

Listuguj railway blockade still present

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LISTUGUJ: – The railway blockade that started on February 10 by the Mi'gmaqs of Listuguj was still in effect on February 28, its 19th day, as talks were held in Smithers, British Columbia, between the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs and ministers of the Canadian government, in an attempt to reach an agreement on the Coastal GasLink issue.

The Listuguj demonstrators were still expecting the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to move out of the Wet'suwet'en traditional land, as requested by that British Columbia First Nation's hereditary chiefs, and a satisfactory dialogue that would satisfy the needs of those chiefs, who have expressed for a decade opposition to the Coastal GasLink pipeline project.

On February 25, the Listuguj blockade demonstrators showed signs of "good faith" (the expression they used when they removed from the tracks some of the items they had put there, mainly wood for their fire). That happened at the beginning of the afternoon. They did not commit to let a train pass later that day though, as expected by the staff of the Gaspésie Railway Society.

One of the protesters, Austin Caplin, explained that

the "good faith" move to clear the tracks was a way to show that "we can let trains pass," even if the intent was not to materialize the same day.

When asked if the railway would be blocked that night and the following night (February 25 to the 26), Mr. Caplin answered "certainly."

Members of the Listuguj Police Department spoke with the protesters that afternoon. By that time, the press had been asked to keep a significant distance. For an hour, journalists settled for a spot located about 100 metres from the railway before being allowed to move closer.

Listuguj Mi'gmaq Government council member Chad Gedeon assisted with communication between the press and the demonstrators for a couple of hours on February 25.

"My role is to make sure that everything is done in a peaceful way," he told The Gaspé SPEC. Mr. Gedeon seemed under the impression that the blockade would be lifted in two days later.

However, the protesters regularly follow what is going on elsewhere, including Kahnawake, Tyendinaga (Ontario), Quebec City and in British Columbia. Although they did not want to be quoted directly, it was obvious they did not like what they were hearing from

the federal and provincial governments.

It became especially evident when Canada's Minister of Transport Marc Garneau made remarks about the Mohawks of Tyendinaga, when Quebec Premier François Legault suspected the Mohawks of Kahnawake of possessing AK-47 machine guns and when the Quebec government was granted with an injunction to free the tracks in Listuguj.

"If Sûreté du Québec policemen come here to enforce that injunction, and although I favour the dismantling of the blockade, they (police officers) will find me in front of them," said a Listuguj citizen who want to remain anonymous. He was not a protester.

The director general of the Gaspésie Railway Society, Luc Lévesque, is anxious to see the protesters leave the location along the tracks "because the situation is scrapping years of work done by a non-profit organization," but at the same time he favours a peaceful resolution of the crisis. "Our railway will still pass here after the crisis. We must keep a good relationship."

Listuguj's Gary Metallic, hereditary chief of the Mi'gmaqs' Seventh district, called Gespe'gewa'gi, which includes

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the Gaspé Peninsula, was regularly asked by the protesters to act as spokesperson for the group and he collaborated.

As a pivotal stakeholder of the 1998 logging crisis, Mr. Metallic used his experience to make the link between the protesters and the other Mi'gmaq hereditary chiefs.

"They (the protesters) have the full support of the chiefs as long as it remains peaceful," stated Gary Metallic to the SPEC.

He remarks that Prime Minister "Justin Trudeau lost the opportunity to solve many problems because he went to the AFN (Assembly of First Nations), however, the AFN members are an arm of the Indian Act. They are not a Native organization."

Gary Metallic states that if the governments had integrated the hereditary chiefs in the talks pertaining to the relevant Native issues, numerous problems would have been avoided.

"The resources are ours too. That's why we are here today," he concludes.

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