

Political prisoner and Native American activist Leonard Peltier denied parole again

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Leonard Peltier, the Native American activist who was framed up for the deaths of two FBI agents in 1975 and has been in prison for nearly a half-century, was denied his request for parole by the US Parole Commission on Tuesday.

Peltier, a leader of the American Indian Movement (AIM), is serving two consecutive life sentences at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, for two counts of first-degree murder in the deaths of agents Ronald Arthur Williams and Jack Ross Coler. The agents were killed during a shoot-out between the FBI and AIM on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota on June 26, 1975.

The denial of Peltier's parole request is a continuation of the government vendetta against the 79-year-old activist for a crime he never committed. The *World Socialist Web Site* denounces the parole commission's decision and calls on workers and youth throughout the world to demand his immediate release.

The shoot-out at Pine Ridge was the result of US government repression and law enforcement provocations against Native Americans that reached a high-point in 1973, after AIM organized the occupation of the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

Peltier, who was born in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and grew up on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation, became active in Native American social and political causes after he moved to Seattle in 1965.

He joined AIM in 1972 after he learned of factional tensions at Pine Ridge. By the time he traveled to Wounded Knee in 1975 to deliver supplies to the occupiers, he had already been framed up for attempted murder of a police officer during an AIM protest outside the federal building in Milwaukee. He was later acquitted of this charge.

According to government reports, the two FBI agents

Williams and Coler were killed after pursuing a red pickup or van at high speeds onto the Pine Ridge ranch of the Jumping Bull family where AIM members and other Indians had encamped. It turned out that the vehicle they were chasing was a white over orange Chevy Suburban with three Native Americans in it, including Leonard Peltier.

The agents were driving separate unmarked cars and got out of their vehicles with guns drawn while the Suburban also stopped, and the occupants got out. A gunfight involving handguns and AR-15 style assault rifles ensued with Native Americans from the camp joining in. Government documents allege there were 47 shooters in all, including Peltier. The FBI maintained that after both agents sustained serious wounds, an individual who was a Native American approached and fatally shot them both at close range with a high powered rifle.

Following the shootout, Peltier and several others fled to Canada. On December 22, 1975, he was named to the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list. On February 6, 1976, he was arrested, along with Frank Blackhorse, by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police at the Smallboy's Reserve/Smallboy Camp Hinton, Alberta. He was transported to Calgary and then taken to the Oakalla Prison Farm in Vancouver, British Columbia.

In December 1976, Peltier was extradited to the US from Canada based on documents supplied by the FBI which were later shown to contain false information derived from coerced testimony. He was charged with executing the two agents and put on trial in Fargo, North Dakota, where the government expected a supportive jury after the FBI launched a campaign to scare Fargo residents into thinking that the AIM would descend on the town during the trial and carry out a massacre. SWAT teams were sent in to guard the jury

24 hours a day.

The jury conviction of Peltier on April 18, 1977, was the product of a US government conspiracy. The trial included federal prosecutors hiding evidence that exonerated Peltier. The FBI threatened and coerced witnesses into lying who later recanted their testimony. The ballistics evidence that the FBI claimed linked Peltier to the crime was disputed by experts, but this information was not disclosed during the trial.

When the government's original case against Peltier fell apart after these facts came to light, it abruptly changed the charges to aiding and abetting whoever did kill the agents—on the grounds that he was one of dozens of people present when the shoot-out occurred.

Leonard Peltier has maintained his innocence consistently over the decades. In 1999, he told CNN correspondent Mark Potter, “I didn't kill those agents, I didn't see who killed those agents, and if I did know, I'm not telling. But I don't know. That's the point.” Peltier said he fired shots during the gun battle but, “I know I didn't hit them. I know I didn't.”

Every legal attempt by Peltier and his attorneys to overturn his wrongful conviction has been denied by the US court system. A previous parole request in 2009 was also denied. Meanwhile, campaigns for clemency from Democrat Bill Clinton in 2001 and for a commuted sentence from Barack Obama in 2016 were denied just before each of them left office. At every stage, a campaign by FBI agents was mounted to demand that Peltier be kept behind bars.

Peltier will be eligible for another parole hearing in June 2026, according to a Parole Commission representative.

Responding to the decision on Tuesday, Peltier's attorney Kevin Sharp, said in a statement, “Today's announcement continues the injustice of this long ordeal for Leonard Peltier. This decision is a missed opportunity for the United States to finally recognize the misconduct of the FBI and send a message to Indian Country regarding the impacts of the federal government's actions and policies of the 1970s.”

In a statement FBI Director Christopher Wray claimed, “No amount of prison time will ever change the facts surrounding the murders of FBI Special Agents Coler and Williams.” Well aware that Peltier has been systematically denied his basic rights, Wray went on to assert that the political prisoner had been

afforded due process “time and again.”

Paul O'Brien, Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, which had representatives at Peltier's trial in 1977 and has long campaigned for his freedom, said keeping him locked up is a human rights travesty. “Not only are there ongoing, unresolved concerns about the fairness of his trial, he has spent nearly 50 years in prison, is approaching 80 years old, and suffers from several chronic health problems,” O'Brien said.



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