December 16, 2010

John Duncan, Minister of Indian Affairs
600 Confederation Building
House of Commons
Ottawa ON K1A 0A6

Lawrence Cannon, Local Member of Parliament
Minister of Foreign Affairs
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

Dear Honourable Ministers:

On behalf of the 54,000 members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers I want to express my outrage at the Government of Canada's attempt to abolish the traditional government of the Algonquin First Nation of Barriere Lake.

For more than two decades, the Algonquins of Barriere Lake, who lead a hunting way of life on more than 15,000 square kilometers in north-western Quebec, have been demonstrating environmental leadership by campaigning to stop destructive clear-cut logging and to implement a sustainable development agreement in their homeland.

The people of Barriere Lake have been assisted in this struggle by a traditional government that is tied to their land-based existence, one of the few remaining in the country. Barriere Lake's traditional leaders are nominated by Elders and confirmed in community assemblies, which are open only to those who live in their traditional territory and have connection to the land.

Although an overwhelming majority of community members support their traditional government, the Government of Canada is bent on using a section of the Indian Act - Section 74 - to abolish it and impose a foreign electoral system in its place. The loss of Barriere Lake's governance system, tied as it is to their land use, culture and identity, would have a devastating impact on their way of life.

Elections under Section 74 of the Indian Act haven’t been forcibly imposed on a community since 1924, when the Government of Canada unilaterally deposed the traditional government of Six Nations with the assistance of the RCMP. Canadian officials were angry that traditional leaders were campaigning internationally for recognition of Six Nations’ sovereignty and rights.
It appears the Government of Canada’s motivations are similar today. They seem to believe that abolishing Barriere Lake's traditional government will sever Barriere Lake's connection to their lands. With the community weakened politically, logging companies will have unchallenged reign over the forest and the government can abandon signed agreements.

In polls imposed on Barriere Lake on August 12, 2010 under the threatening watch of the police, less than 10 people consented to the Indian Act election regime by nominating individuals to compete in an election. This contrasts with nearly 200 community members who signed a resolution outright opposing any such election. On the basis of these nominations, the Government of Canada has declared that a new Indian Act Chief and Council have been elected by acclamation – though even the individual deemed Chief has refused the position, in line with the community’s broad opposition to the government-imposed election system. Such government actions make a mockery of democratic principles.

The Algonquins of Barriere Lake’s inherent right to customary self-government is also protected by section 35 of the Canadian Constitution and is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which the Conservative government has endorsed.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers calls on the Government of Canada to immediately reverse its imposition of an Indian Act election system, and to publicly commit to honour their outstanding agreements with the Algonquins of Barriere Lake.

The Government of Canada may think that Barriere Lake's relative isolation will allow them to get away with such draconian violations of their rights but the Algonquins of Barriere Lake have friends and supporters across the country who are standing behind their struggle for justice.

Yours truly,

Denis Lemelin
National President

cc. Barriere Lake Support Committee
    Christian Martel, Director, Quebec Region CUPW

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