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# Indigenous People, Wage Labour and Trade Unions:

## The Historical Experience in Canada

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**Indigenous People, Wage Labour and Trade  
Unions: The Historical Experience in Canada**

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# Indigenous People, Wage Labour and Trade Unions: The Historical Experience in Canada

Have Indigenous people in Canada been active as wage labourers and union members? If so, what have been the circumstances? When and where and for what reasons have Indigenous people worked for wages and been union members and how have they fared in these roles? In this short paper we examine a wide range of recent studies that have looked at various aspects of these questions.

In particular, we examine the role that unions have played with Indigenous wage workers, and with Indigenous people who have sought to work for wages, and we consider some recent initiatives that unions have taken to meet the needs of Indigenous workers. Such efforts are especially significant in an era when the numbers of Indigenous workers entering the labour market are growing rapidly, and when the labour force as a whole is becoming increasingly diverse.

It may come as a surprise to many to learn that for well over a century Indigenous people in Canada, and before that in what was to become Canada, have participated in wage labour, and in a good many cases have been members of unions. Indigenous people have typically worked for wages on a seasonal basis, while maintaining their involvement in traditional land-based econ-

omies. In some parts of the country Indigenous wage workers have been particularly important, indeed essential, to the economic development of Canada. However, these Indigenous wage workers were, in a great many cases, pushed out of the paid labour force when non-Indigenous workers arrived, and have in many cases had similarly negative experiences with unions.

Nevertheless, the fact that so many Indigenous people have been active as wage labourers and union members over the past 150 years, and that in some parts of the country have played a particularly important role as wage labourers in the country's economic development, is likely to undermine at least some aspects of the all-too-common stereotypical views of Indigenous people held by many Canadians. And the fact that the Indigenous population is growing rapidly, and that Indigenous people are likely to comprise an ever-growing share of the work force, especially in a province like Manitoba — where Indigenous people comprise 16.7 percent of the population as of 2011, and are projected to grow to be between 17.6 and 21.3 percent of the population by 2036 (Bond and Spence 2016: 26–27) — may make it especially significant to consider the steps that unions are taking and could take to

secure the support and engagement of their Indigenous members.

### Colonialism and Racism as the Context

Any consideration of Indigenous people, wage labour and trade unions has to take place in the context of the historical experience of colonialism, and the racism that was a part of that process and that persists to this day. Colonialism involved the dispossession of Indigenous peoples' land and resources, the erosion and in many cases elimination of their economic and political systems, the constant attacks against and in some cases the outlawing of their cultural and spiritual practices, and the incarceration of many tens of thousands of Indigenous children in residential schools where they were taught that Indigenous people and their cultures and languages were inferior to those of Europeans (TRC Report 2015). To justify these terribly damaging colonial practices, settlers and the settler state falsely constructed Indigenous peoples as "primitive" and even "savages." The false sense of European superiority upon which these actions and beliefs were based was the stated justification for what has been described by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as "cultural genocide" (TRC Report 2015: 1).

Forced to adapt to a new socio-economic environment in which they were systematically marginalized and demeaned and in which they had largely been dispossessed of the land and resources which had been the basis of their survival, many Indigenous people — men, women and even children — turned to wage labour. In some cases they did so because their dispossession left them with no alternatives. In other cases Indigenous people chose to engage in wage labour, doing so in ways that suited their circumstances and their determination to survive as Indigenous peoples. In still other cases, as will be shown, Indigenous people were forced by the state to engage in wage labour. Whatever were the reasons for their par-

ticipation in wage labour, Indigenous people have done so to a much greater extent than is generally recognized. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Indigenous wage labourers were, in some parts of Canada, essential to the emergence of this country's capitalist industrialization.

Nevertheless, as non-Indigenous settlers increasingly populated all parts of the country, Indigenous workers were, in a great many cases, squeezed out of the paid labour force by employers, non-Indigenous settlers and, in some cases, unions.

### Indigenous Peoples' Experience as Wage Workers

Indigenous people 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 province (Knight 1978; 1996), and have been described as "essential to the capitalist development of British Columbia" (Lutz 1992: 70; see also Parnaby 2006: 68). They often migrated considerable distances to work for wages: "by the mid-1870s BC Indians were migrating to work in sawmills, canneries, hop-yards, docks and all manner of jobs from Alaska to the American Northwest, and in some cases as far as San Francisco" (Knight 1996: 14). John Lutz (2008: 167) reports, to take one particular example, 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 working age Indigenous men and women and even children migrated to work for wages (Muszynski 1988: 10; Lutz 2008: 189).

