

Residential Schools Apology: An Anarchist View

- Posted by [apoc](#)
- August 23, 2008

by Rev, from Linchpin #5

On June 11th 2008, the Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, claimed to apologize for residential schools and the government's plan to destroy the cultures of Indigenous peoples in Canada. This apology came after a similar apology was given to indigenous people in Australia. Residential or boarding schools were part of colonial policy in New Zealand, Australia, the United States and Canada. Harper's apology talked about the abuses and cultural assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada by the Canadian government, especially the forced removal of children from their families. However, there is so much that Harper did not say. What he left out was that the residential schools were just one aspect of colonization.

Residential schools were run by churches, led by the Department of Indian Affairs for most of their existence. They focused on a total approach to assimilation: physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual. The Indigenous children stolen from their families were to be made into Canadians by force. The curriculum was created to allow the destruction of Indigenous ways of living on the land. The idea of "killing the Indian and saving the man," was really about making way for capitalist ways of living on the land. In essence, residential schools aimed at handing over Indigenous land to corporations and turning Indigenous people into workers. Since Canadian society was based on private property while most Indigenous communities held the land in common, residential schools taught skills for private property ownership and taught the values of a capitalist society to the children. In the mind of the churches and the government, the Indigenous person was to become a settler and worker for the ruling class.

The residential schools were first called Manual Labour or Industrial schools and this says a lot about their actual purpose. The schools spent a half day teaching lessons in the classroom, the other half was spent learning trades or housework. The schools aimed to produce workers that were able to be exploited for wages or for their crops. The students were taught to be hard working and obedient like all good white Christian workers. Or in other words, to respect the authority of the church, state and the capitalist bosses. This is the same idea as the workhouse or poorhouse in Europe, to discipline and create the working class.

Authority and fear were central to the goals and methods of the residential schools. Indigenous societies were

very free and equal. European society on the other hand used discipline and power to control people.

Residential schools used power and violence to train Indigenous peoples to submit to settler society and the figures of authority in it. Indigenous peoples were taught to behave like white people or face punishment, just like all settler children are taught to behave or face punishment. Those who ran residential schools argued that Indigenous parents did not exercise proper authority over their children.























The residential school curriculum tried to destroy Indigenous languages in order to remove the people from the land. Indigenous languages often name an object by what you can use it for. For instance, Cecilia Jeffries Indian Residential School, Kenora, Ontario Picture courtesy of Nishnawbe Aski Nation Residential Schools Project, www.nan.on.ca, The Shingwauk Project plants are often named after what healing properties they offer. The elimination of this knowledge through the teaching of English imposed settler ways of living, because the necessary knowledge to live Indigenous was lost.

Residential Schools also taught sexism and the rule of men over women (patriarchy). Girls were taught to be domestic and remain in the home, while very often Indigenous women had more freedom and could do many jobs outside the home. Women were taught that Christian marriage was right rather than be brought up in a clan system where women's solidarity and collective power protected women from male oppression. Women were taught to be inferior and this destroyed the backbone of the gender equality in Indigenous societies. This inequality was essential to the development of the working class in all European societies. The production of the Christian nuclear family is the linchpin of capitalist society.

To wrap up, residential schools were a project to spread capitalism. Residential schools were meant to turn Indigenous peoples into settlers and make them workers and peasants for the capitalist system. Harper will never apologize for the real goals of the residential schools. Many Indigenous peoples, such as the Assembly of First Nations, are even scared to admit how colonized they remain. Really discussing decolonization will require the unsettling of capitalism. Recognizing that colonization and capitalism are the same process, shows us that the struggle for Indigenous freedom from the authority of bosses and the government is a natural ally with the anarchist struggle for freedom.

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