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# Interview with Zig Zag on Idle No More



*Train blockade in Portage la Prairie,  
Manitoba, on Jan 16, 2013*

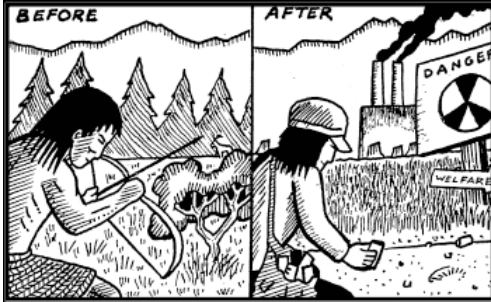
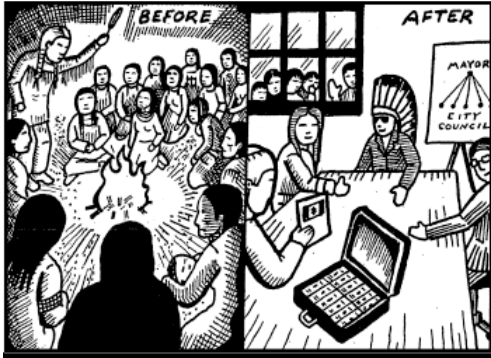
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In order to try and understand this better, i asked some questions of Zig Zag, also known as Gord Hill, who is of the Kwakwaka'wakw nation and a long-time participant in anti-colonial and anti-capitalist resistance movements in Canada. Gord is the author and artist of *The 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance Comic Book* and *The Anti-Capitalist Resistance Comic Book* and *500 Years of Indigenous Resistance*; he also maintains the website [WarriorPublications.wordpress.com](http://WarriorPublications.wordpress.com).

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*K: Dispossession has been a central feature of colonialism and genocide within Canada. Can you give some examples of how people have resisted dispossession in the past?*

ZZ: Well in the past Native peoples had some level of military capability to resist dispossession, which ended around 1890. More recently there have been many examples including Oka 1990, Ipperwash 1995, Sutikalh 2000, Six Nations 2006, etc. At Oka it was armed resistance that stopped the proposed expansion of a golf course and condo project. At Ipperwash people re-occupied their reserve land that had been expropriated during WW2, and they still remain there to this day. At Sutikalh, St'at'imc people built a re-occupation camp to stop a \$530 million ski resort. They were successful and the camp remains to this day. At Six Nations they re-occupied land and prevented the construction of a condo project.

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## What is the 'Aboriginal Business Elite'?

The Aboriginal business elite are Natives who have gained wealth, status and power through their involvement or association with the Indian Act system. Much of the Native elite's wealth comes from government funding and corporations.

Today, many bands handle multi-million dollar budgets and double as Native corporations involved in many diverse businesses (logging, mining, leasing of reserve land, garbage dumps, airlines, water bottling, etc.). Yet, less than a century ago, bands were directly administered by DIA and its Indian Agents. What changed?

In the 1960s, Indian Agents began to be phased out. They were replaced by chiefs and councilors trained by the DIA to implement government programs and to administer the band councils.

As well, in the 1970s, thousands of Natives began attending colleges or universities. By the 1980s, as many as 30,000 Natives may have gone to university to study economics, political science or law, skills which became valuable as they returned to their reserves and began their careers in the Indian Act system.

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*Indigenous people to successfully break out of this system, and resist Canadian colonialism? What is the strategic significance of Indigenous resistance?*

ZZ: Indigenous peoples must make alliances with other social sectors that also organize against the system. The strategic significance of Indigenous peoples is their greater potential fighting spirit, stronger community basis of organizing, their ability to significantly impact infrastructure (such as railways, highways, etc, that pass through or near reserve communities) and their examples of resistance that can inspire other social movements.

