

Interview with Big Mountain Activist

Fighting for Survival

REPRESENTATIVES OF THE OLYMPIA, Washington, Big Mountain Support Group were in Vancouver for a week in January to raise awareness about the forced relocation of over 14,000 Hopi and Navajo people from Big Mountain and the Joint Use Area (JUA). The Hopi and Navajo have shared the land in what is now called the JUA for hundreds of years without conflict.

In 1909, coal was discovered in the JUA. In addition, the land was found to be endowed with tremendous reserves of untapped oil, natural gas and ground water resources, as well as 'unknown' uranium potential.

And this is where the problems all began. In 1921, when Standard Oil found oil on the Navajo Reservation, they went to the matrilineal traditional leadership, who voted 75 to 0 against any kind of exploration or exploitation of the natural resources. Undeterred, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) went out and found five Navajo men who were willing to sign the leases. The Federal Government then said that they would only recognize these five men as the tribal leadership. The same system was developed for the Hopi, and, in fact, was so successful that it was the model for the far reaching Indian Reorganizing Act of 1934.

In 1933, several multinational corporations interested in the natural resources on the 1882 Executive Order Reservation (subsequently called the JUA) petitioned the Federal Government to define who owned the rights to these resources. The Government replied that "It would appear that both tribes owned the mineral rights to the area." It became obvious that if any exploitation of the resources was to happen, the land would have to be divided between the two tribes, giving the corporations easier access. At this point, the two attorneys who represented the government appointed tribal councils (and who were at the same time directly connected with the multinationals) became involved.

Through a series of manoeuvres they convinced the two tribal councils to sue each other over the rights to the land. They also convinced the councils to sign away future mineral rights and use the revenues to pay for this legal action, thus guaranteeing the multinationals the right to go in. It finally went to court in 1960, and, as a result, gave the Hopi exclusive rights over the Hopi Reservation. The Hopi and Navajo had undivided mineral rights and interests to remainder of the JUA.

We talked to Marilyn James, a Colville tribal member from the Okanogan and Cheesaw bands about the history of the struggle and the ongoing resistance.

We have been led to believe that there is an ongoing dispute between the Navajo and the Hopi people. How true is this?

Marilyn: The dispute is between the Progressives (Government appointed Tribal Council) and the Traditionals. The myth involved here is that there is a dispute between the Indians when in fact the U.S. government only recognizes the progressive factions of both tribes. Less than 15% of the people vote for the tribal leadership because they do not believe in that form of government and don't recognize it.

In 1971, there was a renewed push for a 50-50% surface partition of the JUA. How did they go about doing this?

The bureau of Indian affairs, their attorneys and the Federal Government hired Evans and Associates, a P.R. firm from Salt Lake City, Utah, to stage a 'range war' between the Hopi and Navajo and brought in the press. They hammed it up about how the Indians were fighting amongst themselves. One of their famous divide and conquer tactics. The U.S. Government thought that they had better pass a law to "Save the Indians from themselves." They called this the 1974 Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act (PL 93-531). The law was never really brought to the people, so it was passed without the majority of the people knowing



what was going on, and without impact studies.

This particular law is based on fraud, it is based on cultural genocide, it is based on the Federal Government's non-recognition of the traditional government. The traditional people have gone to the U.S. Government and have tried to tell them that they do not want this law. They want the law repealed.

Public Law 93-531 mandated that the land be partitioned and whatever Indians were found to be 'on the wrong side of the fence' to be relocated. What effect does this law have on the people who are expected to relocate?

The Navajo people live a really isolated existence on the land. They live totally self-sufficiently on their land and have no electricity, no running water, their main meat source is mutton. They are basically shepherds and they need a wide land base to graze their sheep. The rest of the land on the Navajo reserve is pretty well taken up so they have to be relocated to hostile border towns like Flagstaff, Tuba City, or into what I call 'reservation ghettos'. These are big housing projects where people don't have sufficient land or water supplies for sheep and gardens. They have never had a sewage bill, tax payments, rent payments, etc., so when they move into these other situations in society they have to use an economic system that is foreign to them. Out of 3,300 Navajo people relocated, 60% have lost everything.

