Ihumātao: Reclaiming the land and resisting settler colonial capitalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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In Aotearoa, one of the major forms of social struggle is the indigenous Māori struggling to reclaim the land stolen from them by the New Zealand colonial government as part of the capitalist settler colonisation of Aotearoa. Since 2015, the greatest land struggle in a decade has been happening at Ihumātao in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, where Māori and non-Māori from the Save Our Unique Landscape/SOUL campaign have been occupying the land to stop the capitalist construction firm Fletcher Building from beginning a socially and environmentally harmful housing development and return the land to mana whenua. This land struggle is the most recent event in Ihumātao's long history.

800 years ago, Ihumātao was one of the first places where Māori arrived and established settlements in Aotearoa, in the area now known as the Ōtuataua Stonefields. There, they cultivated 8,000 hectares of land to grow kūmara, taro, yams and gourds to feed themselves. They also fed the British settlers/Pākehā when they began to colonise Tāmaki Makaurau to create Auckland following the signing of Te Tiriti O Waitangi between some Māori hapu/sub-tribes and the British Empire. However, such co-operation between Māori and Pākehā did not last, as the drive to accumulate capital inherent to capitalism led to the New Zealand government using various means to transform communal Māori land into state and private land, including the Native Land Court, land sales and war, in Aotearoa's version of the enclosure of the commons.

This came to a head when the Waikato War, part of the broader New Zealand Wars, began in 1863 between the New Zealand government, led by Governor George Grey, their Māori allies the Kūpapa/Queenitanga and the Kingitanga/King movement that wanted Te Tiriti to be honoured, began. During the war, a British official was sent to Ihumātao and demanded that the Māori there take an oath of allegiance to the Crown and give up arms or be expelled to the Waikato. The Māori there refused, and in response the Crown illegally confiscated Ihumātao and in 1869 gave it to a Pākehā family – the Wallaces – to be developed into a capitalist farm, while the Māori there were left landless and destitute.

Over the course of the 20th century, while the Wallaces were running their farm, in the surrounding land from 1960 to 2000 the Māngere Wastewater Treatment Plant was built, polluting

the air, water and sea bed, and volcanoes are quarried for airport construction and Auckland's road network. In 2009, Auckland Airport's second runway construction led to the bulldozing of a 600 year old urupa/grave site on the Manukau Harbour foreshore, unearthing 89 graves. In 2012, Auckland Council tried to make the land a public space, but this was challenged in the Environment Court and they had to rezone the land for future economic development. In February 2014, the local iwi/tribe Te Kawerau ā Maki signed a treaty settlement with the Government to settle breaches of Te Tirti by the Government. In July 2014, the Government and Auckland Council designated 32 hectares adjacent to the Otuataua Stonefields Historic Reserve as Special Housing Area/SHA 62 for a future housing development.

When this was announced, Ihumātao local Pania Newton, along with several of her cousins, formed SOUL in 2015 to stop the rezoning. In 2016, the Wallaces sold the land to capitalist construction firm Fletcher Building, which planned to construct 480 homes. In response, in November 2016 SOUL began their occupation of the land and demanded that Fletcher Building end their plans and that SHA 62 be dissolved. A month later, Joe Hawke, leader of the Bastion Point occupation, visited to support the occupation and provide advice. For the next three years, SOUL would use a diversity of tactics to try and stop Fletcher's plans, including going to the United Nations, taking Fletcher's to the Environment Court as well as taking petitions to Parliament in Wellington/Pōneke and to Auckland Council with this all being complemented with an extensive social media campaign. However, none of these measures succeeded, with Fletcher's development going ahead. In response, Te Kawerau ā Maki negotiated with Fletcher Building to set aside some of the homes to be for the iwi and then supported the development, claiming that this was the best deal possible and that SOUL weren't mana whenua.

With no more obstacles facing it, Fletcher's now tried to begin construction at Ihumātao. Police were sent on 23rd July 2019 to Ihumātao to serve eviction notices and arrest three protestors. When this happened, the three years of SOUL's campaigning now bore fruit, with hundreds arriving to blockade Ihumātao to prevent construction from beginning. Members from Tāmaki Makaurau Anarchists being amongst them. Due to holding this blockade the Government, after initially saying that they wouldn't intervene on 24th July then said on 26th July that construction at Ihumātao would stop while a solution was being negotiated between Te Kawerau ā Maki, Fletchers and Auckland Council.

Unfortunately SOUL was not invited to negotiations and they continued the blockade due to this as well as due to the Police and Fletcher's remaining at Ihumātao, with the katiaki/protectors of Ihumātao being able to push the blockade line closer to Ihumātao while also facing an increased police presence by 5th August. On the following day, there was a national day of actions in solidarity with the reclamation of Ihumātao. This helped keep pressure on Fletcher's and the Government after the Kingitanga offered to hold a hui between SOUL and Te Kawerau ā Maki to come to a common position on Ihumātao that both sides accepted.

As the negotiations continued, the blockade held, with the majority of the Police withdrawing from Ihumātao on 16th August, while SOUL organised a hikoi/march to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Mount Albert office to get her to visit Ihumātao, which she refused to do. The negotiations ended on 18th September, with SOUL and Te Kawerau ā Maki agreeing that Ihumātao should be returned to mana whenua. Since mid-September 2019, negotiations have continued, although SOUL have been locked out of them. There are positive signs that a resolution may be reached soon however, with the Government stating on 16th November that it's considering loaning Auckland Council money to purchase Ihumātao from Fletcher's to turn it into a public

space, while Pania Newton announced on 23rd December that a resolution would be announced soon. This great news led to Ihumātao having a very Meri Kirhimete/Merry Christmas in 2019.

The struggle for Ihumātao in 2020 started well with Fletcher's removing their fences at Ihumātao. In addition, there was an expectation that a resolution would be reached before Waitangi Day, with the Kingitangi lowering their flag from Ihumātao to symbolise, as their work in helping to resolve this struggle had finished. Unfortunately, Waitangi Day 2020 came and went without a resolution being announced. However, the Kingitanga has said that a resolution was imminent, but that some work still needed to be done to finalise the resolution, so this long struggle may at last be coming to an end.

Looking back, SOUL's campaign to #Protect Ihumātao has been a phenomenal success, with them being able to transform their initially small reclamation action into a direct action campaign that has created a mass movement in Tāmaki Makaurau and across Aotearoa to stop Fletcher's housing development backed by an excellent social media campaign. It's also led to a new approach to Māori politics, with a new generation seeking to engage in direct action to return stolen land instead of relying on corporate iwi structures (to the exclusion of hapu) negotiating with the Government to get treaty settlements that provide monetary compensation and only return Government land, enriching a new Māori capitalist class. However, this struggle has not yet ended, and the Government's actions must be viewed with scepticism, as they will do anything to stop this dispute being used to as precedent to return private land to Māori in future treaty settlements. If that happens, then all stolen land in Aotearoa could possibly be returned to Māori, destabilising one of the pillars of settler colonial capitalism in Aotearoa: private and state land ownership. No matter what happens, SOUL's campaign to reclaim Ihumātao has put into practice the anti-colonial cry from the Māori rangatira/chief Rewi Maniapoto during the Waikato War: 'Ka whawhai tonu mātou, Ake! Ake! Ake! – We will fight on for ever and ever!'

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