right to health by manufacturing and using glyphosate, a toxic chemical used in aerial crop spraying, supposedly for coca eradication, as part of Plan Colombia.

Coal mining giants Anglo Gold American, Glencore and BHP Billiton, as well as Unión Fenosa and fruit companies that included Chiquita Brands, were connected to flagrant abuses against union members.

Investing in conflict

According to the sentence, between 1978 and 1985, annual foreign direct investment in Colombia increased from $65 million to $650 million. During this period, “a model of brutal and merciless hegemony and accumulation was imposed, based in narco-paramilitary violence and state terrorism, and without democratic control.”

Foreign investment in Colombia continued to increase throughout the 1990s, reaching nearly $7 billion in 1997. This decade is characterized by the massive sell-off of state-controlled companies, bringing in over $12 billion to government coffers, as well as generating up to $2.8 billion annually, according to a World Bank estimate, for corrupt government officials.

The fire sale of state resources and lands to foreign investors, according to the verdict, was carried out “in a framework of terror both inside and outside of the corporations, complemented by paramilitary and state security forces, perpetrating a true genocide that has claimed the lives of approximately 4,000 trade unionists over a 20-year period, the forced displacement of more than four million people, and caused more than five million Colombians to flee the country.”

In the past 10 years, foreign investment in Colombia has continued to grow, reaching $3.77 billion in 2000, and over $10 billion in 2005. This period of economic investments was ushered in by the changing role of the state, which – under pressure from big business, international financial institutions and the local and international elite – was reformulated to “serve the interests of multinational corporations, granting huge opportunities to investors and taking away the rights of workers, eliminating many political rights as well.”

Free Trade Agreements between Colombia and the US and Canada – neither of which has been finalized – are widely seen to be a sort of ‘lock’ on legislation passed or concessions granted in favour of corporate profit, which will be very difficult for future Colombian governments to overturn.

This period also saw the implementation of Plan Colombia, which, “...has permitted an increase in the interference of political and military control by the United States, which has also benefited private military companies...”

Colombia: laboratory for the world

In the first Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal ruling in Colombia, the judges condemned the Colombian state as the principal protagonist of crimes against humanity, bringing to light a situation where institutional and paramilitary armed groups “attempt to destroy any person or social, trade or political organization that confronts the unjust socio-economic and political structures.”

This summer’s ruling, coming 17 years after the first, states that the political conditions in Colombia remain the same, if not more unjust. According to the ruling, “Colombia seems to be, in one sense, like a true institutional political laboratory where the interests of national and international economic actors are fully defended though the state’s abandonment of its functions and its constitutional duty to protect the dignity and life of the population, to which instead the state applies the Colombian version of the doctrine of national security.”

The verdict condemns the Colombian state for a host of violations of human rights, including “direct and indirect participation, through action and omission, in committing genocidal practices,” war crimes and crimes against humanity, including “assassination; extermination; deportation or forced relocation; being jailed or other grave privations of physical freedom in violation of the norms of international law; torture; rape; persecution of a grouping of people with a distinct political and ethnic identity in connection with other crimes mentioned; and the forced disappearance of people.”

The 43 multinational corporations named were charged “in some cases due to a direct and active participation, in others due to a role as instigators or accomplices; but in all cases, at the least, as economic beneficiaries of the existence of the armed conflict in Colombia and the rights violations that have been produced in this framework.”

The charges against the private sector weigh in on “grave and massive violations” of the rights of workers, fraud to their shareholders for promoting policies of corporate social responsibility which are flagrantly ignored in Colombia, for damages to the environment, for their participation as “authors, accomplices or instigators” in genocidal practices including massacres, practices which are particularly obvious “in the process of extinction of 28 indigenous communities, in the liquidation of the Colombian union movement and in the extermination of the political group Unión Patriótica.” Finally, the verdict mentions the responsibility of host states of multinational corporations and highlights in particular the role that the US government has had in Colombia.

Hard not to be involved

Present at the TPP ruling in Bogota was a delegation of Canadian trade union leaders. In an interview after the verdict was read, Paul Moist, president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, noted that, “Canadian companies are probably involved” in some of the violations outlined by the judges, and voiced his concern about the proposed Free Trade Agreement between Canada and Colombia, which, he said, “is all about enabling the corporate agenda.”

Among the 43 companies examined by the tribunal is Vancouver’s B2Gold, which didn’t return repeated calls for an interview. B2Gold is one of a host of Canadian junior mining companies active in Colombia.

“We are not surprised by the verdict,” stated Denis Lemelin, president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, on his way out of the Auditorium after spending a week touring Colombia and visiting with union members, Afro-Colombians, indigenous people and displaced communities.

What North Americans need to understand about Colombia, according to Lemelin, is, “the other side of the story. People need to know what impunity means, and be able to link displacement to the corporate invasion. We oppose the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and Colombia... We need fair trade principles based in social justice.”

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Free Trade Will Not Lift All Boats
Trade deal with Colombia criticized by Canadian labour leaders

by Chris Arsenault

Paul Moist, the President of Canada’s largest union, expressed concern about a free trade deal between Canada and Colombia during a recent meeting with Fabio Valencio, Colombia’s Minister of the Interior.

“[Valencio] listed off the numbers of unionists murdered in Colombia like he was reading a report on the weather channel,” said Moist, President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

Since the beginning of 2008, 32 Colombian trade unionists have been assassinated.

Moist and three other Canadian labour leaders, representing some 1.1 million workers, returned to Canada on July 25 from a weeklong fact-finding mission in Colombia. They were tasked with examining the potential effects of a free trade deal inked on June 7 between the executive branches of the two countries.

“Our overwhelming conclusion is that a free trade agreement will not help the Colombian people,” said the Canadian labour leaders in a statement.

According to the Colombian Network in Response to Free Trade (RECALCA), based on the precedent set with the Canada-Peru agreement, the Colombian government “calculates that overnight, the emasculated and already under-protected agricultural and industrial sectors in Colombia will be capable of competing with their Canadian counterparts.” However, RECALCA notes that farmers as well as Colombian manufacturers of “textiles, footwear, plastic products, industrial metals, chemicals and paper as well as machinery and automotive equipment” are threatened by the ratification of the agreement.