*K: What are bills C-38 and C-45, and how do they fit into the current global economic and political context?*

ZZ: Bills C-38 and C-45 are omnibus budget bills the government has passed in order to implement its budget. They include significant revisions of various federal acts, including the Navigable Waters Protection Act, environmental assessments, and the Indian Act<sup>1</sup>. These are generally seen as facilitating greater corporate access to resources, such as mining and oil and gas. The amendments to the Indian Act affect the ability of band councils to lease reserve land. The move to open up resources, by removing protection from many rivers and lakes and "streamlining" environmental assessments is clearly meant to bolster Canada as a source of natural resources and to overcome public opposi-

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*K: Is this something new, or more of the same old same old from the canadian state?*

ZZ: These bills are new in that they're designed, in part, to facilitate greater corporate access to resources, primarily in the changes to the environmental assessment and Navigable Waters Protection Act. These are measures designed to re-position Canada as a major source of oil and gas for the global market, and particularly Asian markets, while diversifying Canadian exports of such resources away from a US focused one, as the US economy continues to decline. At the same time they are indeed a continuation of policies adapted by the federal government for many years now, which include major projects such as the Alberta Tar Sands and proposed pipeline projects. These policies are the result of the neo-liberal ideology that states have been following for the past few decades.

*K: What is one to make of this Idle No More movement that has sprung up over the past six weeks?*

ZZ: It's similar to Occupy in that it reveals a yearning for social change among grassroots Native peoples, but it is also reformist and lacks any anti-colonial or anti-capitalist perspective. It is fixated primarily on legal-political reforms, specifically repealing Bill C-45 (which passed in mid-December). Although it has

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### **What is the Government's Strategy Re: the Indian Act?**

The strategy of the government is to remove the Indian Act and all special legal status for Natives and reserve lands. This has always been its long-term goal, for it would mean the legal (and political and economic) assimilation of Native peoples was complete. In 1969, Canada proposed abolishing the Indian Act & DIA (the 'White Paper') but was met with strong opposition from Natives. Today, both government and chiefs call for an end to the Indian Act, which they claim is now an obstacle to economic progress. Of course, how can Natives be assimilated if they continue to have special legal status (including reservations)?

### **What is Self-Government?**

Self-government is the current government plan for assimilation. It involves transforming band councils into municipal governments, with similar powers and responsibilities. Under self-government, bands gain more control over land, resources, finances, and local governance. Selling or leasing land, resource exploitation and taxation are seen as the primary means for bands to attain economic self-sufficiency. In this way, self-government will really be the self-administration of our own oppression.

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A band council derives its authority to govern from the Indian Act, and is subject to both provincial and federal laws, as well as the Department of Indian Affairs. It gains power from the money & resources provided by the government, which is used at the discretion of the chief & council. This provides it with a great amount of control and influence over the community (as intended).

### **What is a Reserve?**

Under the Indian Act, 1876, a reserve is “Crown land set aside for use by an Indian band.” The land belongs to Canada but is “reserved” for use by Indians. Like the Indian Act, reserves were meant to be temporary; the land was to be used for housing and establishing economic self-sufficiency (a necessary part of assimilation).

### **What is the Department of Indian Affairs?**

The DIA (presently titled Indian & Northern Affairs Canada, INAC) is the federal department responsible for administering the Indian Act over some 609 bands across Canada. It has an annual budget of some \$6 billion, some of which is distributed to band councils as both a form of control and to ensure govern-

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mobilized thousands of Natives, this is only to create political pressure on the government. The four women from Saskatchewan who founded the movement are lawyers, academics, and business managers, so it is no surprise that the entire trajectory of the movement has been focused on legal-political reforms. Another prominent speaker on behalf of INM has been Pam Palmater, a lawyer and Chair in Indigenous Governance at Ryerson University. Last summer, she campaigned against Shawn Atleo for the position of “grand chief” of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN).

As it isn't anti-colonial or anti-capitalist, it has been a safe platform for many Indian Act chiefs and members of the Aboriginal business elite to participate, and many have in fact helped orchestrate the national protests and blockades that have occurred. In fact, INM allied itself early on with chiefs from Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. It was chiefs from these provinces that made the symbolic attempt to enter the House of Commons on Dec. 4, an event that in many ways really launched INM and built the December 10 day of action.

These chiefs oppose Atleo, support Palmater, and have been the driving force behind most of the major rallies and blockades that have occurred in their respective provinces (with notable exceptions, such as the Tyendinaga train blockades).

