



“We’re Still Here”: Indigenous Peoples’ Day Celebration Reflects Ongoing Resistance to Colonization

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Christopher Columbus arrived in the Bahamas 527 years ago this week, unleashing a brutal genocide that killed tens of millions of Native people across the hemisphere. Cities and states across the country are acknowledging this

devastating history by rejecting the federal holiday of Columbus Day and celebrating Indigenous Peoples’ Day instead to honor centuries of indigenous resistance. Alaska, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Dakota, Vermont and Wisconsin have all officially recognized Indigenous Peoples’ Day. So have more than 130 cities and counties, from Los Angeles, San Francisco and Dallas to smaller places like Livingston, Kentucky, and Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Last week, Washington, D.C., became one of the latest to recognize the holiday. Washington, D.C., the District of Columbia, takes its name from Columbus. We speak with Iakowi:he’ne’ Oakes of the Snipe Clan. She is a Mohawk of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. She is the executive director of the American Indian Community House in New York.

Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman. Christopher Columbus arrived in the Bahamas 527 years ago this week, unleashing a brutal genocide that killed tens of millions of Native people across the hemisphere. Well, cities and states across the United States are acknowledging this devastating history by rejecting the federal holiday of Columbus Day and celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day instead, to honor centuries of indigenous resistance. Alaska, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Dakota, Vermont and Wisconsin have all officially recognized Indigenous Peoples' Day. So have more than 130 cities and counties, from Los Angeles, San Francisco and Dallas to smaller places like Livingston, Kentucky, and Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

Last week, Washington, D.C., became one of the latest to recognize the holiday. Washington, D.C., the District of Columbia, takes its name from Columbus. In a statement before the vote, D.C. Councilmember At-Large David Grosso said, quote, "Columbus Day was officially designated as a federal holiday in 1937 despite the fact that Columbus did not discover North America, despite the fact that millions of people were already living in North America upon his arrival in the Americas, and despite the fact that Columbus never set foot on the shores of the current United States. Columbus enslaved, colonized, mutilated and massacred thousands of Indigenous People in the Americas," he said.

The movement to replace Columbus Day gained momentum in 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival, when Berkeley, California, became the first city to make the change. Earlier protests inspired the movement, including the annual National Day of Mourning in Plymouth, Massachusetts, held on Thanksgiving to challenge the myth of peaceful coexistence between Native people and the English settlers, the Pilgrims. Well, today Native American communities are celebrating

Indigenous Peoples' Day across the country with sunrise ceremonies at New York City's Randall's Island to California's Alcatraz Island, the former prison and site of a historic Native American occupation and protest against U.S. treatment of indigenous people 50 years ago.

Well, for more, we go to Iakowi:he'ne' Oakes. She is Snipe Clan, Mohawk of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and executive director of the American Indian Community House here in New York City.

We welcome to *Democracy Now!* It's great to have you with us. Can you talk about the significance of this day? We are here in New York. There is a statue to Christopher Columbus in Columbus Circle, and it is not one of those cities that is recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day.

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Well, this day, Indigenous Peoples' Day, is – it's Indigenous Peoples' Day every day for me and my community. You know, we have to fight colonization and try to maintain our identity every single day, because it's been stripped away from us through efforts and, I guess, just what we've been through and what's been taken from us from Columbus and his crusade. At the American Indian Community House, one of my goals is to sort of reclaim space, our culture, and find a place and presence within society today. So, for us, it's not just a day to celebrate us; it's a day to remind everybody else to take responsibility and step up and rescind things like the Doctrine of Discovery.

AMY GOODMAN: You wrote about the Native American population in New York in a *New York Daily News* [article](#), "What New York City's indigenous people deserve." You explain that among cities, New York has the largest population of indigenous peoples. Can you explain the diversity of this population?

