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# Indigenous Workers and Unions:

## The Case of Winnipeg's CUPE 500

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**About the Authors**

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Larry Morrissette – friend, co-worker and Indigenous activist.



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# Introduction

Indigenous people have worked for wages for more than 150 years in Canada, and before that in what was to become Canada. They have often been members of unions and in some cases actively. They have been known to engage in strike actions even when not represented by a union. However, relations between Indigenous people and unions have often been difficult. In many cases unions have failed to serve the interests of Indigenous wage workers (Fernandez and Silver 2017).

In recent decades, especially since the 1960s, Indigenous people have moved in large numbers to urban centres where they have increasingly been employed in the paid labour force, especially but not only in public sector jobs. Many also work in the sales and service sector, and in trades, transport, manufacturing and utilities (see Table 2 for the case of Manitoba).

The Indigenous population is large and growing rapidly in Manitoba. This province has the highest proportion of Indigenous people of any Canadian province — 18.0 percent according to 2016 Census data (see Table 1) — and it has recently been estimated that by 2036 there will be between 273,000 and 335,000 Indigenous people in Manitoba, comprising more than 20 percent,

or one in five, of the province's population (Bond and Spence 2016: 26–27). This means that a steadily growing proportion of Manitoba's labour force will be comprised of people of Indigenous descent. It follows that unions in Manitoba will have to commit increased resources and effort to meeting the specific needs of those of their members who are Indigenous.

Winnipeg's Census Metropolitan area has Canada's largest *urban* Indigenous population — 91,000 in a population estimated at 761,540, or about 12 percent according to 2016 Census data (Statistics Canada 2017) — and therefore provides fertile ground for enquiring into the nature of the relationship between unions and their Indigenous members. The Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 500 (CUPE 500) represents City of Winnipeg workers and is one of CUPE's largest locals. Significant numbers of Indigenous people are now employed by the City of Winnipeg and are members of CUPE 500. However, less than ten percent of the City of Winnipeg workforce identifies as Indigenous (Taylor 2016), a percentage that must increase if Winnipeg's growing Indigenous population is to have access to decent jobs in proportion to its size.

In this paper we examine the case of CUPE 500 and its relationship with Indigenous City of Winnipeg workers as a case study.

Given the changing labour market in which precarious work is becoming more common and union density is shrinking, and considering the negative experiences many Indigenous workers have had with unions, we have undertaken this study to get a snapshot of the current relationship between one group of unionized Indigenous workers and their union, CUPE 500. What do CUPE 500's Indigenous members think of their

union? Are they engaged with the union? If so, in what ways and why are they engaged? If not, why are they not involved and what might be done to secure their involvement? And what has CUPE 500 done to date to engage with their Indigenous members?

These questions are important because active involvement by Indigenous workers in CUPE 500 would be likely to strengthen the union, and because a strengthened union would be better able to fight for changes that would benefit Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers alike.

# Methodology

The authors met with the leadership of CUPE 500 at the outset of this study, and their collaboration gave us access to a large pool of Indigenous union members.

Despite CUPE 500's best efforts to connect us with its members, relatively few volunteered to participate in the study. As the study explains, interviews with union officials reveal a growing concern with the low levels of member engagement in union activity, with Indigenous members being no different. This generalized lack of engagement may at least partly explain Indigenous workers' lack of willingness to participate.

We also speculated that the lack of willingness to participate might be explained by Indigenous members feeling uncomfortable with unions. Long-time Indigenous leader and past union organizer Leslie Spillett confirmed in a 2016 interview that some Indigenous workers can consider unions to be just another colonial institution that does not have the best interests of Indigenous people at heart, a sentiment validated by the historical experience (Fernandez and Silver 2017). Although our interviews with union members did not corroborate this sentiment, it is possible that there are members who did not participate because they feel this way and/or are anti-union for different reasons.