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promoted by the original founders has included the imposing of pacifist methods and so has dampened the warrior spirit of the people overall. Another factor in the INM mobilizing has been the fast carried out by the Indian Act chief Theresa Spence in Ottawa. This has motivated many Natives to participate in INM due to the emotional and pseudo-spiritual aspects of the fast (a “hunger strike” to the death). Despite the praise given to Spence, she revealed her intentions in late December when she made a public call for the chiefs to “take control” of the grassroots.

*K: What you are outlining seems to be a class analysis of the INM movement. Some people have suggested that class analysis is incompatible with anticolonial analysis, that it is divisive, or amounts to applying a european framework that is not relevant to Indigenous people. What do you make of this?*

ZZ: Under colonization the capitalist division of classes is imposed on Indigenous peoples. The band councils and Aboriginal business elite are proof of this. Under capitalist class divisions, there are new political and economic elites that are established and who have more to gain from assimilation and collaboration, despite any movements for reform they may be involved in. As separate political and economic elites, they have their own interests which are not the same as the most impoverished and oppressed, which comprises the bulk of Indigenous grassroots people. Middle class elites are able to impose their own beliefs and methods on grassroots movements through their greater access to, and control of, resources (including money, communica-

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The Indian Act is a law first passed by Canada in 1876. It imposed government control over all Natives, covering many aspects of daily life. It focused on three main areas, however: band councils, reserves, and status (membership). Its primary purpose was (and is) to control Natives and assimilate them into Canada. It was always intended as a temporary set of laws until Native peoples were successfully assimilated.

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## APPENDIX

### How the Indian Act Made Indians Act Like Indian Act Indians

*taken from WarriorPublications.wordpress.com*

#### What is Assimilation?

Assimilation is the merging of one entity, or group, into another. In North America, this has involved the destruction of traditional Native culture and social organization, and their replacement with European forms.

In order to accomplish this, Native peoples first had to be weakened through biological warfare and military violence. After this, they were forced onto reservations where they were then subjected to policies of assimilation.

These policies included Christian-ization and Residential Schools (run by the Churches). Until the 1970s, generations of Native children and youth were forced into Residential Schools, where they were forbidden to practise their culture (inc. language) and indoctrinated with European values and ways of life.

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For a genuinely autonomous, decentralized and self-organized Indigenous grassroots movement to emerge, the question of middle-class elites, including the band councils, must be resolved. I would also say that in any liberation movement there are internal and external struggles. The internal one determines the overall methods and objectives of the movement, and therefore cannot be silenced or marginalized under the pretext of preserving some non-existent "unity." In fact, only when internal struggles are clarified can there be any significant gains made in the external one, against the primary enemy (state and capital).

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AFN's provincial wing, has been very active in promoting INM rallies and blockades, etc. But Nepinak's AMC also suffered massive funding cuts announced in early September. His organization will see their annual funding cut from \$2.6 million down to \$500,000. He is fighting for his political and economic career and has little to lose by agitating for more grassroots actions, but that doesn't mean he's now a "radical." Rather, the band councils and chiefs must be understood as having their own agenda in regards to their power struggle with the state. Many are easily fooled by militant rhetoric and symbolic blockades, but these are old tactics for the Indian Act chiefs.

Along with chiefs fighting for the maintenance of their provincial or regional organizations (such as the AMC or tribal councils), which is contributing to band council participation across the country in INM mobilizing, the chiefs in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario have a political struggle with Atleo and have their own vision for greater economic development. It was the chiefs from these provinces that boycotted the meeting between the PM and Atleo, and who called for the January 16 national day of action.

Delegations of these chiefs have travelled to Asia, Venezuela, and Iran seeking corporate investors, especially in the oil and gas industry. Chief Wallace Fox of the Onion Lake Cree Nation, one of those at the forefront of recent events and an outspoken opponent of Atleo, is the chief of the top oil producing Native band in the country (located in Alberta and Saskatchewan). Fox

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ZZ: I would say Indigenous anti-colonial groups should engage such movements critically, and not simply take the role of cheerleaders. When large numbers of people are aroused and mobilized, it means they're thinking about, and discussing, concepts such as colonialism, tactics, strategies, methods, etc. So it is an opportune time to contribute radical anti-colonial and anti-capitalist analysis, even though some participants in the movement think that such debate "divides" people. I would avoid denouncing such movements, or opposing them, of course, because there are both positive and negative aspects. Promote the positive and try to illuminate the negative, the contradictions, etc. As many participants are new and inexperienced, anti-colonial groups can contribute a lot to expanding and radicalizing the movement.