The Canadian labour delegation met with various sectors of Colombian society, including government officials, the United Central of Workers (CUT) and other trade unions, opposition leaders, non-governmental organisations, groups representing indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples as well as the Canadian ambassador. “Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country on earth for trade unions and civil society activists,” they said upon return to Canada.

“From what we have learned, 95 per cent of Colombian workers do not have an enforceable collective agreement,” Moist explained. “We cannot accept a free trade agreement until this changes.”

While Colombia is a signatory to International Labour Organization (ILO) protocols, which should guarantee workers the right to organise independent trade unions, the protocols have not been codified into domestic legalisation, making them practically irrelevant.

“It is easier to form a paramilitary gang than it is to form a trade union in this country,” CUT President Tarisco Mora told reporters at a press conference with his Canadian counterparts.

The CUT had 1.5 million members at its founding, Mora told the Canadians. Today it is down to 460,000 due to a combination of legal hurdles to unionisation and violence against union members.

Colombia’s National Trade Union School documented 2,245 killings, 3,400 threats and 138 forced disappearances of trade unionists between January 1991 and December 2006. Broken down, that’s one unionist killed every three days and one unionist forcibly disappeared every month, for 15 years.

According to a statement by David Emerson, Canada’s foreign affairs minister, the deal will expand “trade and investment, and will help solidify ongoing efforts by the Government of Colombia to create a more prosperous, equitable and secure democracy.”

Union leaders, including CUPE’s Paul Moist, dispute these claims. “In Colombia’s current climate, increased foreign investment will not lift all boats,” said Mois, citing the case of sugar cane workers with whom he met.

Even a decade ago, most of Colombia’s 22,000 cane workers were unionised, according to Mois. Today, the industry has been contracted out and workers receive less money per pound of cane than they did ten years ago.

These trends exist not only in the sugar sector, but across a rapidly industrializing and concentrated agricultural sector. Free Trade Agreements undermine small-scale producers and food sovereignty, encouraging the export of cash crops and increasing the likelihood of dumping by countries with highly subsidized agricultural sectors.

In 2007, two-way merchandise trade between Canada and Colombia amounted to $1.14 billion.

Some analysts believe Colombia is seeking a deal with Canada to win a public relations battle in the US, rather than to increase trade flows.

“Colombia is offering Canada an FTA because it really wants the US Congress to reconsider its opposition to such a deal,” wrote Pablo Heidrich, senior researcher at the North-South Institute, a development policy watchdog based in Canada.

Congressional Democrats are stalling a similar deal between the US and Colombia because of human right concerns.

With the recent collapse of World Trade Organization talks in Japan due in no small part to opposition from the global south, developed countries are likely to pursue bilateral deals, such as the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, with renewed vigour.

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Free Trade or False Logic?
Exploring the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement

by Moira Peters and Dawn Paley

On Saturday, June 7, the Canadian government announced that it had wrapped up negotiations with Colombia for a Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA). “The free trade agreement will expand Canada-Colombia trade and investment, and will help solidify ongoing efforts by the government of Colombia to create a more prosperous, equitable and secure democracy,” Canada’s Minister of Foreign Affairs David Emerson said in a statement following the announcement. The notion that an FTA between Canada and Colombia would result in increased prosperity for Colombians is based on the much-repeated concept of ‘free trade,’ which, according to the dominant economic model, opens up markets and encourages investment.

“Colombia exports coffee, oil, coal, gold, emeralds and bananas. These are the same kinds of products that Colombia was exporting 100 years ago,” states Mario Valencia, an economist with the Colombian Network in Response to Free Trade (RECALCA). “We import technology and industrial goods, and it is necessary to export more and more primary materials to buy the same amount of technology and machines. This type of exporting scheme is deepened with the signing of free trade agreements.”

When governments and corporations speak about free trade, they are often referring to tariffs, which are per cent taxes charged on products as they are being imported. According to Colombian researcher Héctor Moncayo, “Tariffs are considered ‘barriers’ to international trade, but these tariffs provide benefits for the importing country: tax revenue and protection for local industries.”

Moncayo explains: “Multinational corporations claim that these tariffs are denying them access to international markets and that these tariffs must be eliminated. This is generally what is referred to as ‘free trade.’” He goes on to state that there have always been tariffs, and that, “while the oligarchies and governments of weak countries [like Colombia] will drop import tariffs if there is pressure for them to do so, the powerful countries maintain their tariffs.”

In Canada, trade barriers on foreign products are designed to protect Canadian industry and agriculture.

Examples of Canadian trade barriers that apply to trade with Colombia include:

- sanitary requirements for seafood, plants, seeds, vegetables and fruit
- special permission for textiles, fowl and dairy
- quotas on coffee
- eight per cent import tax on sugar
- seasonal tariffs on vegetables and fruit

[Data: Colombian Network in Response to Free Trade (RECALCA), Canadian Sugar Institute]

Canada’s general tariffs—ones that could eventually be lifted with an FTA—are already considered low. And, according to RECALCA, 90.6 per cent of imports to Canada are already tariff-free.

In terms of being able to compete in Canada, an FTA is not expected to open up the market in a significant way for Colombian products. Nor will it address agricultural subsidies that grant Canadian farmers a competitive advantage over their Colombian counterparts.

Agreements on the rights of transnational corporations

If the FTA between Canada and Colombia is not so much about lowering tariffs and improving market access for Colombian exporters, what are the benefits of this kind of agreement, and to which economic sectors will these benefits flow?

According to Colombian economist Héctor Mondragon, “These agreements should be known as ‘Agreements on the Rights of Transnational Corporations’ instead of as ‘Free Trade Agreements.” Indeed, investment guarantees for Canadian corporations are a key element of the FTA between the two countries. Canada has recently finished negotiating an FTA with Peru, the texts of which are public, and the deal with Colombia is expected to look similar. According to Foreign Affairs Canada, “An investment chapter in the Canada-Peru FTA locks in market access for Canadian investors in Peru and provides greater stability, transparency and protection for their investments.”

This means that Canadian corporations investing in Colombia or Peru stand to further benefit from FTAs, because the agreements remove the possibility that the host government will raise taxes, change its laws, or expropriate properties.