We conducted interviews with fifteen Indigenous City of Winnipeg employees, fourteen of whom are or recently have been members of CUPE 500, and one of whom is a City of Winnipeg middle manager who is active in her own union and involved in Indigenous workplace issues. These interviews were done over a six-month period from spring to autumn, 2016. Larry Morrisette, an experienced interviewer and Indigenous person conducted ten of the interviews with Indigenous CUPE 500 members. Tragically, Larry passed away in early October, 2016. The remaining five interviews were conducted by Cheyenne Henry, also an experienced Indigenous interviewer.

The fact that we were only able to interview fifteen workers means that we have to draw our conclusions with caution. The majority of those whom we did interview had generally positive feelings towards CUPE 500, as will be shown below, and it may be the case that they "self-selected" on that basis. Such a small sample size leaves open the possibility that there are Indigenous members with more negative opinions with whom we did not speak.

We also interviewed four people — two Indigenous and two non-Indigenous — who are or have recently been elected officials of, or

staff members of, CUPE 500 and CUPE National, including the Chair Person of CUPE 500's Aboriginal Council. Two of these interviews were conducted by Lynne Fernandez, and the other two by Fernandez and Jim Silver.

Fernandez also interviewed Cathy Woods, the Aboriginal Liaison for the Manitoba Government Employees Union and Leslie Spillett, Executive Director of Ka Ni Kanichihk — an Indigenous inner-city organization that provides services to and runs programs for youth and women. Spillett spent many years working as an organizer in Manitoba's garment industry. Silver interviewed

two non-Indigenous staff members at other Winnipeg-based unions, both of whom have a particular interest in and experience in working with Indigenous union members.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the research project as a whole was approved by the University of Winnipeg's Human Research Ethics Board.

The results of the interviews are analyzed in the context of the following summary of the historical experience of Indigenous wage workers and unions (for a fuller treatment of this historical experience see Fernandez and Silver 2017).

# The Historical Experience

Indigenous people have worked for wages to a much greater extent than is generally recognized, and have made a significant contribution to Canada's economy as wage workers. In the mid-late 19th century Indigenous people formed the majority of British Columbia's paid labour force, and Indigenous wage workers have been described as "essential to the capitalist development of British Columbia" (Lutz 1992: 70; see also Parnaby 2006: 68). On the other side of the country Mi'kmaq men and women in Nova Scotia travelled to Maine to work for wages, and to western Canada in large numbers to work for wages at harvest time (Wien 1986: 22). In northern Manitoba Indigenous men and women worked for wages in resource-based industries — commercial fishing, sawmills, railway and power line construction, for example — and in domestic labour and hospitals, while in southern Manitoba Indigenous women and men worked for wages as domestics, on farms, in hospitals and as lumber and transport workers, among other forms of waged work (Tough 1996: 197–198, 203; Mochoruk 2004: 54–55; Elias 1988: 192; McCallum 2014: 22).

In most cases racism pushed Indigenous people out of the paid labour force when non-Indigenous settlers arrived. In northern Manitoba,

for example, once the railway made it possible for non-Indigenous settlers to arrive in northern communities, Indigenous wage workers were replaced. Indigenous people had worked for wages clearing bush in 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 1913–1914 business leaders in The Pas promoted settlement and investment in the town by pointing out that The Pas "was decidedly not an 'Indian' town," making clear what Jim Mochoruk (2004: 204) has called "the de facto apartheid between Aboriginals and whites." In southern Manitoba, Dakota wage workers — women and men — had for many years "formed the backbone of a dependable rural and urban labour force in their localities." However, "the Dakota were virtually excluded from a rapidly changing labour force" as non-Indigenous settlers arrived in ever greater numbers (Elias 1988: 223).

