

Peltier tells how FBI plotted to put him behind bars

By Joyce Chediac

SEPTEMBER 22 — Leonard Peltier, an Ojibway/Lakota Indian, is a political prisoner wrongfully jailed by the U.S. government. His plight is a continuation of Washington's war against indigenous people, from the 371 broken treaties and

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massacres of the past to the land theft, unemployment and poverty of the present.

Peltier's story begins with the militant 1973 reclaiming of Wounded Knee in which he participated. Located on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, Wounded Knee was the site of the massacre of 300 indigenous families by the U.S. cavalry in 1890.

The U.S. government responded to the 1973 takeover by bringing in the troops. Only instead of the cavalry this time it was the FBI, federal marshals, the Bureau of Indian Affairs police and even the U.S. Army. Heavily armed military raids continued on Pine Ridge, augmented by a huge FBI intelligence network targeting Native leaders under the COINTELPRO program. This resulted in the violent deaths or disappearances of as many as 300 Native people in the 1970s, according to the

International Indian Treaty Council.

In 1975, two FBI agents participating in one of the many armed attacks on Pine Ridge were killed. Peltier, an American Indian Movement (AIM) leader, was wrongly convicted in their deaths and is currently serving two life terms. In an exclusive interview with Workers World, this Native leader explained why:

"There was a COINTELPRO program in the 1960s to break the American Indian Movement because we were exposing what was going on in the reservations, the continued land theft, the annihilation of Indian people through assimilation. The American Indian Movement was becoming very powerful."

Documents later discovered under a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit, he said, showed that the FBI at that time was "starting to concentrate on those of us who they labeled 'lieutenants of leadership,' those of us who the people were following more closely.

"Then, when the shoot-out took place, four of us were indicted."

Charges were dropped against one person and two were acquitted. "I was the last one to go to court. I was their last chance to get a conviction. . . . We found an FBI document that said, 'Put the full weight of the United States justice system on Leonard Peltier. Get a conviction.' And that's exactly what they did."

Peltier's trial was characterized by government misconduct, including threatening witnesses with death, suppression of key evidence by the FBI and the self-admitted perjury of many witnesses. Despite the well-documented presentation of all this in two appeals for a new trial, both appeals have been denied.

Peltier said that his prosecutor, Lynn Crooks, even admitted in court that "The government does not know who killed the agents or what involvement Peltier had in it." Clearly Peltier is in jail for political reasons.

"They're forcing us off our reservations and they're coming in and taking our lands for strip mining," Peltier explained. "Now, they're trying to put nuclear waste dumps on our land . . . so it's a modern type of annihilation. Those of us who are resisting, we're in prison.

"I was put in the most maximum security prison they had, Marion. Out of my 11 years in jail, I've spent a good four years of that, off and on, in the hole." This was often for the most minor of offenses. One time, he said, he was thrown into solitary "for having too many postage stamps in my cell. . . . I was beaten once for passing a sandwich to another inmate who was hungry and I didn't feel like eating."