Indigenous people were often active in unions and in strike actions. Rolf Knight (1996: 17) describes 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 World (Knight 1996: 17). In some cases Indigenous workers took strike action even when they were not part of a union. Lutz (2008: 200) writes that “there are several reports of the [Indigenous] sealers striking for higher pay,” while Paige Raibmon (2006: 23), referring to Indigenous women who travelled hundreds of miles to pick hops around Puget Sound, reported that although they were not represented by a union, these workers “were known to strike for wages.”

Because they worked seasonally in order to keep one foot in the subsistence economy, Indigenous workers were paid very low wages, and even more so in the case of Indigenous women and children who worked for wages. Indeed, Indigenous women tended to be located at the bottom of a labour hierarchy that was both racialized and gendered (Patrias 2007: 41; Raibmon 2006: 35). In technical terms, capitalists were able to get away with paying a wage that was less than sufficient to fully cover Indigenous workers’ subsistence because at least a part of that subsistence was being earned in the pre-capitalist forms of production that existed alongside and in the interstices of capitalist production (Lutz 2008: 219). In the coastal canneries of BC thousands of Indigenous wage workers were employed (Lutz 2008: 185), many of them women, but most were gradually replaced by Chinese workers, who could be paid equally low wages but who were more easily controlled by owners and managers because, unlike Indigenous workers, they did not have access to non-capitalist means of subsistence (Muszynski 1988: 112–3).

On the other side of the country, Mi’kmaq men and women from Nova Scotia worked for wages at the turn of the twentieth century in

agriculture, forestry, fish processing and manufacturing in both Canada and the USA. As was the case in BC, they often travelled considerable distances to work for wages — to Maine for blueberry and potato harvesting in the 1920s and 1930s, and as far as western Canada, especially from 1924 to 1930, to work in the Fall harvest, for which “whole excursion trains were organized, with tickets provided in advance by western employers and the costs subsequently deducted from wages” (Wien 1986: 22). Mi’kmaq men and women also worked in resource-based industries in Nova Scotia — food and fish processing plants and lumber processing plants and sawmills, for example — and travelled to the northeast USA to work in labour intensive industries such as textiles and shoe manufacturing. For the most part this was seasonal work, and the Mi’kmaq combined it with continued work in subsistence fishing and hunting, as was the case on Canada’s west coast.

In Quebec, Kahnawake Mohawk men have worked for wages for more than 300 years: as voyageurs in the early fur trade, rafting timber on the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Rivers and piloting river boats on the St. Lawrence in the nineteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century they began the work for which they have become famous — hundreds of Kahnawake men worked on the construction of the Grand Trunk Railway’s Victoria Bridge across the St. Lawrence River in Montreal, where they developed the specialized skills of high iron/steel work. So skilled were they that for the rest of the nineteenth century they worked at railway bridge building across Canada, specializing in high construction work. Early in the twentieth century they began doing the same work in the USA, connecting the steel frames of urban skyscrapers. They too travelled long distances — to Brooklyn, Detroit, Buffalo, Syracuse, Boston and Chicago — to work for wages. By the second half of the twentieth century, 40 percent or more of the men in Kahnawake were high steel workers (Blanchard 1983: 52; Katzer

1988: 46). They were highly skilled, and in most cases were members of the National Structural Steel Workers Union or the International Association of Bridge, Structural, and Ornamental Iron Workers (Katzer 1988; Blanchard 1983).

### Indigenous Wage Workers in Manitoba

In Manitoba, Indigenous people worked for wages in the fur trade in the nineteenth century (Tough 1996). Those Cree living close to York Factory, for example, worked as freighters and labourers (Thistle 1986: 36), as did the Metis for many years (Bourgeault 1983). Indigenous women played an essential role in the fur trade — working to provide food, to make clothing, to make and paddle canoes, and working as “guides, interpreters and diplomats in trade” (McCallum 2014: 22).