The removal of Indigenous wage workers from the paid labour force in favour of non-Indigenous settlers must be seen in the context of colonialism — which is the process that has involved: the dispossession of Indigenous people's

land and resources and means of economic survival; the constant attacks against and in some cases outlawing of their cultural and spiritual practices; the severe restrictions placed on their activities, such as the requirement that Indigenous people get a “pass” from the Indian Agent if they wanted to leave their reserve; and the incarceration of many tens of thousands of Indigenous children in residential schools where they were taught that Indigenous peoples and their cultures and languages were inferior to those of Europeans. These forms of cultural genocide (TRC Report 2015: 1) were justified on the false grounds that Indigenous people and their cultures and ways of being were inferior to European people and cultures. These same racist beliefs of European superiority and Indigenous inferiority were the basis of the justification used for pushing Indigenous wage workers out of the paid labour force in favour of non-Indigenous settlers.

In the 1960s Indigenous people began to move in ever-growing numbers to urban

centres like Winnipeg, often in search of better opportunities for education and employment. Today, although rates of unemployment and labour force participation are worse for Indigenous than non-Indigenous people (see Table 1), very significant numbers of Indigenous people work in the paid labour force, a high proportion of these in the public sector. Furthermore, the Indigenous population is growing more rapidly than, and is younger than, the population at large, which means that a growing proportion of Manitoba’s labour force will in future be comprised of Indigenous people.

Although in the past unions were often complicit in the racist practices of employers, they are now working to meet the needs of their Indigenous members, just as they have been forced in recent decades to make changes to their structures and processes and cultures to meet the needs of the growing numbers of their members who are female, and/or people of colour, and/or workers who are other than heterosexual.



# Indigenous People in Manitoba's Paid Labour Force

It is unfortunate that when many people think of Indigenous people in the paid labour force, their thoughts are about high rates of unemployment and low rates of labour force participation. There is some justification for this. In Manitoba, for example, according to Table 1 below, the unemployment rate for Indigenous people was 10.8 percent, compared to 5.4 percent for the population as a whole. Unemployment rates for on-reserve workers are even higher (Fernandez, 2015).

As high as the provincial off-reserve Indigenous unemployment rate is compared to the total population, there is a smaller gap

between the two populations when looking at the labour market participation rate. Province wide, the Indigenous non-reserve participation rate is 64.1 percent vs 67.2 percent for the total population. In Winnipeg, the story is similar, with the Indigenous rate at 62.3 percent vs 68 percent for the total population (Lezubski forthcoming). Nonetheless, these data demonstrate that a high percentage of Manitoba's Indigenous population is engaged in the labour market. Table 2 below shows the sectors where Manitoba's Indigenous wage workers are employed according to Statistics Canada National Occupational Classifications.

TABLE 1 Indigenous Population 2016

	Percentage of total population <sup>1</sup>	
	Manitoba	Winnipeg
	18.0	12.2
<b>Labour Market Indicators 2017: Off-reserve Indigenous population</b>		
Participation rate: 15 years and over	64.1 <sup>2</sup>	62.3 <sup>3</sup>
Unemployment rate: total Indigenous population 15 years and older	10.8 <sup>2</sup>	11.8 <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Calculated from Statistics Canada. 2017. *Winnipeg, CY [Census subdivision], Manitoba and Canada [Country]* (table). *Census Profile*. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E> (accessed January 5, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. *Table 282-0226- Labour Force Survey Estimates (LFS), by Aboriginal group, sex and age group, Canada, selected provinces and regions, annual (persons unless otherwise noted), CANSIM*

<sup>3</sup> Lezubski, forthcoming. Source: Statistics Canada. Statistics Canada. 2016 Census of Canada, table 98-400-X2016287

**TABLE 2 Employment by National Occupational Classification for Indigenous Off Reserve Population  
Manitoba 2015**

		Percentage of all classifications
All Occupations	61,300	100%
Management, business, finance and administration	13,200	21.5
Natural and applied sciences; health; education, law and social, community and government services; art, culture, recreation and sport	15,700	25.6
Sales and service occupations	15,800	25.7
Trades, transport and equipment operators; natural resources, agriculture and related production; manufacturing and utilities	16,600	27

**SOURCE:** Labour Force Survey Estimates: CANSIM Table 282-0166: <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a47>

Table 2 shows that a significant percentage of Indigenous workers are in the sales and service sector which tends to offer precarious work. It is important to note that it is becoming increasingly difficult to organize workers in general, and that more workers find themselves precariously employed in low-quality jobs (Tal 2015). This trend toward precarious work means that private sector

unions have to come up with new strategies to reach workers.

