

Native American Activist Winona LaDuke at Standing Rock: It's Time to Move On from Fossil Fuels

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TOPICS

Dakota Access Pipeline
Indigenous
Natural Gas & Oil Drilling
Native American

GUESTS

WINONA LADUKE

longtime Native American activist and executive director of the group Honor the Earth.

While Democracy Now! was covering the Standing Rock standoff earlier this month, we spoke to Winona LaDuke, longtime Native American activist and executive director of the group Honor the Earth. She lives and works on the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota. She spent years successfully fighting the Sandpiper pipeline, a pipeline similar to Dakota Access. We met her right outside the Red Warrior Camp, where she has set up her tipi. Red Warrior is one of the encampments where thousands of Native Americans representing hundreds of tribes from across the U.S. and Canada are currently resisting the pipeline's construction.

TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman. While *Democracy Now!* was covering the standoff at Standing Rock earlier this month, on Labor Day weekend, we spoke to Winona LaDuke, longtime Native American activist, executive director of the group Honor the Earth. She lives and works on the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota. She spent years successfully fighting a pipeline similar to Dakota Access, the Sandpiper pipeline. We met her right outside the Red Warrior Camp, where she has set up her tipi. Red Warrior is one of the encampments where thousands of Native Americans, representing hundreds of tribes from across the U.S. and Canada, are currently resisting the pipeline's construction. Her tipi is painted with animals that are threatened by climate change. We began by asking Winona LaDuke why communities are now protesting the pipeline.

WINONA LADUKE: It's time to end the fossil fuel infrastructure. I mean, these people on this reservation, they don't have adequate infrastructure for their houses. They don't have adequate energy infrastructure. They don't have adequate highway infrastructure. And yet they're looking at a \$3.9 billion pipeline that will not help them. It will only help oil companies. And so that's why we're here. You know, we're here to protect this land.

AMY GOODMAN: Explain what happened to the Sandpiper pipeline, the one that you protested, the one that you opposed.

WINONA LADUKE: What we opposed, yeah. So, for four years, the Enbridge company said that they absolutely needed a pipeline that would go from Clearbrook, Minnesota, to Superior, Wisconsin. That was the critical and only possible route. They proposed a brand-new route that would go through the heart of our best wild rice lakes and territory, skirting the reservations, but within our treaty territory. They did not consult with us, and they made some serious errors in their process. They underestimated what was going to happen there.

And so, for four years, we battled them in the Minnesota regulatory process, which is a process which is more advanced and slightly more functional than North Dakota's regulatory process, which, from what I can see, is largely nonexistent. And in that process, we attended every hearing. We intervened legally. We rode our horses against the current of the oil. We had ceremonies. And they cancelled the pipeline. That's what they did, after four years' very, very ardent opposition by Minnesota citizens, tribal governments, tribal people, you know, on that line.

And that pipeline, you know, big problem—we still have six pipelines in northern Minnesota to go to Superior, the furthest-inland port. But their new proposals are not going to happen there. Enbridge has said that they still want to continue with their proposals for line three. The first pipeline they want, they want to abandon. The beginning of a whole new set of problems in North America, the abandoning of 50-year-old pipelines, with no regulatory clarity as to who is responsible. And so we are opposing them on that, that they cannot abandon, and they cannot—they still cannot get a new route.

But when they announced that, you know, in my area, I could have said, "Hey, good luck, y'all. We beat it here. Good luck." You know? But, no, we said we're

going to follow them out here, too, because we believe that—you know, we could spend our lives fighting one pipeline after another after another, but someone needs to challenge the problem and say, "This is not the way to go, America. This is not the way to go for any of us." So, we came out here to support these people.

AMY GOODMAN: So talk about everyone who's out here.

WINONA LADUKE: There are a lot of people out here, you know? It's very funny, because I feel like I've been like the Standing Rock switchboard, the travel guide, for the past two weeks. You know, everybody hits me up on Facebook, calls me up: "Hey, LaDuke, I want to bring out this. I got some winter coats. You know, what should I do?" I was like, "Oh, my gosh!" You know?

So, a lot of people are coming here, united. You know, so what I know is out here is like—you know, I go walk in here, and I've seen people from the—you know, from Wounded Knee in 1973. I've seen people I worked with in opposing uranium mining in the Black Hills in the 1970s and '80s, you know, out here. I mean, I've been at this a while. You know, it's like Old Home Week out here. I've seen people from Oklahoma that opposed the Keystone XL pipeline, and Nebraska. And I've seen people from, you know, out in our territory that are opposing the pipelines here. The tribal chairman of Fond du Lac is here, and, you know, a whole host of Native and non-Native people. And there are a lot of people that just do not believe that this should happen anymore in this country, that are very willing to put themselves on the line, non-Indian people, you know, as well as tribal members, and they are here. And it is a beautiful place to defend.

AMY GOODMAN: For people who are watching in New York and Louisiana, in California and India, China and South Africa, why does this matter to them?