Late in the nineteenth century Indigenous and Metis people worked on Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba in the commercial fishing industry. “In 1887, the two largest companies ... employed 80 white men, 40 half-breeds and 185 Indians,” although the relationship appears to have been exploitative, as evidenced by Indigenous fishermen opposing the establishment of commercial fishing on the grounds that “these companies with their steamers and enormous nets enclosing fish of all kinds” were threatening the Indigenous subsistence fishing economy (Tough 1996: 178, 182). Wage labour in what was the American-financed and export-oriented commercial fishing industry existed alongside the Indigenous subsistence fishing economy, and the wage labour was seasonal, as was the case elsewhere.

As Winnipeg grew late in the 19th and early in the 20th centuries, when it was the “Chicago of the North,” demand for lumber for housing grew. Many Indigenous people worked for wages in sawmills. The Indian Agent at Fisher River wrote of the success of the band “due to their having three lumbering mills in the vicinity of their reserve” where they worked for wag-

es. They were so good at this work that, as the Indian Agent put it, “if required of them, they could run the mill themselves, without the aid of white men” (Tough 1996: 193). The same was the case at Fort Alexander where “Indians were engaged in the most intricate portions of the work, feeding the saws, working with machines with quickness and precision” (Tough 1996: 193). Indigenous people in Manitoba’s northern and Interlake regions were anxious to work for wages, and skilled at doing so.

Indigenous people also worked seasonally for wages on farms in southern Manitoba. At Sandy Bay in 1901, for example, “the greater part of the adult male portion of the band came down to work in the Manitoba grain fields during harvesting and threshing” (Tough 1996: 202). Indigenous people also worked for wages in railway construction, in mines and at Fort Alexander on power line construction (Tough 1996: 203). As Frank Tough (1996: 197–8) puts it:

During this economic boom, local labour, not non-resident whites, was the main source for workers for frontier resource capitalists. The ease with which Native peoples moved back and forth between subsistence and available seasonal wage labour in the new staple industries worked to the advantage of both Natives and capitalists.

Jim Mochoruk (2004: 54) makes a similar argument:

Sawmills and bush camps employed hundreds of Cree and Ojibwa men in the Lake of the Woods and Lake Winnipeg regions. Railroad construction work and the associated tie cutting were also common Aboriginal occupations during the early 1880s. Miners employed a fair number of Aboriginal people as guides, transportation workers, timber cutters, and general labourers during the Lake of the Woods gold rush of the 1880s.

Yet this wage work was unstable:

No sooner would a band become reliant on a sawmill for winter employment than market conditions would force the mill out of business, or the merchantable timber would be cut over and the mill owner would move the operation to another location, leaving the local people with no work. The other economic enterprises along the resource frontier were equally unstable (Mochoruk 2004: 55).

It made good economic sense, therefore, for Indigenous people to continue to work in the pre-capitalist fishing and hunting economy, keeping one foot in each mode of production and thereby offsetting the ups and downs of a frontier capitalist economy.

Dakota people engaged simultaneously both in hunting, fishing, farming and ranching, and in wage labour with lumber and transport companies and local farmers. Beginning late in the 19th century Dakota people worked as farm hands and on railway construction. In eastern Saskatchewan in 1888–89, “the demand for Dakota labour was insatiable, and top wages were asked and paid” (Elias 1988:155). In September, 1890, 40 of 45 families at one Dakota reserve were working for wages on settlers’ farms, after having spent July and August haying on their own lands (Elias 1988: 156). Dakota people living near Prince Albert “had become indispensable to the local economy” (Elias 1988: 205).

At the beginning of the 20th century many Dakota women worked in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, where “they were earning good incomes as domestics” (Elias 1988: 192), and Dakota people generally played an important role in the town’s economy. There is a long history of Indigenous women working as domestics, the origins of which are, in many cases, in the residential schools where Indigenous girls did domestic chores not only in the schools but also in the homes of school staff members (McCallum 2014: 22). The federal government played a

key role in this form of wage labour. Mary Jane McCallum (2014: 225) observes that “The state played a central role in training Native women to work as domestic servants by making domestic training central to girls’ curriculum in federal Indian schooling. Schools became vital sources of Indian labour for federal institutions and private individuals.” In Sandy Bay, Manitoba, for example, there is a long history of Indigenous women working as domestics, “cleaning houses, hotels and hospitals both ‘in town’ and ‘around the reserve,’” plus a wide range of other forms of wage labour (McCallum 2014: 24–5). However, as was the case elsewhere in Canada, Dakota wage workers, including those women working as domestics, eventually were largely squeezed out of the paid labour force. Elias (1988: 223) concludes by observing that “For many years, the Dakota formed the backbone of a dependable urban and rural labour force in their localities.” However, “the Dakota were virtually excluded from a rapidly changing labour force,” the result in part of the racism that arose as non-Indigenous settlers competed for jobs.