Union density in the private sector decreased in Canada from 18.1 to 15.2 percent between 1999 and 2014 (Statistics Canada 2015). Public sector workers fare much better, with a union density rate of 71.3 percent as of 2014 (Statistics Canada 2015).

# How are Unions Responding to their Indigenous Members?

Public sector unions have been among the leaders in responding to the needs of Indigenous members, 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), Stephanie Mills and Louise Clarke (2009: 996) found that racism directed at Indigenous workers was a dominant theme. This echoes 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 and Winnipeg, of racism directed at Indigenous peoples (Macdonald 2015).

Unions are responding in a variety of ways. One is that they are 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: Stephanie Mills and Tyler

McCreary (2012: 122) have argued that awareness levels appear not to have reached rank and file levels in unions, and our findings, as will be seen below, 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.

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.” 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 — UFCW Local 832, for example, supports Indigenous youth organizations in Manitoba — 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. 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. 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.

Under the leadership of former Manitoba Federation of Labour President Dick Martin, the Manitoba Federation of Labour, Manitoba Indian Brotherhood and the Manitoba Metis Federation formed the “3-M” committee (Fernandez et al 2015: 291). The committee turned into today’s MFL Aboriginal Caucus which continues working to improve conditions of Indigenous workers. The Caucus has representation on the MFL’s Executive Council (Fernandez et al 2015: 291). The 3-M Committee is a past initiative that might usefully be resurrected.

The need to respond to the needs and demands of those marginalized in and by the union has a long history in CUPE 500 and its predecessors, as shown in the brief history that follows.

# CUPE 500 and the Long Struggle for Equity and Inclusion

Local 500 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE 500), and its predecessor the Federation of Civic Employees (FCE), have a century-long history punctuated by challenges and struggles. Like all unions early in the 20th century, mere existence was a challenge: “It was difficult for any union, no matter how skilled its workers were, to survive” (Pringle 1991: 13).

A major means of undercutting unions that represent civic employees has always been the contracting out of work — a threat that continues to this day (Smirl forthcoming). As long ago as the early 20th century it was the case that:

Whenever city council undertook to carry out a project or provide a service it generally gave the job to a private contractor, who would then be responsible for hiring and controlling the workforce. These contractors were notoriously anti-union (Pringle 1991: 13).

In 1918 civic employees whose work had not been contracted out struck over wages and the result was a bitterly contested, three-week battle over their right to strike, with City Council narrowly passing a motion that denied that right. It was in effect a rehearsal for the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, and as Paul Moist (2016) has described it:

“1919 was a disaster for civic employees, firefighters, police officers, different unions.” All FCE members who participated in the strike were fired. They could apply to get their jobs back, but union activists were excluded and those who did get their jobs back were forced to sign a document that came to be called the “Slave Pact,” which required that civic employees not belong to any organization that was associated with any other labour organization. The result was that the FCE was forced to disaffiliate from the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council, and became distanced from the broader labour movement — it “became a little more inward-looking and got into survival mode because all of the activists were blackballed” (Moist 2016; see also Pringle 1991: 25).

The Slave Pact remained in force until 1930, severely weakening civic employees’ bargaining power. Civic employees were further weakened because they were represented by at least four different unions, enabling City Council to use divide and rule tactics. During the 1920s and 1930s civic employees were forced to accept substantial wage concessions (Pringle 1991: 28). It was not until 1949 that all City of Winnipeg employees except transit workers, police and firefighters were finally united in one civic employees union,

the Federation of Civic Employees, and in 1957 the FCE became Local 500 of what was then the National Union of Public Service Employees. In 1963, in Winnipeg, the Canadian Union of Public Employees was created. The final step in uniting the civic workforce came as the result of Unicity in 1971, when the City of Winnipeg and 12 surrounding municipalities were united, and multiple collective agreements were amalgamated into one, “and so Local 500 as we know it was born January 1, 1972” (Moist 2016).