Lobbying by industry in favour of an FTA with Colombia has been intense. In mid-May, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce sent a letter to Lee Richardson, chair of the Standing Committee on International Trade, to “strongly encourage [the] committee to endorse these negotiations and the benefits that they will bring to Canadian companies and to Canadians.” Eight companies signed on in support of the letter, including Barrick Gold Inc., Teck Cominco, Nexen Inc. and Talisman Energy Inc.

Hush, rush and sign

According to a press release issued by RECALCA, the Canada-Colombia FTA negotiations “were extraordinarily fast and unlike the negotiations with the United States, which lasted 16 rounds, they were wrapped up in the fifth round of negotiations, out of the six rounds planned at the outset in July of 2007.”

The texts of the Canada-Colombia FTA are still hidden from... continued on next page »
In Toronto, these "broad issues" include fighting gentrification and demanding rights for immigrants.

Local 75 has begun influencing commercial developments in Rexdale, one of the poorest communities in Toronto. Guled Warsame, an organizer with the union, says that in December 2006 communities in Rexdale found out about an open-house for Woodbine Live: a major expansion of the local race track. "People started asking about local benefits," says Warsame. "The first big meeting [of coalition partners] was in May 2007; over 600 people came." Then the Community Organizing for Responsible Development (CORD) campaign was launched. UNITE HERE Local 75, the Toronto Social Planning Council and other organizations signed on to support the campaign.

CORD’s goal is to obtain concessions for the Rexdale community. The campaign is modeled after one in the United States in which “everything that the neighbourhood wanted got written into the agreement,” including provisions for parking, housing, hospital debt, jobs, training and asthma reduction, says Van der Heever, who worked with the CORD initiative in New Haven.

When asked about the objectives of Toronto’s CORD campaign, Sima Sahar Zerehi, Communications Specialist with Local 75, says that the Rexdale community has similar goals. “We have a huge shopping list; it’s exhaustive. More jobs, better services, youth services, etc.”

Summer of hope

Beyond its participation in the CORD campaign in Rexdale, UNITE HERE has also joined the "Summer of Hope" campaign.

“The Summer of Hope is a campaign aimed at bringing together members across Toronto to fight for the rights of immigrant workers,” says Zerehi. Tactics have included the union job actions as well as a rally at City Hall on July 31 entitled, 'We Are The New Majority'. Feuser believes that UNITE HERE’s bargaining tactics, community work and high immigrant membership will eventually gain the support of most workers in Toronto. “It’s in everyone’s interest that service industry jobs are good jobs. Manufacturing jobs are decreasing [in Ontario] and service sector jobs...these are the jobs that are going to be the jobs that stay.”

the public, despite the fact that negotiations have finished. One of the justifications used to push forward free-trade agreements is increasing ‘transparency.’ Instead, unelected Canadian and Colombian bureaucrats negotiated the Canada-Colombia deal in total secrecy. In fact, the end of Canadian negotiations was prepared to advise the government during negotiations. “By making this announcement only days before the Standing Committee on International Trade finished the report it was preparing to advise the government during negotiations. “By making this announcement only days before the Standing Committee on International Trade finished the report would have been completed, the government is clearly saying that it does not respect the work of parliament,” stated Liberal International Trade Critic Navdeep Bains.

The report, meant to “guide negotiations,” was released more than two weeks after negotiations were concluded. It contains eight recommendations, of which the second “recommends that the government of Canada maintain close ties with Colombia without signing a free trade agreement.”

Free trade on the table this fall

Now that an early election has been called by Stephen Harper, the FTA will be sidelined during election campaigns. Because the agreement is already negotiated, however, once the new government is installed in Canada, the Canada-Colombia FTA may be among the first items to be tabled – presented to MPs – this winter, once Parliament sits again.

Previously, the prime minister had the authority to sign an FTA without discussion in the House of Commons. However, the current process is the result of an election promise by the Harper Conservatives, and “nobody has much experience with this new process or really knows where it leads,” says Burnaby-New Westminster MP Peter Julian, the NDP Critic on International Trade.

Once tabled, the FTA will sit before the House for 21 days. Voting will not necessarily take place. In Canada, a vote in parliament is not necessary to ratify the agreement, unlike in the United States, where the Democrat-led congress has thus far ‘frozen’ the ratification of the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement partly due to concerns about human rights in Colombia.
Canada is a global mining giant. In fact, it is the world’s major force in mining, dominating the industry on every continent except Antarctica. Fifty-seven per cent of the world’s public mining companies list on the Toronto Stock Exchange, representing over 9,990 mining projects world-wide.

This giant is growing. In 2007, the TSE financed mining companies to the tune of $17 billion.

Supported by tax breaks and favourable legislation at home, and assisted by official development aid and diplomatic support abroad, mining companies have long found Canada to be the place to do business.

 Mining, however, comes at an often devastating cost to communities that lie in its path. As resource prices rise, so do the stakes; conflict is escalating.

Community spokespeople from northern Ontario’s Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug were jailed after they escorted mining companies off of their territory. A village near Guatemala’s El Estor was burned to the ground to make way for Vancouver’s Skye Resources. New Brunswickers have shouted down uranium mining representatives at community meetings in Saint John and Moncton. Labour unions representing workers for a company with operations in Brazil and Canada have joined forces.

Ultimately, a resource-intensive growth economy pits the continued consumption of material goods – from power plants to aluminum cans to digital networks – against the ecological state of vast areas of land, air and water that communities – and ultimately, humanity – depend on for survival.

The Dominion’s November 2008 special issue on mining will bring the role of Canadian mining back into view, with a comprehensive look at all stages of mining, and its impacts in terms of economics, human rights, labour, indigenous communities, the environment, gender, and art. Independent journalists from around the world will dig to the heart of extractive industries and find out what keeps it beating, or what it takes to beat it.

To distribute 20,000 copies of State of Mine and organize events across the country, we need your help. Organize a local event, volunteer to distribute copies locally, contribute an article, and make a donation to make it happen!

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In the Mexican village of Cerro de San Pedro in the State of San Luis Potosí, local residents have been fighting a battle against an open pit mine owned by a Canadian corporation and run by its Mexican subsidiary, Minera San Xavier (MSX). According to Jose Antonio Motilla, who is part of the Broad Opposition Front (FAO) to MSX, the open pit mine is a historical, legal, and environmental crime.

