

An Open Letter

on Recent Developments in the American Indian Movement/International Indian Treaty Council

In the summer of 1979 I resigned as Director of the International Indian Treaty Council. At the same time Paul Smith, editor of the *Treaty Council News* and head of the San Francisco office of the Treaty Council, also left his position. The reasons were political.

In this paper we want to explain those reasons, as a responsibility to Indian people and our allies. People have asked us for some sort of statement, and we apologise for hesitating so long. We looked for the best way to say things clearly and not to be needlessly disruptive. The first attempts we made were too long, and had too many details about personalities, which we thought was necessary since we did not want to make statements or charges without backing them up with facts and examples. Our hope is that this effort explains our reasons in a clear and factual way, without being too long and confusing. We cannot possibly write in an open letter every detail that may be important. We know we have left out many things in a ten-year history, but our purpose is only to make an initial statement. We hope this effort will help start a serious discussion on some of the questions we raise here.

People have asked us if by leaving the Treaty Council we have also left the American Indian Movement. We can only answer honestly that there is no AIM to leave. We feel that AIM/Treaty Council is heavily infiltrated by US government agents, and that the directions and policies of both organisations serve the interests of the government and the energy corporations instead of serving the interests of Indian people. We believe that the last part of that statement is true mostly because it is government agents who are the 'behind the scenes' leaders of the Movement at this time. But we also feel it is true partly due to political confusion among the regular membership of the Movement.

The divisiveness that had always been a problem increased dramatically in the spring of 1979. Facing personal and political attacks (including a red-baiting campaign) from most of the Movement's leadership, resignation was the only choice. This was especially unfortunate since the Treaty Council had, only a few months before, begun a process that would have considerably shaken the US. In February 1979, we took part in meetings of the United Nations Human Rights Commission as usual. But at that time we got a solid commitment from them that if we brought our case to the sub-committee meeting in August a resolution in our favour would result, and be carried into a resolution and study by the full committee the following February (1980). At that same meeting in 1979 several countries spoke on our behalf and called for action, including Cuba, Syria and others. For the first time, the US was forced to respond officially, not once, but three times to Indian charges in a meeting of the United Nations. But no one had even come close to achieving UN action or resolution on a matter inside the US. The US was so worried at the time that it sent Allard Lowenstein as a special envoy to refute our charges. By June, I was so isolated inside the Movement that my only choice was to leave. After I left, this entire effort fell apart.

One of the main failures of AIM was the inability of our leadership, from top to bottom, to face squarely our weaknesses and our failures. Every oppressed people fighting for liberation must overcome tremendous obstacles to build organisations that can advance the struggle. Those obstacles include both internal weaknesses, partly due to oppression itself, as well as direct repression and infiltration by government forces. In the US, we collectively face a political backwardness because of the strength of our enemy, that can only be overcome by a careful political analysis of our situation and an objective summation of our Movement's successes and failures.

This paper is an attempt to explain what went right and what went wrong with the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. Paul and I made our share of mistakes, of course. And we still feel that many people who continue to support AIM are committed, sincere fighters whose determination to make a better life for Indian people is beyond any question. Even though we profoundly disagree with their current direction, we respect their efforts. But the hard truths must be faced, by all of us, because only in this way can we overcome our weaknesses.

The problems that AIM/Treaty Council faced (and didn't face) we believe are similar to those that other organisations in other

movements have had to face. In AIM/Treaty Council, elements that stand in opposition to the most basic goals of the Movement have taken control. We hope that by explaining how this happened all progressive forces can learn from the experience.

The Indian Movement 1945-1969

The period from the Second World War to the present has two major characteristics for Indian people: firstly, on the reservations the federal government has steadily intensified its efforts to promote and entrench the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) 'tribal governments' (or governments which are almost the same thing and serve a similar purpose on those reservations which were able to resist the IRA). In the classic Third World model, this has set up a 'puppet' group of élites on reservations, nationwide. Until recently this group was completely subservient to the federal government simply because of the structure of the IRA, and even though some members have had integrity, others have been completely bought, while others still are so alienated that they do not know their own hearts.

