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AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT

The American Indian Movement (AIM) emerged from the broader context of ethnic/racial activism during the civil rights era in the United States. AIM was founded in 1968 on the streets of Minneapolis to monitor police harassment and abuse. From this original mandate, AIM quickly evolved into a civil rights organization fighting for Native American rights. This entry reviews its history and contributions.

Early Issues

Amid the many local struggles in which AIM members participated across the country, one major protest event drew national and international attention. In 1969, the group "Indians of All Tribes" began its occupation of Alcatraz Island. During the 19-month occupation, a major spokesperson was Dennis Banks, a founder of AIM. That same year, AIM founded an Indian Health Board in Minneapolis, the first urban-based health care center for American Indians in the nation.

After the Alcatraz occupation, AIM chapters were founded across the United States in major cities with significant Native American populations. During this time, some of AIM's most ardent leaders, such as Russell Means and John Trudell, were recruited to its ranks. Throughout these early years, AIM members expanded their vision for social justice by attacking inequalities on numerous fronts. For example, AIM occupied abandoned property at the naval air station near Minneapolis to focus attention on Indian education. In 1970, a legal rights center was founded to assist in alleviating indigenous legal issues.

In a series of demonstrations, AIM members publicly addressed Native American grievances. For example, on July 4, 1971, AIM members held demonstrations atop Mount Rushmore. On Thanksgiving Day, protesters took over a replica of the *Mayflower* at Plymouth, Massachusetts, painting Plymouth Rock

red, and they used the ship as a public forum to air Native grievances. In 1971, AIM assisted the Lac Courte Oreilles of Ojibwa, Wisconsin, in taking over a dam controlled by Northern States Power that flooded reservation land. The action led to an eventual settlement, returning more than 25,000 acres of Ojibwa land. That same year, the First National AIM Conference was convened to develop long-range strategies for future directions of the movement. Eighteen AIM chapters attended the meeting.

An Agenda of Issues

AIM continued to become directly involved in issues nationwide. In February 1972, Means led a caravan of approximately 1,000 people to Gordon, Nebraska, to protest the failure of local authorities to charge two Anglo men in the torture and murder of Raymond Yellow Thunder. AIM also organized a caravan to Washington, D.C. The central objective was to present a twenty-point solution paper to President Richard Nixon to address Native American grievances on the eve of the 1972 U.S. presidential election. In what was called the "Trail of Broken Treaties," 2,000 people from reservations and urban areas across the country arrived in the capital in November.

When government officials refused to allow representatives to deliver their document about treaty rights and self-governance, approximately 400 AIM members and activists seized the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) headquarters in the Department of the Interior building. The six-day occupation ended only after the Nixon administration publicly committed itself to addressing each point. The occupiers left the building, but not before taking many confidential files discovered in BIA offices. The documents revealed many questionable government practices, including land and mineral fraud as well as the forced sterilization of Indian women. AIM came to Washington as a civil rights organization, and it left with the reputation for violent action. This reputation was magnified after the media focused on the vandalizing of the BIA offices rather than on the issues of indigenous sovereignty.

While AIM members drew national and international attention to Native American issues, they also sought solutions to problems. Realizing that any resolution must be based in a strong cultural and spiritual context, AIM opened several survival schools in Milwaukee and the Twin Cities (Minneapolis–St. Paul) area. However, in 1973, the federal government

abruptly canceled AIM's education grants. Many believe that the withdrawal of funding was punishment for the Trail of Broken Treaties, although legal action restored them. Within two years, a Federation of Survival Schools was created among sixteen schools in the United States and Canada. The purpose of the federation was to advocate and cooperate in a culturally based education for American Indian and Native children. That same year (1975), Housing and Urban Development (HUD) chose AIM to be the primary sponsor of the first Indian-run housing project, the Little Earth of United Tribes.

Wounded Knee

After the Trail of Broken Treaties, some AIM members headed to South Dakota to protest a pattern of racism and violence against Indians in off-reservation border towns. On February 6, 1973, 200 AIM members and police confronted each other at the county courthouse in Custer. A local Anglo man, Darold Schmitz, stabbed Wesley Bad Heart Bull to death, and Schmitz was charged with manslaughter rather than first-degree murder. When local officials refused the AIM request to alter the charge, violence ensued. In the end, approximately 40 AIM members were charged with offenses. Several AIM members were jailed, including the victim's mother, but Schmitz never served a day in jail.

AIM leadership also was contacted by the Lakota Elders to assist them in solving the pattern of gross corruption within the BIA and the Tribal Council on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The major conflict was between traditional Oglalas and the federally sponsored tribal government under Dick Wilson. Traditional Oglalas requested support from AIM to defend them against what they saw as a state of terror carried out by Wilson's tribal government. The conflict led to the 71-day armed confrontation at Wounded Knee, the site of the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre.

The occupation began February 28, 1973, and the armed standoff, involving U.S. army reserves, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents, law enforcement, and armed vigilantes, ended May 7 after officials agreed to investigate the complaints. The incident at Wounded Knee became a powerful social point for Indian sovereignty.

After the Wounded Knee incident, the federal government intervened in ways that had a negative effect

on the movement. AIM leadership was neutralized by a series of criminal charges. During the eight months of trials, the longest federal trial in U.S. history, the defense uncovered many instances of government misconduct. Eventually, most charges were dropped against Means, Banks, and others. On the Pine Ridge reservation, Wilson remained in power despite being outpolled by Means in an election. The Department of the Interior upheld the decision to keep Wilson in power. Wilson's vigilantes then began a violent campaign to rid the reservation of any political opposition.