#### Pushed Out of the Paid Labour Force

There is a long history of Indigenous people wanting to work for wages, but in all too many cases being forced out by non-Indigenous settlers. This was the case across Canada. In BC, where they had made such an indispensable contribution to the emergent 19th century capitalist economy, most Indigenous wage workers were eventually replaced by European settlers. Employers preferred Europeans because, like Chinese wage labourers, they did not have the same access to non-capitalist means of subsistence and so were more dependent upon their waged jobs and could be more easily controlled, and even more because, as European settlement grew, racist constructions of Indigenous workers were used to justify European employment. James Burrows (1986: 45) argues that Indigenous people were pushed out

of the paid labour force “when the white population in a given region of the province became sufficiently dense to end the demand for Indian labour. At that point prejudice against the Indians or, if one wishes to be generous, favouritism toward white labourers, eliminated Indians from the labour force.”

In Atlantic Canada Mi’macq men and women were squeezed out of their marginal positions in the capitalist economy during the economic depressions of the early 1920s and the 1930s. “As non-Indian Nova Scotians filled the jobs at the core of the economy — in coal, steel, pulp and paper, or highway construction — and developed job shelters to protect their positions, the Micmac were left on the outside looking in” (Wien 1986: 97). Unions played a role in this strategy of Indigenous exclusion.

The pattern was similar in Manitoba. Indigenous workers found waged work clearing bush leading to the establishment of Lac du Bonnet, “but as soon as the railway to Lac du Bonnet made possible the importation of white workers, Aboriginals were increasingly pushed to the back of the hiring line and were excluded from any employment save as casual workers” (Mochoruk 2004: 191). In 1913–14 business leaders in The Pas in northern Manitoba promoted settlement and investment in the town by pointing out that The Pas “was decidedly not an ‘Indian’ town,” making clear what Mochoruk (2004: 204) calls “the de facto apartheid between Aboriginals and whites.” The result was minimal employment opportunities for Indigenous people who wanted to continue to work for wages.

As more settlers arrived, fewer Indigenous peoples were employed for wages. Railway lines extending into northern Manitoba meant that “white labourers who congregated in Winnipeg could be hired through employment agencies and shipped directly to the work site” (Mochoruk 2004: 162). Non-Indigenous workers were preferred over Indigenous workers primarily for reasons related to racism, but also, as was the

case across Canada, because Indigenous workers maintained access to and skills in the pre-capitalist hunting and fishing economy, and thus were less dependent upon waged labour.

However, as non-Indigenous settlers increasingly moved into the north they not only pushed Indigenous people out of waged work, but also, because of industrial and other activities, they eroded the capacity of the pre-capitalist, land-based economy to support Indigenous peoples. The result was that in many northern Manitoba communities, growing numbers of Indigenous people were forced to rely upon social assistance for their survival (Elias 1975: 114). In at least one known case this growing reliance upon social assistance as their land-based economies were eroded was used as the basis upon which Indigenous people were, in effect, forced into waged labour. In the southern Alberta sugar beet fields, labour shortages had long necessitated extraordinary labour recruitment efforts. During the Second World War, for example, German prisoners of war, Japanese-Canadian detainees and conscientious objectors were used as forced labour. When this source dried up in the post-war period the Canadian, Saskatchewan and Alberta governments supported the sugar beet industry’s labour recruitment efforts by, among other things, pushing northern Indigenous people into waged labour in the sugar beet fields in southern Alberta by deliberately cutting off their social assistance payments (Laliberte and Satzewich 1990). In 1962, 2100 Indigenous seasonal workers were employed; in 1990 the number was 2500. They were “recruited for work in the fields under conditions of compulsion or forced labour” (Laliberte and Satzewich 1990: 80).

If there was work at all for Indigenous people in Manitoba’s north, it was in jobs that had the lowest pay and lowest prestige, as in the case of Churchill, Manitoba in the mid-1970s where:

The jobs that are held by the Natives are, by and large, those that rate lowest on a socio-

economic scale. The jobs that Natives are most likely to get, if and when they can get work, are those that pay the poorest, have the least responsibility attached to them, and are considered by dominant white values to be the least desirable. Natives get a crack at those jobs whites don't want (Elias 1975: 24).

