



The new resource wars

By Al Gedicks

The struggle of indigenous peoples and their allies for control over their resources and their right to pursue their own models of development can be seen as the points at which inter-imperialist rivalries and anti-imperialist struggles come together in their sharpest forms.

This is the central theme of the following article on the global struggle for resources.

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Over the past decade, large transnational corporations and development-conscious nation states have waged resource wars against the indigenous peoples of the earth. The emergence of the transnational corporation as the dominant force in the world political economy, the postwar emphasis on national development, and the increasing demand of industrial nations for limitless quantities of energy resources, minerals, and other raw materials have been devastating for indigenous peoples. Lacking legal protection within the countries they inhabit and unprepared for the technological impact of transnational companies, indigenous communities have been uprooted, dislocated, and, in some cases, destroyed.

"Transnational Corporations and Indigenous Peoples", an Anthropology Resource Center (ARC) position paper, September 1981.

As the raw-material producing countries of the Third World take increasing control over their non-renewable natural resources and as the United States faces increasing competition from Western Europe and Japan for the remaining sources of cheap raw materials, the multinational mining and energy corporations must scout the globe in search of new resource colonies. Countries like Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Peru, which are ruled by US supported military regimes, have opened their doors to foreign control of their vast mineral wealth and provided lucrative opportunities for high profit, low risk mining projects. The shift in corporate investments from "unstable" Third World mineral suppliers to "politically secure" mineral-rich regions has resulted in an intensification of the genocidal assault

upon native peoples whose lands contain untapped mineral resources.

The resource colonization process removes all major decision-making power from the hands of those who will be directly affected by mining operations and reserves that power for a handful of multinational mining and energy corporations. The victims of this colonization process are not confined to the indigenous populations of the Third World: the victims are also found within the internal colonies – the Indian reservations and native reserves – of the advanced capitalist countries. Since the early 1970s, nearly 85 per cent of the total world expenditures on mineral exploration has been channelled into the United States, Canada, Australia and South Africa.¹ The correspondance between some of the world's richest uranium deposits and these internal colonies is particularly striking. In Australia, three of the four largest uranium deposits, with over 80 per cent of the country's reserves, are on Aboriginal lands. In Canada, where native reserves cover 6 million acres, Indian and Eskimo communities have faced a massive uranium boom. And in the United States, approximately 80 per cent of uranium reserves lie on Indian lands.²

The first part of this essay will examine the impact of the resource colonization process upon energy-rich American tribes and suggest some contradictions of this process. The second part of this essay will critically examine the Reagan Administration's rhetoric about "resource wars" with the Soviet Union and suggest some implications for the anti-nuclear and environmental movements in the United States.

Uranium from Indian lands

During the first wave of internal colonial expansion in the United States, the native populations were forced onto what were considered the most unproductive lands – rocky, arid lands seldom hospitable for

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agriculture or settlement. Ironically, these out-of-the way areas happened to be the most favorable geological environments for the formation of uranium deposits. Since 1948, 53,835 tons of uranium has been produced from Indian lands. This is roughly 10 per cent of the world's total.

The Grants Uranium Belt of north-west New Mexico which encompasses the lands of Navajo and Pueblo Indian peoples is the area of the most intense uranium mining and milling activity in the United States. Northwestern New Mexico is the largest uranium producing region in the world, supplying about half of the country's mined and milled uranium. About 47 per cent of that uranium comes from Indian land. As exploration continues, that percentage will rise. In a 1976 report, the Department of Interior called this region "the hottest uranium exploration area in the United States". Close to 750,000 acres of Navajo and Pueblo land has been leased for exploration. Exxon alone has 400,000 acres leased near Red Rock on Navajo land. Some of the other thirteen companies which have uranium leases on Indian

lands include Continental Oil, Anaconda, Gulf Minerals, Humble Oil and Kerr McGee.

