

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Indigenous Peoples and Unions in Canada

Historically, unions sought to exclude Indigenous workers from employment, but some unions also extended their solidarity, and Indigenous workers were often active in unions and in strike action

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Last year, Canada celebrated its 150th birthday. The notion that Canada did not exist prior to 1867 was greeted by many Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) as insulting – to say the least. More than 600 First Nations – speaking 50 different languages – have lived in this land since thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. The Inuit reside in Canada’s extreme north. The Métis are of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry and have been a crucial part of the Canadian story from well before confederation. Certainly the fur trade, Canada’s primary nation-building enterprise, would not have succeeded without the participation of Indigenous peoples. The country’s name derives from the Iroquoian word ‘kanata’, meaning settlement or community¹. Canadian intellectual John Ralston Saul is convinced that Indigenous cultures are deeply entrenched throughout our society, distinguishing us from Europeans and Americans².

Any consideration of Indigenous peoples, wage labour and trade unions has to take place in the context of the historical experience of colonialism and its attendant racism. Colonialism involved the dispossession of Indigenous peoples’ land and resources, the erosion of their economic and political systems, constant attacks against their cultural and spiritual practices, and the incarceration of tens of thousands of Indigenous children in residential schools – where thousands were abused and died, and where they were taught that Indigenous cultures and languages were inferior to those of Europeans³. Residential schools left an intergenerational legacy of poverty, unemployment, addiction and broken lives, which still afflicts many Indigenous communities. This history is marked by the injustices inflicted on Indigenous peoples; so too is the history of their participation in the labour market.

Yesterday

Indigenous peoples were especially active as wage-workers in British Columbia in the late nineteenth century. They worked in canneries and sawmills, in mining and agriculture, on the docks and sealing boats and as domestic servants and cooks in urban centres. For a part of that period they comprised the majority of wage workers in the province⁴, and have been described as ‘essential to the capitalist development of British Columbia’⁵. John Lutz reports that ‘from 1853 through to the 1880s, two thousand to four thousand Aboriginal People canoed up to eight hundred miles to spend

part of the year in Victoria, where they comprised a significant part of the paid labour force. Entire villages would sometimes be virtually deserted in the late nineteenth century as Indigenous men, women, and even children migrated to work for wages⁶.

Indigenous peoples throughout the country worked for wages on a seasonal basis, while maintaining their involvement in traditional land-based economies, but they were pushed out of the paid labour force when non-Indigenous workers arrived. There is a long history of union efforts to exclude Indigenous workers from employment in order to preserve jobs for non-Indigenous workers⁷.

Indigenous peoples were however often active in unions and in strike action. There are reports of Indigenous fishermen supporting strikes on the Fraser River in 1893, and addressing rallies ‘in support of the striking fishermen’. Indigenous longshoremen played a key role in 1906 in the formation of a local of the Industrial Workers of the World⁸. Indigenous women participated when they travelled hundreds of miles to pick hops around Puget Sound. Although not represented by a union, these workers ‘were known to strike for wages’⁹.

There are also examples of unions extending solidarity to Indigenous workers and demanding justice on their behalf. In 1962, 80 Indigenous workers from Norway House and Split Lake picketed the Inco mine in Thompson, Manitoba, demanding the chance to work for wages. Inco resisted, but the union, the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, supported the Indigenous picketers who were demanding the right to work. In a telegram to the *Winnipeg Free Press* the union wrote: ‘Indians [sic] all the way from Nelson House are parading at the International Nickel Company’s gates demanding their right to work. Many of these people were the first here, clearing the land where the company now stands. Now that the dirty work is finished they feel they have been cast aside. They want the same rights and privileges as their white brothers’¹⁰.

Today

As Leslie Spillett — an Indigenous leader in Winnipeg and former trade union leader — confirmed in an interview with the authors, some Indigenous people see unions as another colonial institution, engaged in practices at odds with Indigenous cultures. It is true that historically unions have acted in the interests of non-Indigenous workers, failing to adequately represent the interests

of Indigenous workers, and even actively excluding them from paid employment.

Today's unions are working to eradicate those colonial and racist tendencies. Many are trying to incorporate Indigenous members in respectful ways, but much work remains to be done. A study of Indigenous experiences in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), found that racism directed at Indigenous workers was a dominant theme¹¹.