For the most part, the same was the case with various federal government programs designed to move Indigenous women into the paid labour force. When they worked for wages, the jobs they were able to secure were those at the bottom of the waged hierarchy. This was the case for Indigenous women employed as domestics and hairdressers. It was similarly the case for Indigenous women employed as waged workers in health care, where they worked as "guides, helpers, companions and translators for white women who worked in the North as missionaries and nurses," and in northern hospitals, where they typically worked as nurses' or ward aides or interpreters, or as cooks or laundry workers or housekeepers. In all of these cases a "racialized labour hierarchy" prevailed (McCallum 2014: 16, 19, 22 & 196).

Job discrimination was the norm; Indigenous workers were the victims.

But what this historical enquiry makes clear is that, contrary to popular stereotypes, Indigenous people have long worked for wages, and as wage workers have played an important role in the development of Canada's economy. In a great many cases Indigenous peoples have wanted to work for wages, but have been prevented from doing so by employers and non-Indigenous workers who have taken actions deliberately designed to push Indigenous workers out of the paid labour force.

### Indigenous People, Diversity and Unions

Unions often played a role in the systemic and often deliberate exclusion of Indigenous people

from waged work. In the 1930s a Manitoba pulp mill east of Lake Winnipeg employed 300 Indigenous people out of a total workforce of 700. Indigenous subcontractors employed Indigenous workers, but "the subcontracting system came to an end in the late 1950s and early 1960s, primarily as a result of labour union activities." The union insisted that the mill purchase wood only from camps with modern conveniences. The capital cost of providing "modern conveniences" was too high for Indigenous subcontractors. "As a result, the Indian subcontractors had to cease their operations" (Lithman 1984: 78).

As George Lithman (1984: 79–81) observed, those Indigenous workers inside the mill were "practically all located in the dirtiest and lowest paid positions," and racism was common. By the 1970s Jeremy Hull (1991: 89) argues that "the union was an organization protecting the interests of the white workers, and excluding the Indian workers." Similar outcomes occurred elsewhere because of deliberate union actions, often of a systemic character. Andy Parnaby (2006: 77), for example, describes how the "implementation of stringent seniority and leave of absence rules for its [the union's] members in 1953" pushed Indigenous workers off the BC docks. This occurred despite the fact that Indigenous longshoremen had previously monopolized the loading and unloading of logs and lumber on the BC docks and were described as "the greatest men that ever worked the lumber" (Parnaby 2006: 64).

Unions have, in general, been slow to reach out to workers who are not white, male or heterosexual. Gerald Hunt and David Rayside (2000: 402–3) found that "through much of their history most unions have been at the very least skeptical of racial minority members and women, regarding them as threatening to higher wages, job security and union solidarity." Julie White (1993) and Ronnie Leah (1993) have documented cases of blatant racism on the part of unions directed at racialized minorities. Maureen Morrison (1991) described the intense struggles that female trade

unionists in Manitoba waged against sexism in union ranks. Progress for women in unions has been “agonizingly slow” (Briskin and McDermott 1993). The same is the case for workers of colour (Hunt and Rayside 2000: 234–5). But the changing demographics of the labour force have forced unions to begin to respond differently. “A labour movement that was once largely white, male, and believed to be largely heterosexual has had to begin adapting to a labour force with very different demographics, attitudes and forms of activism.” (Hunt & Rayside 2000: 403)

In Manitoba, a dominant demographic trend is the rapid growth and the younger than average age of the Indigenous population (Bond and Spence 2016: 29–30), and the resultant dramatic growth in the proportion of labour market entrants who are, and even more in future will be, people of Indigenous descent (Lezubski 2014).

To date, however, Indigenous peoples’ relations with unions and non-Indigenous union members have been mixed, but most often negative. For example, Julie Guard’s analysis of women on strike at Lanark Manufacturing in southern Ontario found that while white women “claimed for themselves an identity as real workers,” they simultaneously “marked out the boundaries of that identity by excluding Native women.” She hypothesized that “non-Natives did not see Native women as authentic workers, regardless of whether or not they were actually engaged in waged work” (Guard 2004: 118–9). Suzanne Mills (2007) found similarly that Indigenous women working at a mill in northern Canada felt a close bond among themselves, but felt excluded by the union and by non-Indigenous workers, including non-Indigenous women.