Indians as guinea pigs for the nuclear industry

Just as the powerful energy companies are preparing for a new uranium boom the first casualties of the nuclear weapons program in the United States have begun to show up among the Indian miners who worked in the uranium mines during the 1950s. Dr. Leon S Gottleib of the US Public Health Service in Shiprock, New Mexico, describes the devastating impact on health caused by the nuclear industry:

"We have been seeing at our hospital a small epidemic of lung cancer among Navajos. Before the 1940s there was no uranium mining here in Shiprock. The occupations consisted of sheepherding, weaving, silversmiths, and agriculture. The climate was good, nobody smoked and there was no cancer. And then came the onset of uranium mining."³

John Redhouse of the National Indian Youth Council has counted 25 Navajo uranium miners from the original Kerr McGee Shiprock uranium facilities who have died from lung cancer. Gottleib expects more to appear in the 1980s because there is a 15 to 20-year induction latency period from the onset of employment to the appearance of cancer. The danger to uranium miners results from the inhalation of radon gas, a decay product of uranium which is released when the ore is mined. Radon and the decay products of radon (called "radon daughters") are inhaled by the miners and become trapped in the lower respiratory tract. The radioactive energy given off by these particles result in lung cancer, fibrosis, and lymphatic cancers. Poorly ventilated underground mines are the primary source of radon contamination for miners. The dangers of radon have been known since the early 1900s, when German scientists determined that airborne radioactivity in mines caused high cancer rates.⁴ Despite this knowledge the Atomic Energy Commission refused to admit that danger was pre-

sent in uranium mining for the first twenty years of nuclear energy development. Dr. Joseph Waggoner, an occupational health researcher with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, summarized the plight of Indian radiation victims as follows:

"Seldom in the history of science or technology have individuals been forced to serve the call of commerce under conditions which are so indefensible as are found in the uranium mining industry." ⁵

Nor are radon-induced lung cancers the only health risk to the Navajos. An average ton of ore contains only 3 pounds of uranium oxide. This means that virtually all of the ore processed ends up as waste. Although these waste piles (called "tailings") contain little uranium, they nonetheless contain 85 per cent of the radioactivity that was in the original ore. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, these tailings present probably the greatest single hazard of the nuclear fuel chain. Recent reports of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission indicate that these piles may threaten the health, not only of people living near them, but also those living thousands of miles away. The quantity of radioactive materials in the tailings will diminish by only one-half in roughly 80,000 years.

On March 30, 1981 public health officials working on the Navajo Reservation and throughout the Four Corners region (Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Colorado) presented preliminary data which indicates a potential correlation between uranium activities and significant changes in birth patterns including abnormally high rates of stillbirths, spontaneous abortions, congenital anomalies, childhood cancers and learning disabilities. ⁶

Bringing the Third World back home

The resource colonization process is

not, however, without its own contradictions. As early as 1975 R H Kennedy, of the US Energy Research and Development Administration, warned the International Atomic Energy Agency that uranium mining was becoming the "Achilles heel" of the nuclear industry:

"So we have here an industry in which the number of deaths attributable to radiation far exceeds that in all other parts of the nuclear industry put together. The environmentalists are going to take this point up — in fact they are taking it up — and they are regarding the uranium producing industry as perhaps the Achilles heel of the whole nuclear programme in the USA. I am sure that this will be a problem in other countries as well. It is one thing to talk about exposures to radon daughters in mining operations, and it is certainly another thing to talk about the exposures that exist in mills and exist for the general public as a result of radon emanating from tailings piles." ⁷

As the nuclear industry prepares for new uranium-mining booms, the resistance is becoming organized. "As difficult as it may be to believe", says Johan Mohawk of *Akwesasne Notes*, "the Native people and the anti-nuclear people may have a great deal more in common than immediately meets the eye. Something may be beginning during this quarter-century which hasn't truly happened for a long time, but it may be something of almost earth-shaking significance." ⁸

On April 28-30, 1979, Indians, Chicanos and anti-nuclear forces joined in a demonstration to protest Gulf Oil's uranium drilling on Mount Taylor. "There are many Navajo and Pueblo people in the Grants Mineral Belt", states the National Indian Youth Council, "who consider the uranium mining activity on Mount Taylor a violent act of sacrilege and desecration visited upon a sacred

shrine." Grassroots opposition to uranium mining is also growing in South Dakota, where exploration activity in the Black Hills is already underway. The Black Hills Alliance, a coalition of Indians, environmentalists, ranchers and anti-nuclear activists, hosted an International Survival Gathering in the Black Hills (July 21-27, 1980) to call world attention to the genocidal policies of the energy corporations.