As this group of puppets grew in size and power, the increasing majority of Indian people on reservations became poorer and more powerless. This caused a fight between what became known as the 'traditionals' (which is actually the majority led by the real pre-IRA leadership) against the minority élite, who are known by their government label, the 'progressives'.

The second characteristic is an increasing number of Indian people living away from the reservations, usually in cities and usually against their will. The IRA, child-snatching, and the growing poverty on reservations are the three main reasons for this. It has set up a group of militant young Indians who are in many ways alienated from their roots (and in many other ways not alienated) and yet who are less isolated from the rest of the world than the reservation Indians.

At every point Indian people have resisted in every way possible. Within the National Congress of American Indians (begun in 1948), which was until recently the government-sanctioned and supported organisation of the élite, there has been a constant battle between those with some integrity and those who were bought. The National Indian Youth Council, begun in 1961, was a result of the college educated, younger members of the élite resisting the old guard. At the same time, the majority back on the reservation were resisting every decision and every organisation of the élite, but in a necessarily fragmented way. The reservations themselves are set up for the purpose of fragmentation and isolation.

Beginning in 1948 the Iroquois Confederacy of New York State were able to resist both the IRA and its puppet élite to a large degree, and in the most organised way of any Indian group at that time. That was possible because they were Eastern Indians without a potentially viable economy, and therefore no real threat to the US. The US could afford to be tolerant of the Iroquois. For decades the Iroquois (that is, the Mohawk, Seneca, Tuscarora, Oneida and Cayuga) have been subject to a very thorough romanticism, as have other small groups of Indians, such as the Hopi in the south-west. This has had a serious effect on them because it is flattering and because they have no economic base for their own culture. Many of the Iroquois attitudes, then, come from other people's definitions, instead of their own definitions of themselves. These outside definitions, needless to say, come from the white bourgeoisie.

But the Iroquois have been brave and consistent in demanding Indian sovereignty. In the 1950s and '60s Iroquois traditionals travelled the US promoting traditional Indian culture (as they saw it) and urging people to resist the IRA. It is not by accident that Richard Oakes, an urban Iroquois, was the leader of the takeover of Alcatraz in 1968.

Akwasasne Notes Newspaper

In 1969, a white man (who gave himself the Indian name of 'Rarihokwats') established the newspaper *Akwasasne Notes*. Although this newspaper throughout its history has been mainly written, produced and read by white people who carried on the tradition of white romantics defining Indian culture, it still has been very influential among some urban Indians and in determining how the left and counterculture see the Indian struggle. A concept that still appears on its front page today is "A Journal for Native and Natural Peoples". We will return later to such ideas and see what they mean for the Indian struggle.

The Beginning of the American Indian Movement

The American Indian Movement had a much more substantial beginning. It was started in 1968 as a police-watch organisation in Minneapolis, modelled after those started by black people in Detroit and other cities just a few years earlier. Minneapolis is one of the few cities with a relatively large and concentrated population of Indians, mostly from the same nation. In other words, AIM began as a militant urban organisation for urban Indians. The people who

started it still had memories of a rather more just life on the reservations, and did not have any real economic position in urban society. Most of them had been radicalised in prison, and had received a much broader political education there and in the slums than they would have had on the reservations.

In 1971 AIM called a national conference to establish itself as a national organisation. The conference was attended mostly by urban Indians, and it was there that people such as Russell Means, Carter Camp and others who later became national leaders joined AIM. It was also there that Russell Means pointed out that a national Indian organisation could only be legitimised if it had a direct and democratic relationship to the grassroots people on the reservation, and making their demands and concerns the first priority of AIM. That started a debate, and several divisions in AIM that were never resolved or dealt with in a clear political way. Even though the debate took the form of personalities accusing personalities, political positions were represented. The original founders of AIM, the Minneapolis people, did not want AIM to make the reservations the priority for the Movement.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs Takeover and Wounded Knee Make AIM a Peoples Movement

The fact that AIM started in the cities was both good and necessary. The extreme isolation of reservations meant that only an organisation based in cities could have created a nationally organised framework that the reservation Indians could use and fill. This is what happened between 1971 and 1973. AIM organised a caravan that went to reservations across the country to win the support of Indians for a protest in Washington. This effort was very successful, and resulted in a position paper (The 20 Points) which argued for self-determination and treaty rights. When the caravan reached Washington, it was largely ignored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs which led to a takeover of the BIA for several days.