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Well, from what we know at the Community House, we represent up to 73 different tribal nations

in New York City. And based on the census, there's 118,000 Native Americans in New York City. Overall, the entire Native population in the U.S., 70% of Natives – of the Native population are urban Natives, and New York City being the largest population of all, of all urban Natives. So, for us to be here and to not have a permanent space or a Native center or any sort of equity, and just erased out of society and culture, it's a tough time for us right now. Right now it's like we're fighting every single day with the system, and we're not heard of, you know. But days like this, Indigenous Peoples' Day, is a reminder to everybody else that we're still here.

AMY GOODMAN: Can explain what the Manna-hatta Fund is?

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Oh, the Manna-hatta Fund is great. So, that was a few people, what we call settlers, using the language, if you visit the site at MannaHattaFund.org. They approached the Community House and worked with a few of our board members in trying to figure out a way that they could contribute to the Native American community in New York City. And together, with all their good minds, they came up with this fund. And it's a sort of campaign where you could donate. You could donate \$5, \$10 or a larger amount. You could do this online. You could make a pledge, which would be every single month, sort of like the Bernie campaign, you know, \$24 a month, that one initial investment, or it could carry on through the whole year. It's – that's what it is. It's great, yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: As you speak, we're going to run a slideshow that was taken yesterday at Randall's Island. And if you can talk about the ceremonies that are taking place? Right now, as we speak, there is a sunrise ceremony both at Randall's Island and also Alcatraz, across the country. This is the period, 50 years ago, of a uprising.

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Well, this is a big year, 50 years. It's the 50-year anniversary for Alcatraz. It's the 50-year anniversary for the American Indian Community House. With all our

ceremonies, we celebrate life. We celebrate what creation has given to us. We celebrate, you know, the water, the Earth, the moon, the stars, the skies, the animals – all things that we depend on and need and coexist with equally. In Alcatraz, from what I know, they are taking canoes, and they're going to visit the island, and they're having their ceremony there, in unison with the ceremonies happening here.

AMY GOODMAN: Also, the Doctrine of Discovery, if you could explain what that is? Last year, representatives of indigenous groups in the U.S. and Canada went to the Vatican to request a retraction of the Doctrine of Discovery. Explain.

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Well, that was – that's the beginning of it all. In 1493, that's when the Doctrine of Discovery was created.

AMY GOODMAN: Pope Alexander VI papal bull.

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And what that does is that gives dominion for white men or for Christians over non-Christians – rather, indigenous people, us. If you're not Christian, if you're not Christian people, you're not considered humans, or there's nobody there occupying that land, or we basically can't have title to land if we're indigenous and non-Christian. And that's always been the root cause of all of this right now, colonization. That's the number one tool.

AMY GOODMAN: Finally, the American Indian Community House, that you are the head of, it's also the 50th anniversary.

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: Explain its origins and what you're doing.

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Well, 50 years ago, they were basically doing – battling the same fight where we are today. We're trying to reclaim our culture. We're trying to maintain our presence and

trying to exercise our strengths and authority for the future and trying to regain title also. And one of those ways is, for me, one of the directions I want to focus on is bringing attention to the Doctrine of Discovery. But throughout the past 50 years, it's been a little bit of a struggle. There was some support, and now there's none. Fifty years later, the Community House is in a place where we have little to no funding. Ninety-seven percent of our funding was taken from us in 2017.

AMY GOODMAN: By?

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: By the federal government. So, here we are today —

AMY GOODMAN: Which coincides exactly with the time that indigenous people around the country have been leading the struggle against extractive industries —

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: — and are on the forefront of the battle around the climate crisis.

IAKOWI:HE'NE' OAKES: Yeah, yeah. We're a threat. The moment things like the Doctrine of Discovery are rescinded, that challenges all title of land and authority.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, I want to thank you so much for being with us. Iakowi:he'ne' Oakes is Snipe Clan, a Mohawk of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, executive director of the American Indian Community House in New York.

When we come back, we look at the record of this year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Stay with us.

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