According to company documents, the mine has reserves of 1.5 million ounces of gold and 62 million ounces of silver. Gold occurs in the ore at a rate of 0.55 grams per tonne.

According to Motilla, the mountain is being collapsed by implosions. Gold and silver are then extracted from the crushed rock using a technique known as cyanide heap leaching. Heap leaching at the Cerro de San Pedro mine requires an estimated 32 million litres of water daily. Juan Carlos Ruiz, an FAO organizer, is concerned that the mine is polluting an aquifer that supplies much of San Luis Potosí’s drinking water.

Cerro de San Pedro is a historical centre. Spaniards settled in the area in 1592, which led to the establishment of the City of San Luis Potosí and the founding of the state of the same name. Known for its wealth in ore, as well as for its historical and natural significance, the village of Cerro de San Pedro was short-listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The open pit gold mine is now owned by New Gold Inc, whose head office is in Vancouver, British Columbia. Until a June 2008 merger, the mine was owned by Metallica Resources, and before that by Glamis Gold, both Canadian corporations. The village of Cerro de San Pedro stands at the foot of the mine.
The FAO has been waging a legal and political battle against the company with the aim of shutting down the mine, which they claim is operating without proper permits.

Don Armando, a resident of Cerro de San Pedro, has been at the forefront of the resistance movement. He lives with the impact of the open pit mine on a daily basis: the breakdown of the village's architectural structures, the noise generated by the extraction, and the air pollution from vast dust storms.

The FAO, which now has a sister organization, FAO-Montreal, is undertaking a popular education campaign to raise awareness of the situation in Cerro de San Pedro and of the role of Canadian mining companies in Mexico. The history of Mexico is one of colonizing forces seeking to extract mineral riches from Indigenous and Mexican soil. Anti-mining activists argue that this latest wave of extraction, carried out by Canadian mining companies, continues the colonial pattern.

Dust storms resulting from explosions, the collapsing of the mountain, and constant heavy truck traffic are part of the mine's ecological impact. Residents of the nearby town La Zapatilla, many of whom are employed at the mine, are also affected by the dust, which often covers the entire village.

A sign in the village reads: "400 YEARS OF GLORY IN POTOSI, MSX GET OUT OF HERE," commemorating the long history of the village and demanding the withdrawal of the company. According to a report written by the Coordinating Committee of the Public Referendum on Cerro de San Pedro/San Xavier, residents voted 97-99 per cent against the mining project in Cerro de San Pedro in a statewide public referendum held in October 2006. The project moved ahead anyway.

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Sobering Statistics
Downtown Eastside survey paints grim picture

by Sean Condon

For 15 years, Sharon Patricia lived in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. A former sex worker and crack addict, she was raped, beaten and left for dead. She has seen people die on the streets, women disappear and people thrown out of their homes.

Patricia is now living on the Sunshine Coast in British Columbia, but recently returned to her old neighbourhood for a visit. In two months she’s seen three dead bodies — a terrifying reminder of how deadly the Downtown Eastside can be.

“This place is no good,” says the 42-year-old grandmother, as she checks the message board at the Carnegie Community Centre. “There’s cockroaches and rats in the hotels, drugs in the alleys and the government isn’t doing anything to help these people.”

Patricia’s Downtown Eastside isn’t a pretty one, and although there are also plenty of positives about the neighbourhood, a recently released survey paints a bleak picture of what people in the Downtown Eastside endure.

In July, the city of Vancouver released the extensive Downtown Eastside Demographic Study of Single Room Occupancy (SRO) and Social Housing Tenants, the first census of the neighbourhood in six years and the first to include social-housing tenants with SRO hotel residents. Commissioned by the city, B.C. Housing and the Vancouver Agreement, the survey interviewed 1,300 residents and was compiled by three different organizations. In order to make interviewees as comfortable as possible, the survey was conducted at the interviewees’ convenience.

The Downtown Eastside constantly struggles with negative stereotypes, and the survey did little to dispel the myths. In some cases, the results were worse than many people believed.

Of those living in SRO hotels, 77 per cent have an income of less than $15,000 a year; 79 per cent have health problems, with 47 per cent reporting multiple health problems; and 52 per cent said they use drugs, with 28 per cent using frequently. Of those living in social housing, 72 per cent have incomes under $15,000 a year; 75 per cent have health problems, with 37 per cent reporting multiple problems; and 15 per cent use drugs. While abject poverty and rampant drug addiction are obvious to anyone who ventures into the Downtown Eastside, the extent of reported health problems appears to have caught the survey’s administrators off-guard.

“People’s health is worse than it was during the [last] study [six years ago],” says Kathleen Boyes, executive director of the Neighbourhood Housing Society, which helped prepare the survey. “There was a lot of people who said their health was fine, but admitted to having HIV or Hep C. The health situation is pretty dire and I think it’s underreported. We’re talking about people with very fragile health conditions in one of the toughest places to live.”

The United Nations has reported that the Downtown Eastside has a Hepatitis C rate of 70 per cent and an HIV rate of 30 per cent — which puts it at the same level as Botswana. Perhaps most puzzling, however, is that the report was actually completed in April, but wasn’t released until the July long weekend. The delay has caused Downtown Eastside activists like Pivot Legal Society lawyer David Eby to accuse the governments responsible for the survey of trying to bury the negative results.

Martha Lewis, the executive director of the Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre (TRAC) and the lead on the report, admits the survey was kept quiet. “The concern, however, was not with the results themselves, she says, but with how the media might spin it, particularly the finding that only 16 per cent of SRO residents actually want to live in the Downtown Eastside.

Lewis says the problem is one of context — residents were asked only about current conditions and not whether they’d consider staying if the problems in their neighbourhood improved.

“If your only other option is to be living on the street, then having a room is pretty satisfying, but we don’t want that to read that it’s satisfactory and that’s all they need,” she says. “And when people say they would move away [from the Downtown Eastside], we don’t want that to be used to show that they’d rather not be there... it’s the housing they’re in, it doesn’t mean the area itself is not a community they want to be in.”

Indeed, the pressure to gentrify the neighbourhood is greater now than ever before. One of the most common arguments in favour of gentrification of the Downtown Eastside is that the situation is so dire that ‘something’ needs to be done. Advocates for and residents of the Downtown Eastside fear that this will give the city an excuse to tear down the condemned buildings — and put up condominiums current residents cannot afford.