In 1973 the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organisation called on AIM to aid them in the now historic liberation of Wounded Knee. At that time more than two thousand Indians from most parts of the country held the village of Wounded Knee for 71 days against units of the US Army, federal marshalls and the FBI, as well as the 'Goon Squad' of the colonial puppets. That event had decisive importance for the Indian struggle. The Sioux waged armed struggle as a nation until 1890, and since then have been able to maintain to a large degree a land base and a cultural and national cohesion. The Sioux also have

one of the strongest treaties legally with the United States, and the people on the five reservations know their treaty rights and are determined to fight for them. In addition, Pine Ridge, where Wounded Knee is located, is the second largest reservation in the country, and is in the middle of a new energy development area which includes coal, uranium, natural gas, iron, and a large underground water table. It was politically important because the reservation people themselves started the ball rolling, and saw that it was important to get AIM involved to make it a national and international issue.

Wounded Knee won AIM the support of probably most Indians in the country, and established it as a genuine national organisation with a constituency, both on reservations and in cities. It also intensified the existing contradictions within AIM.

Russell Means and the Sioux of South Dakota became the most important part of the new AIM, even though they were not always the most organised, the most consistent or the most responsible. The old Minneapolis AIM leadership did not want to give up its control over the organisation. This constant division led to many well-known fights, splits and factions, without bringing any subsequent political clarity or resolutions. Outsiders were seldom able to see what the real political differences were.

Disorganisation and Repression

AIM never became an organisation. It was always a movement. It did not at any time have any real organisational structure, even though it always pretended to, with every 'leader' being a Field Director, Executive Director, National Chairman, and so forth. One became a national leader by getting together followers, media attention and money, and acting tough.

The federal government was able to take full advantage of the situation. On one hand they had agents inside the Movement who created or exaggerated existing factionalism and ill-feeling among the leadership, just as the government did with the Black Panthers and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. On the other hand they used severe repression against ordinary AIM supporters and activists throughout the country, which, after 1973, resulted in at least one of the national leaders almost always being in prison.

The case of Douglass Durham is a clear example of how the US took full advantage of AIM's lack of organisation. Durham was an FBI agent who became AIM's Director of Security by flattering the AIM leadership. Incredible as it may seem, Durham was not an Indian (and visibly so) and under his own name was a police officer in Iowa.

This fact was widely known in the Movement, and because of this he was suspected by many people of being an agent. Despite this, his ties to the leadership and the lack of organisation allowed him to set up AIM organisers around the country and give the government valuable information on the Movement's internal workings.

Funding, and the method of funding, played a considerable part in deepening the splits in AIM. Minneapolis AIM, still calling itself 'national AIM' was completely passive about anything outside its area. Yet it received almost all of the funding for its own programmes, which were and are local, and geared to urban Indian problems. Being a comparatively organised urban centre, and having a programme based on reforms that are possible within the present status quo, Minneapolis AIM seemed to outsiders, especially church people, to be the most responsible part of AIM and to be the 'national AIM' it claimed to be.

In the years of severe crisis, after Wounded Knee, the AIM/Treaty Council people on Pine Ridge were making almost superhuman efforts to maintain and to organise. They were able to set up a school, take over and run the BIA police force, organise communities and participate in the 'tribal' elections even to the extent that Russell Means was elected 'Tribal Chairman' of the reservation. (That was proved later in court, although at the time some of the ballot boxes were stolen and Dick Wilson declared himself re-elected.) All of this was done in the face of such terrorism that many of the AIM leaders were murdered by government forces for their efforts. Others are still in prison on frame-up charges.