The anti-uranium forces in New Mexico and South Dakota have begun to build ties with anti-uranium forces in Australia, Namibia and Canada. Both the anti-nuclear movement and the American Indian Movement (AIM) have recognized that the international character of the nuclear industry necessitates internationally-linked resistance. As *Pacific Research* magazine has noted, "In all these countries, indigenous peoples, whose continued existence as individuals and as cultures is at stake, form the core of the resistance." ⁹ Far more significant, in light of the on-going resource wars, is the fact that non-Aboriginal people of the land, as well as the general public, are joining to demand alternatives to the nuclear path. In October of 1979 the First International Conference on Uranium Mining in the Third and Fourth Worlds took place in Copenhagen, Denmark. Further ties were established between US anti-uranium forces and their counterparts in Canada, Greenland, Australia and Namibia. As the pressure for extracting the world's last supplies of uranium increases, the anti-uranium movement will undoubtedly increase in size and strength.

The case of native resistance to uranium mining demonstrates some of the contradictions of resource colonialism. The continuing resource wars against the indigenous peoples of the earth will further accelerate anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist struggles over the use and control of natural resources. ¹⁰ It is within this context that the Reagan

administrations' s Cold War rethoric of "resource war" with the Soviet Union must be understood.

Resource wars and the national security state

Is it too late to reverse the tide of regulatory self-denial that precludes our domestic industry from providing this nation with domestic supplies? Well, if the severity of such cyclical shortages does not convince the government to de-regulate the mineral resource base and industry in the US, then the geopolitics of resources — the potential of resource wars — surely will... earlier this year something amazing happened in the House of Representatives. We tied that cobalt in the wilderness question to the matter of national defense, and suddenly we had many allies who apparently had been unaware of the Idaho cobalt problem before. We had emphasized and made such effective use of the national security implications of this one wilderness decision that, for the first time in the 16-year history of the Wilderness Act, the proponents of wilderness chose not to fight us on the floor of the House Representatives. The significance is that we had tied a mineral issue to a national defense concern, and had won... This is the way we must face impending resource wars.

Rep. James D. Santini (D. Nevada) before the 18th World Affairs Forum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 17, 1980.

If Rep. Santini and Secretary of State Alexander Haig and Secretary of Interior James Watt are to be believed, the United States is engaged in a resource war with the Soviet Union over access to strategic minerals required for national security. During Congressional hear-



ings on his nomination as Secretary of Interior, James Watt said that one of his top missions as Interior Secretary will be to develop a "strategic minerals policy so that this nation would not suffer (for) military or national security reasons." According to Secretary of State Haig, environmental regulations have "shut off opportunities" for the mining companies to seek out domestic deposits of the strategic materials we need. To correct this situation Rep. Santini has introduced a "National Mineral Security Act" into the US House of Representatives. The bill would give the Secretary of the Interior power to open to mining all US public lands, including wilderness areas, national wildlife refuges and even national parks.

A careful examination of the threat of a cutoff of strategic mineral supplies and the potential for strategic minerals mining in wilderness areas suggests that neither claim is supported by the evidence. In September of 1980, Rep. Santini's subcommittee on mines and mining held hearings entitled "International Resource War: Minerals Held Hostage." Alexander Haig, then president of United Technologies Corp., the nation's third largest defense contractor, testified at these hearings that:

"Should future trends, especially in Southern Africa, result in alignment (*sic*) with Moscow of this critical resource area, then the U.S.S.R. would control as much as 90 per cent of several key mi-

nerals for which no substitutes have been developed and the loss of which could bring the severest consequences to the existing economic and security framework of the free world."¹¹

There is little in the way of logic or history to support the notion that successful liberation movements in southern Africa would deny the West access to essential minerals. Robert M. Price has argued this point in a recent *New York Times* opinion column:

"If one looks beyond rhetoric and observes the actual policies of Marxist states such as Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, then the notion of a resources war is revealed to be fantasy. The reality is the reverse. In the real world we find the nations of southern Africa, Marxist and conservative alike, striving to attract Western investment and technology as to expand the export of minerals to the only customers that exist for them — the United States, Western Europe and Japan."¹²

On the other hand, the notion of resource war provides a convenient justification for Reagan Administration's support for South Africa's apartheid regime and its opposition to the Namibian liberation movement SWAPO.