The banks go in and get lists of these people and give them loans that they can't possible repay. Then they foreclose on their homes and property and move them out. Or, they sell them deeds to totally worthless land that has no water at all. Many of these people go back to the reserve, but since this is illegal they are forced to go underground and live with their families, creating an almost

unbearable burden.

Also under this law they have the Life Estate Program for the elder people. Under this program, the elders can live on the land until they die. But, in effect, the government relocates all their support systems, all their children and grandchildren who help them herd the sheep and help chop wood etc., so these elders are left to do all the work themselves. In effect, the government is saying we'll let you stay here until you die, but we'll put you into an early grave. The law attacks from many, many sides.

Why was herd reduction included in this law?

The Hopi progressives said that the Navajo were over-grazing the land, so they cut the herds by 90%. In one woman's case her herd was reduced from 200 to 20. Since mutton is their main food source it's one more way of starving them of the land. In terms of over-grazing, any intelligent person could

ON THE ROAD:

After all the promises...finally we have published an issue on schedule. But it's no one-shot affair—our next issue is already on the drawing boards and should be printed by mid-summer. An anarcha-feminist issue, with an insert written and produced entirely by women, it will provide a fresh *Open Road* outlook on the world and personal politics.

As for this issue, we hope you like it. We were hoping to include a communique section, but difficulties in acquiring the assistance of translators precluded the realization of this hope.

figure out that from the strip mining that they're doing there, not one acre has ever been successfully reclaimed and no amount of grazing could have caused that kind of devastation.

The crux of the matter is the natural resources which the multinationals want to get their hands on. In 1980, a study was done and for every man, woman and child on the Navajo reserve their total income, including every welfare dollar, independent wage and all natural resource sales, was \$594 million. The Dupont company went in and took natural resources off the land that very same year and off those resources made in excess of \$26 billion. Gulf Oil went in and made in excess of \$30 billion. Peabody Coal (which operates the largest strip mining operation in the world on the Black Mesa) and Mobil Oil would not release their financial statements. So that's the kind of money that's being made.

What effect is this having on the environment?

They are destroying this desert plateau area. They have a coal slurry line which runs from the Black Mesa to Nevada which is 286 miles long, and which consumes three million gallons of water a day, a rate which is much greater than the aquifer can replenish itself. The high desert plateau area is a delicate balance of underground water and precipitation, and if the water level drops too low then they are endangering all life.

There are 49 uranium mines on the Navajo reserve. Uranium is only found in water bearing geological layers and they are pumping the water out of the mines and freely into the desert. This water is radioactive. It doesn't just evaporate, it seeps back down into the water tables. So they are contaminating the aquifer, which is one of the major aquifers on this continent. It supplies drinking water and irrigation for crops for the whole south-western region of the U.S., not to mention the pollution from the radioactive gasses and tailings. Many of the elders are watching even the ten per cent of their sheep that are left get sick, go blind, crazy or die. They are afraid to eat the meat because they fear it is contaminated.

What does the land mean on a spiritual level for the people?

The Hopi and the Navajo are the two most culturally intact tribes left in the U.S. and the 14,000 people to be relocated represent a large percentage of the traditional people that are left. In Hopi prophesy, they believe that if any of this land is disturbed there will be a great calamity on this earth and they are trying to avoid this. The people believe that the area is one end of the spiritual pole of this planet.

The people understand that Big Mountain is a Holy place, and that it has an essential role in maintaining the forces and energies in North America. Their stories and prophesies tell them they are born of that very place, and they are to protect the earth as their mother. They maintain ceremonies which may only be performed in certain places at certain times. For these reasons they are willing to defend the land with their lives.

It seems crucial that people become involved.

The native people are crying out for
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