It was particularly maddening, then, that Pine Ridge received almost no funding for any programmes for years. The National Council of Churches raised huge sums for almost every place except Pine Ridge, where it was most desperately needed. The bitterness that this situation caused was one more opening for the government and opportunists to exploit.

The International Indian Treaty Council

In 1974 the International Indian Treaty Council was formed under the auspices of the reservations, mainly in South Dakota, as part of AIM. Four thousand people attended the founding conference and made international outreach a high priority. The Treaty Council in effect broadened AIM by including many people who were afraid of AIM's 'radical' image. It was also able to concentrate on reservations in ways that 'national AIM' could not because of the urban/reservation split.

Because of the poor level of organisation and the lack of political development in AIM at its base, the international work became too large a part of the Movement's focus. For most of the time between 1974 and 1979, the New York office of the Treaty Council was the only functioning national office, and that made it necessary to deal with a range of problems that a national AIM office should have been dealing with. The UN work came to be seen by many people, even in national leadership, as a solution rather than one tactic. Some thought we were trying to take our treaty cases to the World Court, which would resolve them once and for all in our favour. Some thought we could in a short time win action on our behalf in the General Assembly. No matter how many times I tried to explain that the local work on reservations was the most important work, and that without it the international work was irrelevant, the message did not get across.

AIM's Base Declines

In 1974 and 1975 the support AIM formerly had on reservations was slowly being eroded. On Pine Ridge, work was going ahead on important community projects, but severe repression was taking its toll. In those years many Indians who were AIM supporters or activists were killed by government forces. When two FBI agents were killed in 1975 in a shootout with Indians, hundreds of FBI agents in combat fatigues armed with automatic weapons conducted house to house searches for two months, aided by helicopters and state and tribal police. The terrorism was effective.

There was also a national leadership that was spinning its wheels and increasingly out of touch with reservation people. AIM as a whole was on the defensive partly because of the trials resulting from Wounded Knee and other actions. Altogether there were more than 200 AIM people the Movement had to defend. The media attention all but disappeared after the most glamorous trial, that of Russell Means and Dennis Banks, was over in early 1974.

This entire country's Indian people have been struggling to make a strong national organisation with clear political goals. The history of AIM/Treaty Council is a history of struggle to break out from fragmented, powerless isolation with an organisation that could represent the majority of Indian people. The decline of AIM as a force and a drastic change in political direction coincided with the rise to power of individuals who were not Indians, who had no previous history of involvement in the progressive movements in the US, who advocated small, autonomous community-based organisations as opposed to the

national ones, and whose counter-cultural ideas were not in the best interests of Indian peoples. These individuals managed to infiltrate the Movement, and slowly push out the leadership through intrigue, divisive tactics and bribery. Nothing would make the US and the energy corporations happier than to see AIM become a small core of dislocated individuals, spiritually correct and politically irrelevant to the Indian people on reservations.

The Geneva Conference

Intrigues and political confusion were the hallmarks of the 1977 United Nations Conference on American Indians held in Geneva. On one hand, the conference was a huge success, since for the first time Indians directly addressed an international forum. Dozens of member states of the UN attended, as well as hundreds of international organisations. The event was headline news in Europe, although predictably it was not mentioned in the US press. On the other hand, it became another opening for opportunists to disrupt and take over. It was a time when all of AIM's chickens came home to roost.

I left the UN Conference before it had even officially started, because I was being pressured to make an initial African tour immediately after the conference, centred around Idi Amin, which I knew would be disastrous for our international work. My leaving naturally increased my isolation, but it was one of those situations where there is no satisfactory choice. It may seem now that we were all incredibly naive about international politics, which we were.

AIM has always been plagued by fakes, crooks, opportunists and alienated individuals, and the Geneva Conference was no exception. This made even more weak links. The lack of a viable base became clear when the process for choosing delegates for the Conference took place at the 1977 Treaty Conference. There was a strong push for a non-existent 'Council of Elders' to decide who should go, and also the idea that everyone who could raise money to travel to Geneva should go. Naturally, most of the reservation people who should have gone did not go. While most Indians did know about the conference, there was little direct involvement on the part of anyone outside the AIM circle (which was small and getting smaller) except the Iroquois and the Hopi.