We found the same in our research with the CUPE Local 500, representing City of Winnipeg employees¹². This demonstrates that there remains considerable work in getting Indigenous members engaged with their union. In keeping with this lack of engagement, not many members participated in our study; those who did, however, were generally pro-union. As one Indigenous worker said, "I have many, many times been grateful that we have a union. I believe in unions".

Encouragingly, none told us that they are opposed in principle to unions. A number of those we interviewed described negative experiences in previous non-union workplaces. One told us she "got screwed around quite a bit" at a previous non-union job. Another said, when asked if she is a supporter of unions, "yes, definitely, because I hear about other people and their experiences without unions and there's just nothing to protect them.... I've heard some really bad stories". A third told us, speaking about a previous non-union job, that "I've been humiliated, just put up with all kinds of terrible, terrible conditions with nowhere else to go, but at least with your union, at least you get formal policy, you get formal procedures, you get it down in writing, those are all really important things to happen".

Another member observed that unions are especially important for Indigenous peoples because in a non-union environment individuals have to make their own case for higher wages and benefits. For many Indigenous people, that is difficult: due to the damage colonialism has inflicted on their sense of self-esteem and because such individualism is inconsistent with Indigenous peoples' traditional collective orientation.

Some Indigenous workers that we interviewed expressed the concern that their culture and spirituality are not valued. They said that they would like to be able to smudge (a cleansing ceremony using the smoke from medicinal plants) in the workplace, or have an elder they could speak with, and would like to be able to take time off to attend Sundance and other traditional ceremonies that are more important to them than the dominant Christian holidays. Negotiating with the employer so that Indigenous employees can practice their traditional ceremonies would go a long way to convincing them that they are valued members of the union and of Canadian society. Despite all the good work CUPE 500 and other unions are now doing to reach out to Indigenous members, a more

concentrated effort is required to engage them more with their union, or encourage Indigenous workers to join a union.

Tomorrow

In its Final Report of 2015, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission¹³ - established to examine the historical injustices and legacy of residential schools - included the recommendation that Indigenous peoples should 'have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects'¹⁴. Clearly there is a role for unions to play in meeting that wide-ranging objective.

The blood, sweat and tears of Canada's Indigenous peoples are embedded in our institutions, our culture and our economic success. It's high time they receive their fair share. It is our hope that unions will take this challenge to heart: it could be what injects new life and purpose into the labour movement, helping to write a more honest and hopeful chapter in the Canadian story.

Notes

- 1 Laura Neilson Bonikowsky, 'The Origin of the Name Canada': <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/lets-call-itefifiga-feature>
- 2 Stephen Henighan, 'Citizen Saul'. *The Walrus*, 23 June 2017: <https://thewalrus.ca/citizen-saul>
- 3 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015. *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume One: Summary*. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company.
- 4 Knight, Rolf. 1996. *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books).
- 5 Lutz, John. 1992. 'After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-1890,' *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*. Volume 3, Number 1: 70.
- 6 Lutz, John. 2008. *Makuk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations*. Vancouver: UBC Press: 169, 189.
- 7 Lithman, George. 1984. *The Community Apart: A Case Study of a Canadian Indian Reserve Community*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press: 78; Parnaby, Andy. 2006. 'The Best Men that Ever Worked the Lumber: Aboriginal Longshoremen on Burrard Inlet, BC, 1863-1939', *The Canadian Historical Review*, 87, 1, March: 77
- 8 Knight, Rolf. 1996. *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books): 17.
- 9 Raibmon, Paige. 2006. 'The Practice of Everyday Colonialism: Indigenous Women at Work in the Hop Fields and Tourist Industry of Puget Sound', *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 3, 3: 23.
- 10 Winnipeg Free Press September 19 and 20, 1962
- 11 Mills, Suzanne and Louise Clarke. 2009. "We Will Go Side by Side with You." Labour Engagement with Aboriginal Peoples in Canada', *Geoforum*, 40: 96.
- 12 Fernandez, Lynne and Jim Silver. 2017. *Indigenous Workers and Unions: The Case of Winnipeg's CUPE 500*. Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba.
- 13 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada website: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>
- 14 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, 92(ii). 2015: 337

Today some Indigenous people continue to see unions as another colonial institution, engaged in practices at odds with Indigenous cultures. Much work remains to be done

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