As Leslie Spillett — an Indigenous leader in Winnipeg and former trade union leader — confirmed in a 2016 interview, in some cases Indigenous people see unions as just another colonial institution, engaged in practices at odds with and likely to undermine Indigenous cultures. It is true that unions have historically been — and

in too many cases still are — colonial institutions, acting narrowly in the interests of non-Indigenous workers and not only failing to adequately represent the particular interests of Indigenous workers, but in some cases working actively to exclude them from paid employment.

On the other hand, Indigenous leaders have on occasion acted in ways that look like simple union-busting, and have undertaken to preserve the interests of more privileged Indigenous owners and elected officials. Yale Belanger (2012: 145) describes the opposition of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians (FSIN) to union organizing at First Nations-owned casinos. “The FSIN argues that labour unions are not traditionally ‘Native’ and that their ‘un-Indigenous’ nature is and should remain foreign to First Nations culture.” The FSIN and other Indigenous organizations have, among other tactics, used the courts to try to make the case that federal and provincial labour laws do not apply on reserves. They have done so in an effort to prevent unionization of Indigenous businesses and governing bodies, even when it is Indigenous workers themselves who have actively been seeking union representation.

In part, this is because of legitimate concerns about external control by non-Indigenous organizations that might have little awareness of or sympathy with Indigenous ways of being. But partly it appears that the emergent Indigenous elite want to maintain full access to and control over allocations of streams of revenue. Brock Pitawanakwat (2006: 32–33) has argued that FSIN leaders used a “false front of nationalism as a red herring to maintain their power over labour relations in Indigenous institutions.”

The same has been the case in Indigenous-owned casinos in Manitoba. “There is a tradition of similar hostility towards unions among some First Nations leaders in Manitoba, with claims that they are not Indian organizations and that they challenge First Nations’ sovereignty” (Dubois et al. 2002: 58). However, Alison DuBois and

her colleagues (2002: 58) argue, similar to Pita-wanakwat, that “These are spurious arguments having more to do with First Nations leaders not wishing to have the authority of chief and council challenged.”

Many barriers stand in the way of improved relations between Indigenous people and unions. Some are obvious — for example, the long history of union efforts to exclude Indigenous workers from employment in order to preserve jobs for non-Indigenous workers (Lithman 1984: 78; Parnaby 2006: 77), and the racism so often directed by non-Indigenous union members at Indigenous workers. As Suzanne Mills and Tyler McCreary (2012: 128) describe it: “After a history of exclusion from many unionized forms of employment, it is unsurprising that many Aboriginal workers view unions as a ‘white man’s tool’ and look to their own governments to secure their employment.”

On the other hand, there are cases where unions have supported and fought for Indigenous workers. For example, 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* (Winnipeg Free Press September 19 and 20, 1962) the union wrote: “Indians 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.”

Indigenous workers, like all workers, deserve and need the legal protections, democratic opportunities and improved wages and benefits that unions offer. Grace-Edward Galabuzi (2006:

235), referring broadly to racialized workers, has made the case in this way:

perhaps no institution represents as much promise in empowering racialized workers to overcome their oppression in the labour market as does organized labour.... For Canada’s racialized group members to make significant progress in the labour market, they need the union advantage — the power of collective bargaining.”

If unions are to meet the legitimate needs of Indigenous workers and potential workers, they are going to have to earn their trust by confronting the realities of racism that have long been directed by non-Indigenous people and institutions at Indigenous peoples. There are a variety of steps that might be taken, and many that have recently been taken, but it is likely that this will be a process that will take time and effort. Nevertheless, it is our contention that concerted efforts to facilitate the active involvement of Indigenous workers in their unions will strengthen unions, and that stronger unions will accrue to the benefit of Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers alike.

### What Unions Have Done and are Doing

In recent years at least some unions have made increased efforts to organize and represent Indigenous workers. There is an “increasing recognition within the labour movement of the need to build relationships with Aboriginal peoples, both within and outside of their memberships.” Suzanne Mills and Louise Clarke (2009: 991) argue that:

Unions and labour federations began to dedicate significant resources and staff to: organizing Aboriginal workplaces; dispelling myths about Aboriginal people among their members; providing union training for Aboriginal workers; and altering union structures to

increase the voice of Aboriginal members in union decisions.