Dan, a homeless man from Ottawa, has been in the Downtown Eastside since November. Despite the drugs and prostitution, his main problems with the neighbourhood are the long food lines, poor quality of food and the long lines at shelters that keep him on the street. Dan’s solution to fixing the problem is a simple one: build more shelters.

Patricia contends that more social housing needs to be built for people in the Downtown Eastside.

Neither Dan nor Patricia believes more condominiums are the answer.

Over 70 per cent of those surveyed reported suffering from health problems. According to the United Nations, the Downtown Eastside has a Hepatitis C rate of 70 per cent and an HIV rate of 30 per cent — which puts it at the same level as Botswana. Dawn Paley

A version of this article was originally published in Megaphone Magazine.
Grassy Narrows to shut down main food source – and advised to stop eating the fish – their the First Nations communities the Ontario government told the warning was made public, (White Dog First Nation). After Nation) and Wabaseemong (Grassy Narrows First Nation), Asubpeeschoseewag communities of Quibell (later Dryden’s plant were the com water between 1962 and 1970. mercury-contaminated waste dumping its untreated mercury Chemicals Limited had been tion was discovered: Dryden rivers were poisoned. Even less likely to appear in schoolbooks is the fact that there are hundreds of sites in Canada contaminated with this highly toxic metal, many of them on Indigenous land.

**The Anishinabek of Grassy Narrows, White Dog and Quibell**

In 1970, the government of Canada informed commercial fishermen and tourist-lodge owners along the English-Wabigoon River system in north western Ontario that the fish were testing for extremely high levels of mercury, and that the rivers were poisoned.

Soon after the announce ment, the source of contamina tion was discovered: Dryden Chemicals Limited had been dumping its untreated mercury wastewater into the river. All told, the company released more than 20,000 pounds of mercury-contaminated waste water between 1962 and 1970.

Just upstream from Dryden’s plant were the communities of Quibell (later known as Wabauskang First Nation), Asubpeeschoseewagong (Grassy Narrows First Nation) and Wabaseemong (White Dog First Nation). After the warning was made public, the Ontario government told the First Nations communities to stop eating the fish – their main food source – and advised Grassy Narrows to shut down its commercial fishery.

The economies were devast ated. In Grassy Narrows alone, the employment rate dropped from 90 per cent to 10. In addition, residents had to find different food sources and many were already suffering from mercury poisoning.

Mercury poisoning, or Minamata disease, causes eye problems, loss of co-ordination, numbness in the hands and feet, loss of memory, loss of strength, severe birth defects, “insanity,” neurological disorders and death. People in Grassy Narrows, White Dog and Quibell all showed symptoms of poisoning.

“Aware of the possibility of getting compensation for loss of livelihood,” notes the Grassy Narrows & Islington Bands Mercury Disability Board website, “the two First Nations immediately began to look into ways of getting financial assistance for its members. It took 16 years to achieve their goal.”

In 1985, the Federal and Provincial Governments, along with Great Lakes Forest Products and Dryden Chemicals’ parent company, Reed Inc, paid the communities of Grassy Narrows and White Dog a little over $16 million.

The mercury, however, was never removed from the water.

At the time of the settle ment, “scientists and govern ment officials assured them [the communities] that the mercury would be completely out of the system in 30 years,” says Dr. Leanne Simpson, a researcher from the Alderville First Nation who works with Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang, in a June 9, 2008, press release.

Discussing the Final Report of the Wabauskang First Nations Indigenous Knowledge and Contaminants Program, Simpson further explains that mercury concentrations in 1975 ranged “from 0.47 to 5.98 ppm [parts per million]. Health Canada’s guideline for the safe consumption of fish for frequent fish eaters is 0.2 ppm.”

Understanding that mercury doesn’t just ‘disappear’ but rather works its way up the food chain and throughout the environment, Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang initiated two joint studies, which were completed in 2002 and 2004. The studies indicated that there were still high concentrations of mercury in the local populations of pike, walleye and otters.

Moreover, residents from both communities continue to suffer from an array of mercury-poisoning symptoms. The Mercury Disability Board–established on December 31, 2007, to implement the terms of the 1985 settlement–has processed 819 initial applications for benefits from adults and another 88 applications for children.

The current situation for the small community of Quibell, known today as the Wabauskang First Nation, is even worse than for Grassy Narrows and White Dog.

In 1919, epidemics of smallpox and tuberculosis were introduced into the Wabauskang reservation and the population was decimated. Potentially facing extinction, the few surviving Wabauskang scattered themselves throughout the region. “Some...chose to relocate to their traplines and hunting grounds to escape the disease; others moved to the old Grassy Narrows Reserve, to Lac Seule, Eagle Lake, and Quibell,” Simpson explains.

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Politics of Apologies
The Komagata Maru and Canada’s history of exclusion

by Harsha Walia

In the past few weeks, much has been written about Prime Minister Stephen Harpers’ so-called Komagata Maru apology, delivered at the “Gadhri Babian Da Mela” (Martyrs Festival) in Surrey, B.C., on August 3, 2008. The debate has focused on whether the apology needed to be made in the House of Commons for it to be afforded the respect and dignity it deserves. Many South Asian Canadians have expressed that the racist discrimination inherent to the Komagata Maru incident in 1914 is mirrored today in the treatment of members of the South Asian Canadian community as second-class citizens who are not considered worthy of a full apology from the Conservative government.

Beyond the location of the apology, there are other reasons to believe that the apology was disingenuous. Consider this: Harper left the stage before hearing the response of the 8,000 people gathered; the prime minister’s office pre-screened and approved the thank-you speech to be given by festival organizers; and Secretary of State for Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity Jason Kenney insisted that, “The apology has been given and it won’t be repeated.”

History of exclusion

In order to discourage South Asian migration, in 1908 the Canadian government amended the Immigration Act with the Continuous Journey Regulation, under which travel to Canada required continuous passage from the country of origin, and entry with at least $200 cash. In conjunction with policies such as the Chinese Head Tax, these restrictions were intended to reinforce a “White Canada” policy, restricting non-white migrants at a time when massive numbers of European immigrants—over 400,000 in 1913 alone—were entering Canada.