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This leads to the situation where mobilizations are called, gain traction and then expand – but they have a very shallow analysis of the system and lack experience in real resistance. In both Occupy and INM we see inexperienced organizers who believe they have re-invented the wheel, who feel they know best how social movements should conduct themselves, etc. At best, these mobilizations show that there is a yearning for social change among a growing number of people, but social media enables them to bypass more experienced and radical groups, and their naivete leads them to think that these groups fail because they're too radical. Therefore they appeal to the most basic and populist slogans, the least threatening forms of action, etc.

I don't know if I would characterize it as a failure on the part of radical groups that they are somewhat disconnected from these types of mobilizations. They're not revolts, they're largely reformist rallies without a radical analysis dominated by liberals and pacifists, middle-class organizers, etc. Until these movements are radicalized there is little possibility for radicals to be fully involved. Another aspect of these types of mobilizations is their relatively short duration. Occupy was largely over three or four months after it began, with some exceptions (such as Oakland). How long will INM endure?

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The rationale of these chiefs, Palmater and their allies in INM (the four "official founders") is that Atleo is collaborating with the assimilation strategy of the Harper regime. Meanwhile, it is they who seek to take control of the AFN and impose their own version of Native capitalism, based in part on foreign investment in resource industries. Ironically of course, many INM participants are rallying to defend Mother Earth, in many ways being used as pawns in a power struggle between factions of the Aboriginal business elite. Many INM participants, I would say, are unaware of these internal dynamics. Their mobilization under the slogans of "stop bill c-45," "defend land and water," etc., are positive aspects of INM, and show the great potential for grassroots movements. But this is something that is in the early stages, and the movement will have to overcome the parasitical participation and control of the Indian Act chiefs as well as middle-class elites for it to advance.

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*ticapitalists to members of Quebec nationalist and social democratic groups. This seems in line with the INM strategy of framing the movement as representing all Canadians. How compatible is this with an anticolonial perspective, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of such diverse support?*

ZZ: The first priority and main focus for an anti-colonial liberation movement must be its own people. This is how it develops its own autonomous methods and practise, free from outside interference. This helps to unify the movement and establish it as an independent social force. Alliances are clearly necessary, and while the ultimate goal might be a multi-national resistance movement, colonialism and the unique history as well as socio-economic conditions of Native peoples means they must be able to organize autonomously from other social sectors.

I think in principle to frame Idle No More as one representing all Canadians is correct, but the way in which they are doing this waters down and minimizes the anti-colonial analysis that is necessary for radical social change. By trying to appeal to the “Canadian citizen” it may broaden its appeal but to what end? In the process it will have weakened the anti-colonial resistance. Even now you can see the renewed calls for “peaceful” protests from INM’ers, as well as statements from the “official founders” that they don’t support “illegal” actions such as blockades. They’re very sensitive to any loss of public support, claiming it is now an “educational” movement and that they don’t want to inconvenience citizens. The reformists might claim that in this

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manner we can build a bigger movement to defeat Bill C-45, but clearly such bills are just part of a much larger systemic problem we can identify as colonialism and capitalism. Without addressing the root causes we’ll just be doing the same thing next year against another set of bills. And of course, basing one’s anti-colonial resistance on the opinion of the settler population will never lead to liberation.

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ZZ: I would say a part of these mobilizations is the use of social media in spreading information and coordinating actions. Certainly in the Arab Spring, Occupy and now Idle No More, this has been a significant component of the mobilizing that has occurred. It seems that there are more people who have been influenced by these ongoing social revolts and mobilizations, that then decide to take action of some kind, and the internet empowers them to organize rallies, etc. They don’t need the already existing radical groups to do this, and may not even know of their existence.

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