Yet divisions among civic employees still remained, as the result of discriminatory practices on the grounds of sex and ethnicity used by both City Council and the union. Consider, for example, the case of workers of Eastern European descent:

Much of the early infrastructure of the city was built and maintained by meagerly paid immigrants. Ukrainian labourers once went on strike when they discovered they were being paid less than other construction crews which were doing the same work in different parts of the city (Pringle 1991: 13).

More broadly, what prevailed at the City of Winnipeg was a racialized labour hierarchy:

Non-Anglo-Saxons rarely reached permanent status. East European immigrants and their sons and daughters worked primarily in street, sidewalk and sewer line construction and maintenance; as support staff in hospitals and nursing homes; and as unskilled labour. The better paid, cleaner, supervisory jobs were the almost exclusive preserve of Anglo-Saxon males (Pringle 1991: 49).

Women were the victims of similar discriminatory practices. During the 1920s the city clerk, reflecting the broadly accepted attitude of the times, announced that he would “never employ a lady in his department” (Pringle 1991: 31). Some women were in fact hired by the City, but they were slotted into the lowest-paid jobs and were paid less than men for work of equal

value, while married women were not hired at all, a City Council policy that remained in force until 1953. A 1977 study completed by the City at the insistence of female City Councilors found that women were still virtually unrepresented in senior administrative positions, filled the vast majority of low-paid clerical positions and were not paid the same as men for work of equal value.

It was the women’s movement, and activist women within unions, including CUPE, who were the driving force in the often fierce struggle of women to have their interests taken seriously and to be treated equally (Morrison 1991). CUPE “became the country’s leading organizer of working women — by 1976 the union’s membership was 44 percent female” (Pringle 1991: 72). CUPE 500 created its first women’s committee in 1980, and played an important role in the struggle for women’s equality.

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.



## CUPE and Indigenous Workers in Canada

At the national level and at the regional level especially in Saskatchewan, CUPE has in recent years taken significant steps in reaching out to Indigenous people. Paul Moist, former National President of CUPE and former President of CUPE 500, recalls that when he served on CUPE's national executive board as the general Vice-President with responsibility for Manitoba and Saskatchewan, he "started hanging out in Saskatchewan, and there's more Aboriginal people in the union, more at their conventions, health care workers, municipal workers...and they [CUPE Saskatchewan] are the first organization in CUPE that forms an Aboriginal Council." They later took the lead in creating CUPE's National Aboriginal Council in 2003 (Moist 2016).

CUPE Saskatchewan had been the driving force in pushing the Representative Workplace Strategy (RWS) that was targeted at hiring Indigenous people and that was adopted in 1992 by the NDP government of the day in Saskatchewan. The RWS was the major factor in the hiring of approximately 2100 Indigenous health care employees who are now CUPE Saskatchewan members (Moran 2016). The goal of the RWS, as described by the Saskatoon Health Region (2010), was "to establish partnerships with First Nations

and Metis communities and organizations to effectively attract, recruit, retain and promote First Nations and Metis employment." CUPE Saskatchewan was also successful in securing agreement to implement a mandatory two-day cultural awareness training program for all provincial government employees, which CUPE's National Aboriginal Advisor, Don Moran, says receives a 98 percent positive evaluation rating from participants (Moran 2016). Much of this early organizing work had been done by CUPE staffer Doug Lavallee, who is Metis, and was carried on by Don Moran, an Indigenous CUPE staffer in Saskatchewan who was hired by Moist in 2006 as CUPE's National Aboriginal Advisor.