One thing unions have learned is that for many Indigenous workers, “non-class identities are important” (Mills and Clarke 2009: 992). Indigenous people often identify less as workers than as Indigenous people, whose lived experiences have been shaped, at least in part, by colonialism and racism and by a relationship — sometimes recent, sometimes further in the past — with the land.

Over the past 30 years unions have worked to organize and adequately represent workers who are not part of the white, male and heterosexual mainstream — women, workers of colour, gay and lesbian workers, for example (Hunt and Rayside 2000). “Campaigns have often mobilized around workers’ shared concerns of racism or sexism in the workplace, and made use of networks based on shared language or religion” (Mills and Clarke 2009: 992). As new categories of workers have moved in significant numbers into workplaces, unions have worked — usually pushed by union activists and social movements — to meet their specific needs and to secure their support and active involvement. This necessitates changes in union structures, processes and activities.

Equity-seeking union members have themselves taken steps to advance their interests within unions. Stephanie Ross and her colleagues (Ross et al. 2015: 175–6) have described various approaches used by non-Indigenous equity-seeking union members. These include separate organizing — “the creation of separate structures or spaces that allow equity-seeking groups to express and define their own issues and priorities, develop strategies and tactics for working on them, and strengthen their own leadership capacities”; the promotion of internal union education, both for union members to raise awareness of exclusion and inequality, and for equity-seeking groups to build their capacities and leadership skills; and structural changes including the representation of members of equity-seeking groups in union

decision-making bodies, and efforts in collective bargaining to prioritize equity issues. Gains have been made in all of these areas, but it is only relatively recently that unions have begun to direct their efforts to the particular needs and interests of Indigenous workers.

Public sector unions have been among the leaders in this work, in large part because Indigenous workers have, since the 1960s, had a propensity to work in the public sector — in health, education and social services, for example. Significant problems confront Indigenous people in these workplaces.

In their study of Indigenous experiences in CUPE and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), Mills and Clarke (2009: 996) found that racism directed at Indigenous workers was a dominant theme. The authors found the same in a study of Indigenous City of Winnipeg workers who are members of CUPE 500 (Fernandez and Silver 2017). These workplace studies echo findings of high levels of racism directed at Indigenous students in Winnipeg high schools (Silver and Mallett 2002), suggesting the ubiquity in Canada and, perhaps especially, in Manitoba, of racism directed at Indigenous peoples.

Unions are responding by, among other things, developing Indigenous awareness courses. CUPE Saskatchewan, for example, has developed a course called *Unionism on Turtle Island*, aimed at increasing CUPE members’ awareness of the ongoing impact on Indigenous peoples of colonialism. It is not clear to what extent such initiatives have affected non-Indigenous workers: Mills and McCreary (2012: 122) have argued that awareness levels appear not to have reached rank and file levels in unions, and our findings (Fernandez and Silver 2017) reflect this concern. There are also some educational initiatives aimed at developing Indigenous workers’ skills and capacities. CUPE and UNIFOR, for example, have Aboriginal Leadership development programs (Mills and McCreary 2012: 121).

CUPE Saskatchewan has been involved in developing a representative workforce strategy

(RWS), introduced in 1992 by the NDP government of Saskatchewan and aimed at increasing the numbers of Indigenous people in the paid labour force.

The program involves creating partnerships between the government, employers and unions that commit the parties to: hiring Aboriginal job coordinators who network with the Aboriginal community; identifying barriers to the hiring, retention and promotion of Aboriginal workers within human resource practices and collective agreements; and promoting specialized training for Aboriginal people and Aboriginal awareness training for settlers (Mills and Clarke 2009: 997).

Work is also being done to make changes in collective agreements having to do with, for example, elders in workplaces, accommodation for attendance at spiritual and cultural events, and efforts to ensure that Indigenous people are represented at all levels throughout a workforce and within union ranks. What is required is that “unions make space within their collective identities and structures for Aboriginal workers” (Mills and Clarke 2009: 1000). Gains are being made in this respect. For example, “CUPE and PSAC have national-level committees for Aboriginal members to articulate their issues, named the National Aboriginal Circle and the National Aboriginal Peoples’ Network respectively,” while UNIFOR includes Indigenous members in their Aboriginal Workers and Workers of Colour Committee (Mills and McCreary 2012: 121).

