

*This is the second in a series of extracts abridged from A Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization by Metis activist Howard Adams, published by permission of the author. The first (1995) edition of the book has been sold out, but a revised edition, with additional chapters on the national question and the Zapatista movement, is forthcoming from Theytus Books.*

# A TORTURED PEOPLE:

## part

BY HOWARD ADAMS

All Native peoples across Canada, from Vancouver to New Brunswick, were restless. They were fed up with oppression, racism and injustice. They were fed up with being pushed around and they were ready to start pushing back. All across the land Indians and Metis were talking back to agents of Indian Affairs and Metis Council Administration. "Some Indians and Metis," wrote Stewart of the Star Weekly, "the timid, the elderly, the responsible - call this new aggressiveness self-determination; others, bolder, younger and more determined, call it Red Power."

In the 1960s there was a parallel between Red Power in Canada and Black Power in the US. When a racial minority people are oppressed for a lengthy period, despised on racial grounds, they will inevitably decide to fight back. Self-righteous Canadians were looking across the border and saying to themselves that it can't happen here. But what was happening in the US, was also happening in Canada. Indians and Metis were turning militant and radical, and proclaiming that they had nothing to lose.

In spite of the widespread protests and confrontational demonstrators, the history of Indian, Metis and Inuit liberation movements during the 1960s and 70s remains hidden from the public. Although there has been an explosion of publications, written by both Aboriginals and whites, on the Metis and Indians in the last twenty years, none includes a discussion of the Native peoples' struggles during that important period. The ruling establishment has hidden this history in order to silence our people and deny us a sense of power and heritage. By obscuring this political struggle the colonizer conceals our colonized state and marginalizes our heroic efforts to achieve liberation.

When our battle for justice and liberation began in the early 1960s, Metis and Indian leaders were unsure what it would involve, what direction

it would take, or how it would eventually end. The only thing we knew with any certainty was that our people were no longer willing to tolerate exploitation and oppression in the colonies, ghettos, and reserves.

We were demanding political rights and better living conditions. We needed sufficient food, or as we put it, we wanted to put "bannock and lard" on our tables. Our cold, leaking shacks needed to be fixed. We demanded welfare cheques that didn't leave us begging at the end of each month. But, more than that, we needed to be free from the colonizer's imprisoning welfare system. As indigenous peoples of Canada, we were determined to rid ourselves of colonial oppression in every possible manner.

Since I was intimately involved with Aboriginal organizations and liberation struggles in Saskatchewan, I have greater knowledge about them than those of other provinces. Consequently, I will focus on Saskatchewan organizations and political confrontations. However, Indian and Metis organizations throughout the nation were quite identical to those of Saskatchewan. The one exception in Saskatchewan is that the Aboriginal liberation struggle was originally more militant and politically radical than those in other provinces, with the exception of the Mohawks.

The Federation of Saskatchewan Indians represented status Indians, while the Metis Society, led by Joe Amyote, a mainstream Metis, served the province's southern regions. Amyote sunk the organization into the mainstream psyche; he supported integration and government domination. In the north, Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady, devout socialists, led the Metis Association. These men had steered the organization for years, nourishing and politicizing Aboriginal issues. Rod Bishop, a Metis from Green Lake, and I shared their views and joined them to turn Native dissension into a national democratic movement emphasizing the politics of self-determination.

As activists and radical leaders, we opposed traditional tribal chiefs and Metis collaborators who had betrayed the movement. Likewise, we opposed the growing class of Native elites allying with our enemies - government bureaucrats, white politicians, and other members of the corporate elite.

Radical Native leaders advocated socialism; after all, capitalism was the system on which we were robbed of our lands, resources, and rights. Activists like Brady and Norris educated our people about how the state prevented Natives from adopting or forming alternative ideologies, such as collectivism or socialism. The state smothered Aboriginal peoples' culture and traditional ways of thinking, and then forced us to adopt a false consciousness.

# BUILDING RED POWER

t w o

IN  
THE  
60's



Because colonized people have been socialized into a state of dependency, they tend to leave important matters to their leaders. Although Metis and Indians had occasionally resorted to local demonstrations and confrontations in the past, they lacked systematic organization, and strong collaborator-free leadership. To combat this phenomenon, we held study sessions and organized community gatherings to discuss critical issues about decolonization in simple terms. We had to tap into our people's most intense and personal emotions if we were going to encourage them to actively fight in decolonization struggles. Leaders spoke of our struggle in the context of imperialism in the Third World. It helped to feel that we were part of a global revolution against oppression.

If the ruling power gave us freedom, they could take it back whenever they wanted. To truly obtain freedom one has to own it, and our people could only own their freedom if they fought and seized it. Local people must be involved if they wanted local changes; they must become part of the solution. Local people should participate at all levels from strategy planning to mass demonstrations. Also, it is important to begin the battle where there is considerable home support. By concentrating on local issues, we engaged in confrontations we felt we were sure to win. Neighbourhood activists acted as leaders and got a taste of victory. Regardless of the prize's small size, success buoyed and motivated our people to continue. We embraced the concepts of Aboriginal nationalism and the necessity for confrontation. ★

## PROTEST AT THE BALDWIN HOTEL

In the 1960s, our people arose with confidence and a counter consciousness - ideas against the ruling class - and we were prepared for aggressive confrontation. Our goal was to expose and then discredit racist policies, such as those practiced by the Baldwin Hotel in Saskatoon. In August 1972, forty Indians and Metis were refused service one evening at the hotel. As the local paper reported, "The situation began when waiters of the beverage room refused to serve anyone of Indian origin."

Although we were ignored, we did not cause a disturbance. We eventually decided to move to the service bar as a group to demand an explanation, but by that time the manager had called the police. The bar was immediately surrounded by several policemen, but we were not intimidated. A few of us made passionate speeches condemning the manager and the police. They were treating us like trash.

The tension was rising and many people in our group were on the verge of smashing the bar in anger and frustration. We left at that point because the incident, no matter how damaging to our pride, did not warrant a major confrontation. The Baldwin's policy to deny Indians and Metis beer would never be condemned by the majority of whites.

We returned to the Friendship Centre two blocks away, where we formed a committee to organize a demonstration to be held in front of the hotel the next day. A large group, including white supporters, turned out for the demonstration. Once we began picketing outside, the hotel stopped serving the white drunks they had already been pampering most of the day. The customers were told that it was the Indians' and Metis' fault, thereby encouraging them to attack us while we were demonstrating peacefully. They came out and taunted us, hurled profanities, and called the Native women "squaws" and "whores."

The police were also there, waiting with their paddy wagons, but not to protect us. We concluded the demonstration without incident. Afterward, a complaint was laid under the Fair Accommodation Practices Act against Mr. Beavis, the hotel manager, but as expected, the white supremacy rulers and their institutions stuck together. Roy Romanow, then Attorney General, the judge and city police would not prosecute Mr. Beavis. Nevertheless, the incident was a valuable lesson to the civil rights fighters. The action was part of learning to manage confrontations. It highlighted the interlinking network of the dominant colonizer class and the judiciary. It fuelled our determination to expose Canada's racist and oppressive society. ★

DECEMBER/JANUARY 1999