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Halftown Must Go: Movement Grows to Remove Clint Halftown's Designation as "Federal Representative" of Cayuga Nation

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) may find themselves flooded with correspondence of all sorts demanding an end to their recognition of Clint Halftown as the "federal representative" of the Cayuga Nation. Some of this correspondence is the result of Gayogohónq' (traditional Cayuga Nation)-led efforts to remind local legislatures of their Council's authority as the rightful governing body of the Nation. Meanwhile, non-Indigenous organizers have been calling, emailing, tweeting, and even faxing officials within the BIA, and its parent agency the Department of Interior (DOI), and will continue to do so throughout the week. As a U.S. federal executive administrative agency, the BIA has the ability to revoke the "federal representative" designation at the center of this controversy.

Objections to Halftown's leadership are manyfold. His power is primarily derived from his designation by the BIA as "federal representative," a position created and imposed by the U.S. government on all federally-recognized Nations and Tribes. However, the Cayuga Nation Council of Chiefs, as well as the Clanmothers and citizens to whom they are accountable, have long refused Clint Halftown's ability to speak and act in the name of the Nation, and have internally revoked his designation as "federal representative" - a decision the BIA has refused to acknowledge.

In February of 2020, Halftown ordered the overnight demolition of a longhouse, daycare center, businesses, dwellings, gardens and fruit trees caretaken by the community of Gayogohónq' citizens in Seneca Falls. Previously, he established a Nation police force - comprised almost exclusively of former New York State Police officers - which has been attempting to serve money judgments on Nation citizens living in Nation-owned homes. These judgments were issued by his self-proclaimed "Tribal Court" on Route 89 in Seneca Falls, an entity presided over by two former County Supreme Court judges. The Gayogohónq' do not recognize Halftown's police force or his "Tribal Court" as legitimate entities.

The Gayogohónq' have been working for over a decade to get the U.S. government to rescind its designation of Halftown as "federal representative" of the Cayuga Nation. "I've been dealing with Clint Halftown for eleven years," says Cayuga mom Kelsey VanEvery, who came to live on Gayogohónq' territory in 2010. "So to have him out would be a very good thing... We'd be able to live in a lot more peace, because it's just been chaos."

Now efforts toward Halftown's removal are finding new traction. Gayogohónq' citizens and Council Chiefs, as well as non-Indigenous organizers, have been meeting with County representatives within the Nation's 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua-guaranteed reservation, imploring them to work with the Gayogohónq' Council of Chiefs (as opposed to Halftown), and to communicate as much to the BIA. To some avail - the Seneca County Board of Supervisors voted in their August 10th Board meeting to send just such a letter to the BIA. Organizers also attended the August 24th Cayuga County Legislature meeting, presenting a similar call to action and pushing for further dialogue between the County and the Council of Chiefs. Meanwhile, in alignment with these efforts, non-Indigenous organizers based in Ithaca and

Rochester have kicked off a “Week of Action” under the banner of “#HalftownMustGo.” The Week of Action began on Sunday, August 22nd, with an online petition demanding that the BIA cease recognizing Clint Halftown as the “federal representative” of the Cayuga Nation.

The idea for the #HalftownMustGo campaign developed from a Gayogohó:nq’ community meeting on August 12th attended by two members of the Gayogohó:nq’ (aka Cayuga Nation) Council of Chiefs, Gayogohó:nq’ community members, and two non-Gayogohó:nq’ participants. The non-Gayogohó:nq’ participants have been part of ongoing “solidarity camping” that has been happening since May, 2021. Non-Gayogohó:nq’ allies have been camping in front of the residences of many Gayogohó:nq’ families around Seneca Falls and Varick in an effort to dissuade Halftown and his police from acting to enforce the “Tribal Court” judgments.

HalftownMustGo social media pages describe how their campaign’s process is guided by a more-than-400-year-old Treaty called the Two Row Wampum. “Initially established between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Dutch settlers in 1613, and later extended to the fledgling United States,” their page says, “the Two Row Wampum commits to noninterference in one another’s governance affairs while proceeding in relationships of peace and friendship.” Since the Week of Action specifically involves lobbying U.S. government officials, participants at the August 12th meeting agreed that the particular responsibility for coordinating this campaign lies with settler (non-Indigenous) organizers. However, in an effort to foreground the voices of the Gayogohó:nq’ Council of Chiefs and community organizers, these non-Gayogohó:nq’ organizers are intentionally eschewing public attention as individuals, preferring instead to speak and identify collectively.

In a video posted to @HalftownMustGo pages, Gayogohó:nq’ Bear Clan member Judi Jimerson says, “One thing that could help us -- Cayuga Nation, the Cayuga people -- is if maybe one person could just call and just say -- that this isn’t right -- you know, what Clint is doing. It isn’t right.” On Monday afternoon, organizers reported that an exasperated operator at the Seneca County Sheriff’s Office - targeted for that day’s “phone zap” - told a caller that “a lot of people” had been calling their office that day to leave messages about the situation with Halftown.

A schedule of events for the week released on social media even includes plans for participants to contact President Joe Biden on Friday, August 27. The Council of Chiefs’ letter invokes the Treaty of Canandaigua to request a meeting with the President, a privilege the Treaty protects as part of the Nation-to-Nation relationship between the Cayuga Nation and the United States of America.

“There is no negotiating with Halftown,” Dylan Seneca, Cayuga Nation citizen and community organizer recently stated to the Seneca County Board of Supervisors. Now, a cross-National movement is building to make sure the BIA gets the message.