Nor is the mining industry's claim that strategic minerals are locked away in wilderness areas supported by the evidence. The mining surveys that Representative Santini wants for all federal lands are currently conducted in proposed wilderness areas. In the 30 national wildlife refuge lands studied, not one was found to have significant quantities of strategic minerals. Only five national forest wilderness areas were identified as having a high mineral potential, and none of them for the crucial strategic metals. *National Journal* recently noted the concern that mining companies are using national security questions as a way of gaining

more access to the public lands with copper, lead, zinc, and molybdenum. According to Frank Gregg, director of the Bureau of Land Management in the Carter Administration, "The mining companies might not find cobalt, but they'd find other minerals and then ask to mine these materials in order to justify their investment costs."¹³

The Cold War rhetoric of resource wars is revealed as a thinly-veiled attack on the gains of the environmental movement and on the progress of Third World countries in exercising sovereignty over their natural resources. Sam Zuckerman has summarized the propaganda value of resource war rhetoric as follows:

"By promoting the concepts of resource war and locked up land, the industry has developed an effective line of attack against the idea of taking any land out of production at all... One can only marvel at the ingenuity of those who have developed such a propaganda piece de resistance as resource war. In its name, our political, military and industrial leaders are prepared to plunder the last pockets of wilderness in the United States and ignore the cries for freedom in southern Africa."¹⁴

The new resource wars and the challenge to the "Industrial Model" of economic development

While the Reagan Administration's rhetoric of "resource wars" with the Soviet Union is little more than Cold War propaganda aimed at the US public, there is a kernel of truth to the concern about access to raw materials. The faster that capital expands the faster still is the rate at which it must consume raw materials in the form of plant, equipment, and goods for sale. In our own time this expansionary process has reached un-

Concentration in the energy sector — a threat to indigenous people

In the Fall of 1980 SUNRAE (5679 Hollister Ave, Rm 5B, Goleta, Calif, 93017, USA) began research on oil company investment in other energy sectors. In addition an update was made on research by Jeff Bowling on oil company investments in the copper industry. Some of the preliminary findings reported in the Fall of 1981:

In the *uranium industry*, oil companies account for 36,3 per cent of 1979 mine production, 46,8 per cent of mill capacity, and 47,8 per cent of reserves. These figures are pretty significant: even more so considering only 64 per cent of reserves, and only 70 per cent of production have been accounted for.

In the *coal industry*, the oil companies own 25 per cent of 1980 production, and account for 43,102 per cent of reserves. There are a great many more companies involved in this ownership, so the figures are not as significant.

In the *solar industry*, only photovoltaics was considered. It was taken for granted that solar water heating was a very unconcentrated industry, and large companies entering would have a very difficult time affecting the market. The photovoltaic industry, on the other hand, has very few firms actually producing at the present time. Three of the firms, Solarex, Exxon, and Atlantic Richfield can be clearly recognized as oil companies. Solarex is 20-25 per cent owned by Standard Oil (Indiana), and partially owned by two European companies. It is therefore very questionable as to the independence of Solarex, which accounts for 50 per cent of the industry's production.

In the *copper industry*, six oil companies (Atlantic Richfield, Cities Service,

Louisiana Land and Exploration, Standard Oil (Indiana), Pennzoil, and Standard Oil (Ohio), own 49,796 per cent of the 1979 production. If Standard Oil (California) 20 per cent interest in AMAX is included, the percentage increases to 52,239 per cent. Oil companies account for 43,765 per cent of reserves. However, in the list of reserves, only 83 per cent of total reserves were accounted for. Thus, the figure could indeed be much greater.

The oil companies involved in the uranium industry, with their share of the industry in parenthesis, are as follows:

Uranium production (in %):

Kerr-McGee	13,7
Atlantic Richfield	10,0
Exxon	9,1
Conoco ¹	2,0
Gulf Oil	1,0
Standard Oil (Ohio)	0,5

Uranium mill production capacity:

Kerr-McGee	14,3
Atlantic Richfield	12,2
Conoco	6,9
Exxon	6,5
Standard Oil (California)	5,1
Standard Oil (Ohio)	3,3
Getty Oil	3,1

Uranium reserves:

Kerr-McGee	21,0
Gulf Oil	11,6
Conoco	3,6
Getty Oil	2,9
Exxon	2,5
Atlantic Richfield	2,2
Philipps Petroleum	1,8
Reserve Oil	0,8
Standard Oil (Ohio)	0,7
Standard Oil (California)	0,4
Houston Natural Gas ²	0,2

¹ Conoco is now owned by DuPont. For the study, Conoco is an oil company

² Percentages may not total the text percentage due to rounding

precedented proportions. Since 1940, the United States alone has consumed more minerals than all of human kind in history. And demand is not only picking up speed in the United States but is rising at an even faster rate overseas. In the past, industrial consumers of raw materials have been able to rely upon the market to secure their needs. When rising demand or supply constraints have pushed prices up, the market has spurred technology to develop new sources or substitutes.