By the spring of 1975, the Oglalas who were targeted by Wilson's men had come to conclude that armed self-defense was their only means of survival. AIM members were called back to the reservation and established a base camp at the Jumping Bull property. When FBI agents chased a car onto the property, a gun battle ensued. A force of federal agents, Guardians of the Oglala Nation (GOONS), and BIA police attacked the AIM defensive encampment. Two FBI agents and one AIM member were killed in the firefight. To capture escaping AIM members, the FBI brought a force of 250 militarily equipped men onto the reservation. Over the course of the next year, the hostilities on the reservation subsided.

For the killings of the FBI agents, a number of AIM members were placed on trial. All were acquitted except Leonard Peltier, who was extradited from Canada in 1977. Peltier was convicted in the deaths of the FBI agents and given two life sentences. Questions have been raised about the evidence submitted by the prosecution at the original trial, and new evidence demonstrated that Peltier's gun did not kill the agents. Nevertheless, Peltier remained incarcerated. Many charge that Peltier is a political prisoner, incarcerated more for his activism than for the deaths of the FBI agents.

A Global Perspective

As AIM's activities grew, the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) began an active campaign to undermine and discredit the movement's goals, using everything from arrests to infiltrator provocateurs. The effort did not succeed in destroying AIM; rather, it had a role in the eventual creation of a unified AIM.

In 1974, Means founded the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) to charge that the U.S. government is in violation of an 1868 treaty. Within three

years, the IITC arranged the first meeting of Indian peoples from North, South, and Central America before the UN Economic and Social Council at the palace of nations in Geneva, Switzerland. That meeting led to the creation of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations charged with conducting investigations into indigenous issues worldwide. The IITC was the first designated indigenous nongovernmental organization.

The IITC remained active into the mid-1980s, but internal political disagreements led to a decline in support among many activists. Despite changes in political direction since its existence, IITC members continue to struggle for international indigenous rights. In April 1996, AIM and IITC representatives attended the Preparatory Meeting for the Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism hosted by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and held in La Realidad in the Lancondone Rainforest of Eastern Chiapas, Mexico. EZLN also hosted a second meeting, held from July 27 until August 3, 1996, about the Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. Delegates of the IITC and AIM also attended this meeting.

Domestic Issues

The Longest Walk was the final unified AIM action. Organized by Banks, the walk began in San Francisco in February 1978. Participants walked across the United States holding a series of public education events to gather local support and participants. By the time they arrived in Washington, D.C., on July 23, the march contained several hundred Native Americans representing more than 80 nations. The participants held a rally on July 25 where a manifesto was delivered amplifying the 1972 twenty-point program. Congressman Ron Dellums had the piece printed as part of the congressional record.

On local stages across the country, AIM continued to maintain a high level of involvement in American Indian issues. Members founded MIGIZI Communications, which is dedicated to the production of Indian news and information to educate students of all ages as tomorrow's technical workforce. This organization launched an adult educational program for American Indian offenders, continued to establish survival schools, and opened the American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center (AIOIC), which creates

job training schools to ameliorate unemployment among Indian people. More than 17,000 Native Americans have been trained for jobs at the center since it opened in 1979.

Throughout the 1980s and beyond, AIM continued its efforts to achieve social justice for American Indians. In South Dakota, local AIM chapters played an instrumental role in the 1980 Black Hills International Gathering. A year later, they founded the Yellow Thunder Camp, a four-year occupation of 880 acres in the Black Hills of South Dakota. AIM members became involved in the Hopi-Navajo land issue by organizing a security camp to protect 10,000 traditional Dine from being forcibly removed from their homes. They also assisted the Anishinabe Akeeng Organization in its struggle to regain control of stolen reservation lands. AIM formed the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media to confront the media stereotypes about American Indians.

Over the course of its existence, AIM has gone through a number of alterations in purpose and organizational structure. In the beginning, AIM sought to solve local issues, but it quickly evolved into an activist organization to address national and (eventually) international indigenous issues. AIM remains in the forefront with respect to issues of self-determination, sovereignty, and the improvement of American Indian lives. This commitment now extends to supporting indigenous struggles across the globe.

Over time, however, AIM has gone from a centralized organization to autonomous AIM chapters scattered across various states and into Canada. This is the result of several factors. As the political economic landscape changed, disagreements arose within AIM's ranks over tactics and strategies for continuing the struggle. This factor, combined with governmental efforts to undermine AIM, resulted in charges and countercharges of government collaboration, ethnic fraud, and conspiracy among AIM factions.

The legacy of AIM's work has entered into the mainstream of Native North America. On February 27, 1998, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Wounded Knee incident, an Oglala Lakota Nation resolution established that day as a National Day of Liberation. On July 16-19, 1998, the 25th annual Lac Courte Oreilles Honor the Earth Homecoming Celebration was held to celebrate and honor the people of Lac Courte Oreilles and AIM who participated in the July 31, 1971, takeover of the Winter Dam and the birth of Honor the Earth. Several days later, at the Pipe Stone

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Quarries, Minnesota, the AIM Grand Governing Council convened to commemorate AIM's 30th anniversary and set the agenda for struggling for American Indian rights and sovereignty.

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See also Bureau of Indian Affairs; Deloria, Vine, Jr.; National Indian Youth Council; Native American Identity, Native Americans; Peltier, Leonard; Red Power; Reservation System; Wounded Knee (1890 and 1973), Zapatista Rebellion

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