This became even clearer two months after the Geneva Conference when AIM had a national meeting, its first in two years. It was extremely small, and showed the real strength of AIM at that time. Even though Geneva was successful in many ways, especially in Europe and at the UN, at home things were getting progressively

worse. Just after what should have been our strongest accomplishment so far, the Movement was unable to bring even fifty activists to a national meeting.

The Longest Walk

In 1977 there were eleven pieces of legislation introduced in Congress that proposed to strip Indians of various fishing and jurisdictional rights. The most draconian measure would abolish all treaty commitments and give Indians exactly the same rights and status under the law as anyone else in the United States. All of this was called 'backlash'. The reason it was called backlash is that the puppet organisations made believe that since the early '70s Indians had made major gains through the courts which now the states and the federal government were trying to reverse. The truth was that despite a few favourable court rulings, our land base was being eroded every year.

The Treaty Council's investigation into the bills showed that none of them had any real chance of passing. They did point out the fact that the remaining Indian land bases were marked for destruction by the energy companies, but the 'backlash' forces, which included the main government Indian organisations and some former AIM activists, chose a strategy that was directed at people in the US instead of organising in Indian communities.

The Walk eventually received wide support, which can be mainly attributed to the fact that Indian people find themselves in a desperate situation, and will support anything that seems in the slightest bit positive. AIM originally did not support the Walk, but came in at the end. Spiritualism of all kinds, including Buddhists and hippies, replaced any kind of politics or political demands.

AIM Today

After the Longest Walk came the final decline of AIM. For the first time since 1972 AIM was no longer at centre stage in the Indian world. Strange alliances were formed which were to get even stranger the following year.

South Dakota AIM, formerly the most militant part of AIM, put all of its efforts for several months into organising the Black Hills International Survival Gathering in the summer of 1980. The event showed just how confused and empty the politics of AIM had become, and how removed it was from the people on the reservations. Attended by more than 10,000 people, some of them Indians but mostly from the white counterculture, the Survival Gathering offered the view

of a strategic unity between landbased peoples. This meant forgetting about any sort of alliance between Indians, blacks and Chicanos to fight repression and build organisations for our mutual benefit. We were told to forget about the class differences in US society that Indian leaders from Tecumseh and Sitting Bull on have noted and talked about. Unbelievably, the Survival Gathering believed that the Indian struggle must unite with ranchers against corporations — the very same ranchers who most directly and immediately oppress Indian people.

What Next?

It is difficult for us to say what we think should happen next, or how. We do not feel that whatever is left of AIM/Treaty Council is capable of leading the Indian movement.

Maybe AIM can regroup in a more democratic and political way, and needless to say we hope that happens. But it seems unlikely. It may be that the historical setting for the AIM we knew has passed, and that it is time for something else to grow. The division between 'traditionals' and the government's 'progressives' is beginning to blur in both positive and negative ways.

We feel there must be a clear class analysis both within the American Indian world and in how we relate to the rest of this country. We feel that this is much more in line with the traditions of the Indian struggle in the past three centuries than the things that are now being said and done by Indian leaders.

We also feel that within that context, issues and problems need to be put forward in the most clear and sharp way possible. Basic work must begin in building a new organisation, controlled by the people and led by the people's demands, whether or not that new organisation is called AIM or something else.

We see ourselves and our future work as a part of that ongoing struggle.

December, 1980

The Minnows

*The minnows had built a little fire,
To keep warm at the bottom of the pond,
and huddled around it in a star-shaped circle.
At the surface tiny bubbles burst smokily.*

*Suddenly from all directions came sirens,
Swordfish, Sawfish, Snapping Turtles, and the school
was disrupted — outlawed.
"No underwater overcoats and no fires!"*

*The minnow leaders were exiled to Sardinia,
and order was restored. Stores of weapons were re-ordered,
Just in case.*

c. 1964