WINONA LADUKE: This matters because it's time to move on from fossil fuels. You know, this is the same battle that they have everywhere else. You know, each day or each week, there's some new leak, there's some new catastrophe in the fossil fuel industry, as well as the ongoing and growing catastrophe of climate change. The fact that there is no rain in Syria has directly to do with these fossil fuel companies. You know, all of the catastrophes that are happening elsewhere in the world has to do with the fact that North America is retooling its infrastructure and going after the dirtiest oil in the world—the tar sands oil and the oil out of North Dakota, the fracked oil—rather than—you know, they were

working with Venezuela's—it also has to do with crushing Venezuela, because Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world. And rather than do business with Venezuela, they were bound and determined to take oil from places that did not want to give it up, and create this filthy infrastructure. So, this carbon—this oil is very heavy in carbon and will add hundreds of millions of tons of CO₂ to the environment, if these pipelines are allowed through. So, that is—you know, it affects everybody.

AMY GOODMAN: Now, some tribes are for the pipeline. Can you describe the division?

WINONA LADUKE: You know, I don't know that I would say some tribes are for it. I would say some interests in Indian country have been for the pipeline. I mean, historically, the Three Affiliated Tribes is an oil-producing tribe, but they came down here to support the opposition to the pipeline. They came down there. Their whole tribal council came down here a couple of days ago. You know, but the fact is, is that, you know, some tribes have been forced into production of fossil fuels. Eighty-five percent of the Navajo economy, for instance, is fossil fuel-based. About the same percentage of the Fort Berthold economy is fossil fuel-based.

So, you know, just to give a little historic picture: You come out here with your smallpox, and you wipe out 95 percent of the people, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara people, in the early 1800s. They live along these villages, you know, just trying to hang in there. Then you come out here, and you flood their lands. And the agricultural crops that they produced are now owned by Monsanto and Syngenta as trademarked varieties that they created. Right? And then you're out here in North Dakota, and everybody in the country flies over North Dakota and looks down and says, "Well, that's North Dakota." Nobody comes out here. And so stuff continues out here for a hundred years, where these people are treated like third-class citizens, you know, where they have no running water in their houses, and they have oil companies coming out here. And you have high rates of abuse and violence against women and children, and it accelerates and increases in the oil fields, until you have an epidemic of drugs, which now hits this community. This community doesn't get any benefit from oil, but the meth and heroin that came out of those fields is here, you know? Because those dealers came up here, and then they saw these Indian people, and they said, "Well, we'll just go there." And so these reservations are full of it. You know? And then you say, you know, to that tribe up there, the BIA cuts some backyard deals and starts oil extraction. And so, then you—

AMY GOODMAN: The Bureau of Indian Affairs.

WINONA LADUKE: Bureau of Indian Affairs. And then you end up with oil—you end up with haves and have-nots in the oil fields. And you end up with a tribe that now has oil revenues that are coming in. And they look out there, frankly, and they say, "You know? Things haven't been going too well for us, so we're going to sign a few more of these leases, because, after all, you know, nothing has ever worked out well for us. And so, we're going to get a little bit of money." And that's how you get—you know, you force people into that, with a gun to their head, and then they end up destroying their land, you know, which is what is happening up there on that reservation. And they've had huge investigations into corruption at the leadership. But, you know, you force poor people. You force people into that situation, and that's a perfect storm.

AMY GOODMAN: You've talked and written about Native Americans having PTSD, post-traumatic stress syndrome.

WINONA LADUKE: Yeah, we have ongoing; I didn't finish it, I still have it. You know, you say "Enbridge," and I get this little like quirk, you know, and because the Indian wars are far from over out here. But, you know, what you get is intergenerational trauma, is what it is known as, historic trauma. And other people have it. But you have a genetic memory, and you look out there, and you see—every day you wake up, and you see that your land was flooded. And that big power line that runs through this land, that doesn't benefit you. You still have to—you know, everything that is out here was done at your expense, but you still have to pay for it. And every day you go out there, and some—you know, you got a roadblock, that the white people put up, coming into your reservation. And every day you go out there, and you look at your houses, and you see that you've got crumbling infrastructure, and nobody cares about it. And you've got a meth epidemic, and you've got the highest suicide rates in the country, but nobody pays attention. You know, and so you just try to survive. That's what you're trying to do. Like 90 percent of my community, generally, I would say, is just trying to survive.

You know, I mean, in my community, we have rice. We still have our wild rice. And we can go, and we can harvest wild rice. And we can be Anishinaabe people. You know, we can still live off of our land. You know, these people have a much tougher time living off of their land. The buffalo were wiped out, you know? But this year is their stand. This is their stand. They've got a chance to not have one

more bad thing happen to them. And from my perspective, my perspective is, is that \$3.9 billion pipeline, these guys don't need a pipeline. What they need is solar. What they need is wind. Look at this wind. You know, what they need—they have like class 7 wind out here. What they need is solar on all their houses, solar thermal. They need housing that works for people. They need energy justice. This is this chance, America, to say, "Look, this community does not need a pipeline. What this community needs is real energy independence." They call this energy independence, you know, shoving a pipeline down people's throats, so that Canadian oil companies can benefit, and, you know, a bunch of people can—the world can worsen. That is not energy independence. Energy independence is when you have solar. Energy independence is when you have wind. Energy independence is when you have some control over your future. That's what these people want.

AMY GOODMAN: That was Winona LaDuke, longtime Anishinaabe activist from White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota.

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