Strategies used to increase the representation of Aboriginal peoples within CUPE and PSAC have mimicked those of other marginalized groups, such as the creation of separate organizing committees and the creation of representative seats on executives (Mills and Clarke 2009: 1000).

Necessary innovations are being made in organizing strategies as well. For example, “Some of the organizing innovations implemented by

CUPE include having a presence in the community prior to organizing, using Aboriginal organizers and ensuring that organizers are knowledgeable about cultural protocols” (Mills and McCreary 2012: 127). It can be added that unions will have to reach out to Indigenous peoples to support them in their particular, non-union struggles. It is our observation, based on our experience in Winnipeg, that there is an Indigenous cultural revival underway, and unions have to be a part of this process if they are to win the trust of Indigenous peoples. Unions will have to become active and knowledgeable allies in a wide range of Indigenous struggles, walking *beside* Indigenous peoples and organizations, not in front or behind (Silver 2016: 197–8).

While at least some unions are being innovative in reaching out to Indigenous workers, and some gains are being made, there is a considerable distance to go. Historically, although Indigenous people have often worked for wages and been active in unions, it has too often been the case that unions and union members have reflected the racist views of the dominant culture, and that unions have worked to protect non-Indigenous workers to the detriment of Indigenous workers and those Indigenous people who have wanted to work for wages. While this past damage is a reality that has to be acknowledged, it is nevertheless the case that union principles of collectivity and looking after each other are largely consistent with traditional Indigenous values of collectivity and sharing. It’s a matter of figuring out how to build bridges between unions and Indigenous peoples. Doing so is possible, and in fact doing so is likely to contribute to a revitalization of the labour movement. As Mills and McCreary (2012: 130) argue:

Building upon approaches to both connect to Aboriginal people as workers and as Aboriginal peoples, and to support Aboriginal communities in their struggles, offers possibilities for a social unionism both revitalized and reframed

through reciprocal relationships to the cause of Aboriginal self-determination.

### The Struggles of Women and other Equity-Seeking Union Members

There are lessons to be learned by recalling the fierce struggles waged by women to become fully accepted and engaged in unions. All across Canada it was union women — in almost all cases working in coalition with feminist organizations outside the labour movement — who were the leaders in making gains for women. In subsequent years the struggles led by women have provided a precedent and a template for other equity-seeking groups of union members, for example workers of colour, LGBTQ workers, workers with disabilities and, more recently, Indigenous workers (Briskin 2006: 103). Union women typically carried out these struggles in coalition with feminists outside of but supportive of the union movement. As Linda Briskin (2009: 138) has described this coalition-based process:

Beginning in the 1970s, around issues such as pay equity, affirmative action, sexual harassment, violence against women, child care, and reproductive rights, union women have organized alliances and coalitions across unions and with social movements, contesting the isolationist tendencies within the union movement and legitimizing coalition building with groups outside the union movement.

In other words, union women allied with feminist women outside the labour movement, and such coalition-building in pursuit of workplace gains is a model that would benefit Indigenous

workers, and would contribute to the revitalization of unions. As Pradeep Kumar and Christopher Schenk (2006: 40) have argued: “coalition building is regarded as one of the most innovative strategies for union revitalization.”

But beneficial though these innovative approaches adopted by women have been, these gains were only achieved as the result of protracted and often intense struggles by female trade unionists. While it may seem to be a cliché to say so, it is nevertheless true that all the gains and benefits enjoyed by unionized workers today are the result of struggles led by union activists and committed to by union members, often in alliance with progressive forces outside the union movement.

Today, one such struggle involves Indigenous workers. Indigenous people have long worked for wages and been members of unions, but the racism that has been such a defining characteristic of the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada, and the ongoing impact of colonialism and the cultural genocide (TRC 2015: 1) that has been at the heart of colonialism, have been carried into workplaces and into union structures and practices. Unions are beginning to respond to this challenge, and to the extent that they are successful in doing so, unions will be revitalized and strengthened, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers alike will benefit. As Linda Briskin (2006: 110) has argued, in a way that has a particularly powerful resonance since the election in the USA of President Donald Trump: “Experience in Canada has demonstrated that taking account of difference can build a stronger union movement. In fact, solidarity is increasingly understood to mean *unity in diversity*.”

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