The Continuous Journey Regulation was emphatically challenged in May 1914, when 376 Indians aboard the Komagata Maru out of Hong Kong arrived in Vancouver harbour. The steam-liner was not permitted to dock and its passengers were deprived of food and water by Canadian authorities, subject to a legal challenge, intimidated, and finally coerced to depart by Royal Navy boats. The Komagata Maru was eventually forced back to India and the Continuous Journey Regulation remained in effect until 1947.

Symbolism, and the politics of apologies

What is behind the string of recent Conservative government apologies, not only to Indo-Canadians, but also for the internment of Japanese-Canadians, the Chinese-Canadian Head Tax, and the survivors of the residential school system?

According to a May 16, 2008, Globe and Mail article, “The motivation and timing behind the announcements are the subject of much debate... What is clear is that many of those Canadians most affected by these acknowledgements live in some of the most competitive ridings in Canada—particularly in British Columbia and Central Canada.”

Government apologies have been politically expedient for the Conservatives. They are cognisant of the emotional appeal of apologising to a constituency that is otherwise cautious about voting for them. Savvy politicians are acutely aware that these apologies are not intended to further a substantial discourse about the state’s responsibility and complicity in perpetuating racist subjugation, or to bring about practical change in people’s lives.

It is, in fact, just the opposite. Through the politics of symbolism, apologies are a painless way of achieving closure while reinforcing the superficial veneer of Canadian multiculturalism and benevolence.

While formal acknowledgements from governments—particularly in light of their resistance to doing so—are one part of a reconciliation process, movements pushing for government apologies rarely further the demands for restitution, reparations, transformation of power, abolition of a repressive system, or solidarity with other communities. Instead, such movements often reinforce the status quo by seeking equality with, and financial compensation from, an oppressive and colonial state that continues to maintain the power to grant or withhold citizenship.

Putting racism behind us

Such apologies are also a form of political opportunism that seeks our blind loyalty and gratitude for a government that hypocritically continues to perpetuate the very realities for which it is apologising. There is a strong temptation when hearing an apology, particularly for an incident that happened almost 100 years ago, to think that amends have been made and that racism is in the past.

In response to the Harper Government’s recent apology to Indigenous residential school survivors, the Quebec Native Women’s Association issued a statement, declaring, “In order for this apology to be considered genuine, more efforts must be undertaken to correct current oppressive measures under the Indian Act that prevent Indigenous peoples from prospering socially, culturally, politically and economically... And while we may recognize the Government’s admission of guilt, the fact remains that many obstacles must be removed in order to give meaning to the spirit and intent of their apology.”

Sid Tan, president of the Chinese Canadian National Council and the B.C. Coalition of Headtax Payers, has cautioned, “The historical injustices of the Chinese Head Tax are

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In the mid-1940s, inhabitants of Quibell started getting sick. “It was the children and babies who bore the brunt of [it].” Between 1947 and 1949, 10 babies died, all in their first year of life, and all had violent seizures, and what doctors and nurses at the time called ‘an incurable disease,’” continues Simpson. “Most of the babies that died were bottle-fed with Carnation milk mixed directly with water from the river.”

While not official, Dryden was likely responsible for these deaths. To make pulp, the company used a process called ‘krafting,’ which generated a toxic black liquid that mills at the time would simply pour into the river. “Kraft pulp and paper mills were notorious for using Hg compounds [such as mercury chloride]...to keep pulp and paper from rotting,” Simpson adds. “This could have easily been spilled into the river system and converted to methymercury.”

Years later – too late for many residents of Quibell, according to Simpson – the company installed a recovery boiler that allowed them to recycle the black liquid.

Then came the second wave of mercury pollution, from 1962 to 1970. During this time, Dryden operated a mercury cell chlor-alkali plant to make chlorine for bleaching paper, a process that generates tons of mercury waste. The waste being dumped into the river meant that the population of Quibell was devastated further, along with the Grassy Narrows and White Dog communities.

Shortly after Dryden’s actions were made public, the government decided to re-establish the Wabauskang Reserve, and the community of Quibell was relocated.

The government excluded the people of Quibell from the Grassy Narrows and White Dog settlement. In fact, the residents didn’t even know they were suffering from mercury poisoning until the 1980s.

Former residents of Quibell want to know why they were excluded from the settlement. Not only were they closer to Dryden than the other two communities, but even now there are several Wabauskang showing mercury-poisoning symptoms.

Thousands and thousands more

In Canada today there are dozens of chlor-alkali plants, pulp mills, coal-powered generation plants, various mining projects (such as gold mines) and other industrial facilities that use and release mercury near indigenous communities. Environment Canada’s 2005 National Pollutant Release Inventory (NPRI) reports a total of 172 facilities within a 50-km distance of 135 communities across the country.

Communities that report mercury pollution include Akwesasne, Fort William, Aamjiwnaang, Pictou Landing, James Bay, Cheslatta, Tl’azt’en, Tse Keh Nay, Norway House, Eel River Bar, Fort Chipewyan, Fort MacKay, West Moberly and Fort Simpson (Deh Cho).

With the exception of Grassy Narrows, White Dog, Wabauskang, and possibly James Bay, a thorough study has never been conducted to show whether these communities are suffering mercury poisoning. However, the 1999 Health Canada report “Methylmercury in Canada: Exposure of First Nations and Inuit Residents to Methylmercury in the Canadian Environment, Volume 3” may give us an indication. The report revealed 17,671 indigenous people had blood-mercury levels ranging from 20–699 ppb (parts per billion) between 1971 and 1996.

In a message posted on the Friends of Anishinabek of the Gitchi Gami website, John H.W. Hummel, a pollution researcher based in British Columbia, explains that, “when mercury or lead levels of 5 ppb to 6 ppb are found in the brain, 25 per cent of the glial progenitor stem cells simply ‘shut down.’ These particular brain cells are absolutely crucial for building the brain during infancy and beyond. This type of brain cell is also found in adults.”

Hummel believes that the thousands of indigenous people who have been ignored by the government should embark on a class action lawsuit and has contacted Tony Merchant from Merchant Law Group. Based in Saskatchewan, Merchant is the lawyer behind the recent compensation settlement for Residential school victims.