But now, with the quantitative leap in the demand for raw materials and the longer lead time required to develop new supplies, the market is increasingly unable to deliver the raw materials in the required quantities. But the problem is not that there are actual shortages; the raw materials are there in great supply. The question, as the editors of *Business Week* rightly point out is, economic and political: "How will the resources be got out of the ground, and most pointedly, by whom?".¹⁵ The worldwide resistance movement of indigenous peoples against the plunder of the earth's resources has added yet another uncertainty to the picture: the demand for alternative models of economic development which do not require the limitless extraction of energy and mineral resources.

In 1979 the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) raised serious questions about the entire "industrial model" of economic development before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. It called upon the international community to recognize the importance of "small scale economic development" models based on technologies appropriate to local communities and environmental conditions.¹⁶

The struggle of indigenous peoples and their allies for control over their resources and their right to pursue their own models of development can be seen as the points at which inter-imperialist

rivalries and anti-imperialist struggles come together in their sharpest form. Because the struggle for control over natural resources is not unique to indigenous peoples it is important for the international anti-imperialist movement to develop ways and means of providing support for these struggles at the same time as we extend the analogy of foreign and domestic resource colonies to the concerns of other communities regarding control over land, resources, the environment and alternative modes of utilizing labor to meet human needs.

The strategic importance of the struggles of indigenous populations for sovereignty over their land base and economic development is two fold: the success of these struggles will not only deprive the imperialist countries of a much needed source of cheap raw materials for military and industrial expansion but also may provide concrete examples of how economic development planning can take place on a basis other than the self-expansion of multinational corporate capital.

Notes:

¹ Rex Bosson and Bension Varon, *The Mining Industry and the Developing Countries* (Oxford University Press, published for the World Bank, 1977) pp. 31-32.

² The Australian and Canadian figures are from Michael Tanzer, *The Race for Resources* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980) p. 207. The figure for the U.S. comes from the Council of Energy Resource Tribes (CERT).

³ Cited in Alan Ramo, "Nuclear Foes Go to Source of Problem", *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 5, 1980.

⁴ Ralph Nader and John Abbots, *The Menace of Atomic Energy* (New York: Norton, 1979) p. 178.

⁵ "National Citizens Hearings for Ra-

diation Victims", *Sane World Newsletter*, May 1980.

⁶ Christopher McLeod, "New Studies Reveal High Birth Defect Rate in Southwest", *Pacific News Service*, October 1981.

⁷ *Uranium Ore Processing*, Proceedings of and Advisory Group Meeting in Washington, D.C., November 24-26, 1975 (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1976) p. 188.

⁸ John Mohawk, "Native People and the Right to Survive", *Akwesasne Notes*, Spring 1979.

⁹ "Uranium Mines Threaten Native Americans", *Pacific Research*, Vol. 10 No. 1 1979, p. 32.

¹⁰ This argument is elaborated in my essay on "Raw Materials: The Achilles Heel of American Imperialism?", *The Insurgent Sociologist*, Vol. 7 No. 4 (Fall 1977).

¹¹ *Nonfuel Minerals Policy Review*, Oversight Hearing before the Subcommittee on Mines and Mining, 96th Congress; Second Session on Global Mineral Resources, Washington, D.C. September 18, 1980.

¹² "Can Africa Afford Not to Sell Minerals?", *New York Times*, August 18, 1981.

¹³ Cited in Geoffrey Webb, "'Strategic' Minerals", *Not Man Apart*, September 1981. Reprinted in *Mine Talk*, September/October 1981, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴ Sam Zuckerman, "The Interior Department Goes to War", *Environmental Action*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (June 1981) pp. 20-21.

¹⁵ "The Scramble for Resources", *Business Week*, June 30, 1973, p. 56.

¹⁶ "Transnational Corporations and Indigenous Peoples", *Anthropology Resource Center*, Newsletter, Vol. 5 No. 3 (September 1981) p. 6. ■