



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Youth sit in to defend Indigenous sovereignty

written by Zola Fish
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No fracking pipeline on Wet'suwet'en land!



Indigenous youth sit-in at Energy Ministry in Victoria, B.C., Jan. 21. Photo: Ta’Kaiya Blaney

Twelve protesters supporting Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs were arrested by members of the Victoria, British Columbia, Police Department early in the morning of Jan. 22 during a lengthy occupation of a provincial government building lobby.

Indigenous youth activists [blocked the entrance](https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2020/01/31/youth-sit-in-to-defend-indigenous-sovereignty/) to the Canadian Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources for about 18 hours, starting at 11 a.m. on Jan. 21. The group was standing in solidarity with hereditary chiefs of the Wet’suwet’en First Nation, opposing Coastal GasLink (CGL) plans to build a pipeline, and asking that the chiefs’ demands be upheld, observed and respected.

The \$6.6 billion pipeline is led by TC Energy Corporation. Once completed, it would run from Dawson Creek to a \$17-billion LNG Canada plant in Kitimat. The \$40 billion project was heralded as the single largest private sector investment in the history of Canada by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in 2018.

“The Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs provided alternative routes to Coastal GasLink that would have been acceptable to them as a pipeline corridor,” according to a statement released by the protesters. “Coastal GasLink decided that it did not want to take those acceptable options and instead insisted on a route that drives the pipeline through ecologically pristine and culturally important areas.”

Protesters remained in and around the building through the night and [told Victoria News](#) on Wednesday morning that there were many arrests between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. They said they were forcefully removed and had wanted only to peacefully occupy the space.

The youth have [filed a complaint](#) with the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner due to the police violence they experienced.

‘Unceded, untreated and unsundered’

The Unist’ot’en Clan of the Wet’suwet’en nation has held a checkpoint since 2010, the Unist’ot’en Camp, which has been stopping all pipeline crews from entering the area since they do not have permission from the hereditary chiefs. In January 2019, 14 people were arrested [during a tense standoff](#) at the checkpoint. Faced with the determination of the land defenders and an international outcry, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) backed down.

A recent investigation by the Guardian reported that the RCMP were [prepared to use snipers](#) with shoot-to-kill orders when they launched the January 2019 raid, a revelation that was met with shock and outrage. The RCMP worked with Coastal

GasLink to formulate plans to make arrests and “sterilize the site” in what has become a frequent example of police authorities working directly with pipeline and other corporations to force projects through despite opposition.

Then, on Dec. 31, 2019, British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Marguerite Church granted CGL an injunction against members of the Wet’suwet’en nation. The company immediately attempted to send contractors onto Indigenous territory, while the RCMP has set up a blockade—which it calls an “exclusion zone”—of the Unist’ot’en Camp, limiting access to attorneys, journalists, supporters and even Wet’suwet’en members.

“RCMP are now blocking access to Wet’suwet’en territory, and only allowing hereditary chiefs that THEY approve to enter our own unceded lands,” said a [Jan. 15 report](#) from the camp. “Our Wet’suwet’en people and family members are being blocked off the territory, while RCMP say that they are in a position to decide who is and who isn’t a chief.

“Police have blocked media and supplies out, and they are enforcing a modern day pass system — forcing people to identify themselves in order to come and go from our own unceded lands.”

People attempting to leave the camp have been detained and questioned by the cops, forced to provide identification, and told they would not be allowed to return.

“Wet’suwet’en lands are unceded, untreatied and unsurrendered. We maintain full jurisdiction, and the right to decide what happens on our lands. Our chiefs have unanimously asked RCMP to pack up and leave their remote detachment, but instead RCMP are increasing their presence — in anticipation of using violence against our people to force their way onto our lands.”

To justify their tactics, CGL and Ottawa rely on the approval of “band council”

chiefs. But [Parliament member Jody Wilson-Raybould](#), former regional chief of the British Columbia Assembly of First Nations, describes the band councils as “a creature of the colonial Indian Act” with “limited delegated authority tied to reserves. They do not have inherent authority, nor are they self-governing or an expression of self-determination.” For the Wet’suwet’en Nation, it is the hereditary chiefs who represent genuine sovereignty.

Hereditary chiefs are the traditional leaders of the clans. They carry the responsibility of the cultural traditions. They keep the history, protocols, songs and dances of the clan that have been passed down for hundreds of generations.

Union, student solidarity

At a [Jan. 15 news conference](#) in Vancouver, the British Columbia Government and Service Employees’ Union (BCGSEU) announced it was filing legal complaints against the RCMP after union members bringing food and emergency supplies were denied access to the “exclusion zone.”

“As a trade union committed to supporting the full implementation of the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the recommendations of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we are deeply troubled by the use of exclusion zones prohibiting access to Wet’suwet’en territories,” explained BCGSEU Treasurer Paul Finch.

The Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs have [called upon the United Nations](#) to hold Canada accountable. Earlier, the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called upon Canada to “uphold free, prior and informed consent” with Indigenous peoples.

On Jan. 27, [hundreds of university and high school students](#) in Vancouver walked out of classes in solidarity with the Wet’suwet’en people’s resistance. They gathered at

Vancouver City Hall and then marched to the office of Environment Minister George Heyman. The students' demands include suspending all of the permits for the pipeline project, and that the RCMP and other security services be withdrawn from the Wet'suwet'en lands.

"I think it's really important for all of Canada right now and everybody who can find out about this to support the Wet'suwet'en people in their fight to keep their land sacred and keep it the way it's supposed to be," said protester Savanna Todd. "This pipeline is really going to hurt those people and it's going to hurt the environment, and it's going to hurt their way of life. So I think all of us need to learn about this."

Readers can get updates from [Unist'ot'en Camp](#) on Facebook. To donate for supplies, visit the camp's [GoFundMe page](#).