In his reply to Hummel, Merchant said he does not believe anything can be done for Grassy Narrows because of the 1985 settlement, but, “if there are identifiable mercury issues elsewhere,” a lawsuit is a possibility. “We are prepared to pursue this issue,” Merchant says. “We are prepared to fund the battle which includes a battle regarding experts. If there are projects that we might undertake, we will undertake them.”

For more articles by John Schertou, visit his blog, intercontinentalery.org.

“Trade Will Not Lift All Boats,” from page 12 »

It is unclear what happens now with the Canada-Colombia bilateral deal. Buoyed by high popular approval ratings, Colombia’s President Alvaro Uribe has the necessary congressional support and political capital to enact the trade agreement.

The same cannot be said for Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who does not have the parliamentary majority needed to pass legislation without support from other parties.

Canadian opposition parties, including the Liberals and the New Democratic Party, have expressed concern about the deal, especially given the human rights situation in Colombia. “We are not clear where this legislation will go in Canada,” Moist told The Dominion.

While opposition parties in both countries remain skeptical of the agreement, business lobby groups support the deal.

“Colombia imposes tariffs averaging 11 per cent on industrial goods, 17 per cent on agricultural and 15 to 20 per cent on cotton yarns and paper products,” said Thomas d’Aquino, leader of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE) in a May presentation to a parliamentary committee. “The elimination of these tariffs would greatly benefit Canada,” said d’Aquino.

In particular, politically influential Canadian mining firms want access to the vast natural wealth under Colombia’s soil. “The proposed agreement would benefit companies and workers in a wide range of industries, including the automotive sector, steel, chemicals, public infrastructure development, oil drilling... mining and advanced manufacturing such as mining machinery and equipment,” d’Aquino told Canadian politicians.

While a lack of collective bargaining rights may hurt average workers, foreign interests seem content with the current labour situation in Colombia, taking advantage of the inability of most workers to organize to demand fair pay for fear of extermination. “No Canadian mining operations are unionised in Colombia,” says Moist.

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award granted to the victims of the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska. The decision regarding the interest payment has been sent to a lower court. With interest, the payout would be closer to $1 billion.

Chevron and a consortium of oil companies signed an agreement with Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams to develop the offshore Hebron-Ben Nevis heavy-oil project. Days later it was announced that Chevron “stepped aside” as project operator, leaving that job to Exxon Mobil.

Statistics Canada reported that 55,000 jobs were lost in Canada during the month of July. According to economist Jim Stanford, “National productivity hasn’t grown at all in the over two years since Harper came to power - the worst productivity performance for any administration in Canada’s post-war history.”

Parks Canada defended their July 29 decision to allow the reopening of an historic zinc mine next to the Nahanni National Park Reserve. The Prairie Creek mine site is on a tributary of the South Nahanni River. The Decho First Nation, which has been negotiating with Parks Canada to expand the park to include the entire Nahani River watershed, was not consulted in the agreement made between the federal agency and the Canadian Zinc Corp.

Palestinian poet, politician and author Mahmoud Darwish died at the age of 67. Anti-communist dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn died at 89. Singer, actor and creator of the Shaft theme Isaac Hayes died at 65. Comedian and actor Bernie Mac died at 50. Pentagon Papers researcher Anthony Russo died at 71. The oldest Orca Whale on BC’s south coast, known as Lummi, was missing and presumed dead at 98.

Ehud Olmert resigned as Prime Minister of Israel, prompting calls for an early election from Binyamin Netanyahu’s Likud Party.

In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez announced plans to nationalise the Bank of Venezuela, currently owned by Spain’s Grupo Santander. Other sectors slated for nationalisation include cement and telecommunications.

Stephen Harper apologized for the Komagata Maru incident of 1914, when 376 Indians, including many Sikhs, were not allowed to disembark from their ship and were eventually forced to return to India, where 20 of the passengers were massacred by colonial police. The apology took place in Surrey, BC, and was immediately rejected by the 8,000 strong crowd and Sikh leaders, who demanded that an official apology be made in the House of Commons.

Speculation mounted that CanWest Global may take the company private. The company, which owns the National Post, daily papers across Canada and Global TV, has seen its share price decline 83 per cent over the last 18 months, and is carrying a debt of over $3 billion.

US scientist Bruce Ivans died in an apparent suicide after learning that he was to be indicted on charges relating to the anthrax that was mailed to members of US congress in late 2001, killing five people.

The state of Texas executed a Mexican citizen, José Medellin, and a Honduran man, Heliberto Chi. The execution of Chi was the sixth so far this year in Texas.

Alfred Heinz Reumayr, from BC, was sentenced in a New Mexico court to 13 years in prison, after pleading guilty to one count of terrorism for plotting to blow-up the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline. Reumayr was in custody for nine years, during which time he was extradited to the US, and is required to serve another four years.

In Mauritania, the army carried out a coup against the government of Hamdi Ould Mohamed el-Hacen, ending a one year period of democracy in the West African country. The coup was condemned by the African Union.

The International Criminal Court confirmed that they would open an investigation into the links between paramilitaries and government officials in Colombia as well as the extradition of Colombian paramilitaries to the US. Death threats against the Nasa people in Colombia’s southwestern department of Cauca generated fear in Santander de Quilichao, where more than 25 people have been assassinated over the past two weeks. A bomb exploded at a street festival in Ituango, in the department of Antioquia, killing seven and seriously injuring 17.

In Guatemala, two masked men swarmed in front of Amilcar Pop’s car, drew guns and banged on the windows while yelling death threats. Pop is the president of the Guatemalan Association of Mayan Lawyers.

Fernando Lugo was inaugurated president of Paraguay, officially ending 62 years of rule by the Colorado party.

Mauricio Funes, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) candidate and front-runner in the presidential race in El Salvador, announced that he would restore diplomatic relations with Cuba if he is elected in the March 2009 vote.

Canadian border services ordered Jeremy Hinzman and his family to leave Canada by September 23. Hinzman was the first US war resister to seek
asylum in Canada.

Pervez Musharraf stepped down as president of Pakistan, in order to avoid imprisonment and following pressure from the US and other western countries.

Prachanda (Pushpa Kamal Dahal), a Maoist leader, was elected prime minister by lawmakers in the Constituent Assembly in Nepal. Prachanda is a teacher and the former head of the armed insurgency in Nepal, which lasted 10 years and ended with a 2006 peace agreement. The Constituent Assembly abolished the monarchy in May of this year.

One hundred people were arrested and 46 charged in week-long protests against the Kingsnorth coal-fired power plant in England. German-owned Kingsnorth will be the first new coal-fired plant to open in England in more than 30 years. About 1,500 people took part in the protests; police presence was estimated to have equaled the number of protesters.

Twelve employees of SNC-Lavalin in Algeria were killed and fifteen injured in a car bomb attack near Bouira, 150 kilometres southeast of Algiers. The attack took place while the employees were on a bus traveling to the Koudiat Acerdoune water-treatment plant, being built by the Montreal-based corporation. The Montreal Gazette reported that it “was the first terrorist attack on SNC-Lavalin employees in 50 years of operating all over the world.”

China hosted the 2008 Olympics and spent $12 billion on security, installing thousands of cameras and high-tech surveillance systems. Olympic organizers admitted to faking part of the fireworks and having a child lip-sync the national anthem on the television broadcast of the opening ceremonies. Lefty sportswriter David Zirin called the Games “the Olympics the West wanted: games where the grandest prize is not a gold medal but a glittering entree to China’s seemingly endless army of potential consumers.”

Fourty homeless people were moved from Oppenheimer Park to three Vancouver hotels after BC Premier Gordon Campbell faced critical questions from Chinese media about homelessness in the city during his visit to the Olympics in Beijing. Housing advocates questioned Campbell’s assertion that Vancouver will overcome its homelessness problem by 2010.

The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty denounced the choice of the City of Toronto’s “Streets to Homes” program as a finalist for a World Habitat Award, calling it “a cover for an agenda of social exclusion in the service of upscale urban redevelopment.”

Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama stated, “finishing the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban” in Afghanistan and potentially also Pakistan “is a war that we have to win.... We need more troops, more helicopters, more satellites.”

Obama announced that he will share the Democratic ticket with Delaware Senator Joe Biden. Glenn Greenwald, remarked at Salon.com, “Biden is a reliable supporter of virtually every prevailing bit of conventional wisdom within the American elite political consensus, which is why his selection has been widely praised by the establishment.”

Republican candidate John McCain announced Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate. The choice of Palin came as a surprise, leading to the media once again labeling McCain as a maverick. But criticism about Palin’s limited experience came quickly. The two leading Alaskan newspapers questioned McCain’s decision, with the Anchorage Daily News quoting a Republican official as asking, “She’s not prepared to be governor. How can she be prepared to be vice president or president?”

McCain, former chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, also offended Great Plains tribal leaders when he attended a rowdy motorcycle rally in South Dakota instead of responding to their invitations for discussion. Tribal concerns included the disrespect to nearby sacred site Bear Butte Mountain by rowdy events involving alcohol.

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favour of the Arizona Snowbowl ski resort, permitting artificial snowmaking using treated wastewater and the expansion of the resort on the San Francisco Peaks, sacred to many indigenous nations.

The Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency and the US EPA, along with other federal agencies, outlined a five-year plan to clean up 520 abandoned uranium mines and contaminated water in Dinéh territory.

Indigenous demonstrators took over oil and gas installations in Peru, demanding that Congress revoke a law that facilitates the purchase of collectively owned land by mining and energy corporations. A week later, the Peruvian government issued a decree for three provinces, allowing it to send in the armed forces.

Norwegian Knighthood was bestowed upon Nils Olav, a penguin, at the Edinburgh Zoo and mascot of the Norwegian King’s Guard. In Killorglin, Ireland, a mountain goat was crowned King of Ireland for three days.
being replicated today through Canada’s exploitative guest-worker programs and restrictive immigration policies. The descendants of these policies will be demanding apologies in future decades. We should deal with this present reality and not just dwell on the past, especially if a history that we are supposed to have learnt from is repeating itself.

Similarly, the story of the Komagata Maru is not one of a century ago; it is a story about today. News about immigration visa delays and restrictions; daily reports on racial profiling and no-fly lists; escalating workplace raids and deportations; and the Safe Third Country Agreement are happening right now.

Ali Kazmi’s award-winning film “Continuous Journey” highlights the clear links, often suppressed, between the Continuous Journey Regulation of 1908 and the present day Safe Third Country Agreement. This 2004 agreement does not allow (with minor exceptions) asylum seekers into Canada if they first arrive in the US, forcing most asylum seekers to make a non-interrupted journey through North America, resulting in at least a 40 per cent decrease in refugee applications in Canada.

When, where, and how the government apologises for the Komagata Maru will not change today’s devastating reality; it will only change through our determination and dedication to actively struggle against current immigration controls. It was a Conservative government that forced the Komagata Maru to turn back from the shores of Vancouver and it is a Conservative government today that is legislating policies such as Bill C-50, a recent amendment to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act already negatively impacting immigrants, primarily from South Asia.

On the eve of the anniversary of the South Asian subcontinent’s formal independence from British colonial rule, the sacrifices of the 376 migrants aboard the Komagata Maru must be honoured. These heroes challenged not only the nature of Canada’s exclusionary immigration laws, but as leaders or sympathizers of the revolutionary pro-Indian independence Ghadr party, they also understood how their treatment in Canada was related to their status as subjects of the British Empire. It is a little-known fact that upon returning to Calcutta, India, in September 1914, the Komagata Maru was stopped by a British gunboat and the passengers were placed under guard. A riot ensued and the British-Indian police opened fire, killing 20 passengers.

The realities of political and economic migration today are similarly embedded in a system of global apartheid and neoliberal rule that demarcates the asymmetrical relations between rich and poor, North and South, citizen and subject.

As we remember both the legacy of the Komagata Maru and the formal Independence Day anniversaries that are upon us, we can draw some lessons from seemingly disparate histories that span the oceans. We must not be easily blinded by the false expectations—and in this case false apologies—rendered by governments to placate us. We must always be vigilant and never be silent or desensitized in the face of injustice, especially as injustice carries forth into the future. And we must always remember that the legacy of the Komagata Maru teaches us that no human being—whether our ancestors or our future generations—deserves less than a full measure of justice and our solidarity.

Harsha Walia is a Vancouver-based activist and writer. A version of this article originally appeared in the Indo-Canadian Voice.