It was at this time, as the result of "hanging out in Saskatchewan," that Moist became aware of the dramatic demographic statistics that reveal the rapid growth in the Indigenous population, and that also reveal the rapid increase, now and into the future, in the Indigenous share of the labour force in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Bringing Indigenous people into the labour force and involving them with the union is essential for the future health of trade unionism in Canada, and especially in provinces like Saskatchewan and Manitoba.



Efforts by CUPE to create Aboriginal Councils elsewhere in Canada appear not to have been as successful as Saskatchewan. “I would say it’s a work in progress, there are still a lot of barriers, unions are just as bureaucratic...as anything else,” and CUPE is “kind of a unique organization” in that “CUPE National does not try to dictate how locals function. Locals have a lot of autonomy, it’s a great strength of CUPE I think, but it also places limitations on the organization” (Moist 2016). Nevertheless, structural change is underway in CUPE, driven initially by CUPE Saskatchewan, and then taken to the national level by Moist in 2003 with the creation of the National Aboriginal Council, and in 2006 with the hiring of Don Moran as CUPE’s National Aboriginal Advisor. Provincial Aboriginal Councils now exist right across the country with the exception of Atlantic Canada, “so structurally we’ve changed immensely” said Moran in a 2016 interview. CUPE National has recently developed partnerships with various national Indigenous organizations, including the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) — Moran says “now I get a call from AFN all the time” — and works closely with other national Indigenous organizations like Sisters in Spirit and the Native Women’s Association on various important campaigns (Moran 2016). Many CUPE collective agreements include language that recognizes and supports Indigenous cultures. And at CUPE conventions, mostly in Saskatchewan but beginning elsewhere, Indigenous CUPE members are speaking on the convention floor and expressing their appreciation that things are finally being done (Moran 2016). The next stage in this process is that CUPE is

about to roll out a major campaign arising out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report, and in 2016 Don Moran was crossing the country doing workshops on the TRC with CUPE executive members. “Education is our key,” as Moran puts it.

In Manitoba, Moist arranged to send an Indigenous City of Winnipeg employee and CUPE 500 member to a CUPE Saskatchewan Indigenous gathering in the mid-2000s. Prior to this CUPE 500 had done “bugger all for this segment of our membership” (Moist 2016). It is not clear how far these efforts to reach out to Indigenous members and to the Indigenous community have gone in Manitoba. Efforts to develop a working relationship with the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs have been less than successful, and the results of outreach to other Indigenous organizations in Manitoba have been described by Moist as modest: “It’s all cordial, it’s all kind of OK but it’s not, I wouldn’t call it deep”. And those CUPE 500 members who are Indigenous are likely, Moist argues, to be no more active in the union than any other members, and “the vast majority of CUPE 500 members are not really active day-to-day in the union” (Moist 2016).

What is needed, he argues, is “champions” to advance the cause of Indigenous City of Winnipeg employees and CUPE 500 members. Another way of saying this is that at least some Indigenous and other union members have to become activists, working systematically to advance the interests of Indigenous CUPE 500 members. It is not clear to what extent, if at all, this is happening. To find out we spoke with Indigenous members of CUPE 500.

# CUPE 500 and Indigenous City of Winnipeg Workers

What we found, in general terms, is that Indigenous CUPE 500 members, while positive about unions, feel disconnected from and are little engaged in CUPE 500 and the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council.

Indigenous members that we interviewed are generally pro-union — they are aware and they appreciate that unions protect workers' interests in a variety of ways. One Indigenous worker, for example, said that “I have many, many times been grateful that we have a union. I believe in unions.” Most others expressed similar sentiments. None told us that, as Indigenous people, 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.” A long-time Indigenous City of Winnipeg worker observed that unions are especially important for Indigenous people because in a non-union environment it is individuals that have to make their own case for higher wages and benefits. For many Indigenous people that's difficult, especially given the long history of colonialism and racism in Canada and the damage it has done to many Indigenous peoples' sense of self-confidence and self-esteem (Silver 2016: 110–11), and further, such individualism is inconsistent with Indigenous peoples' traditional collective orientation.

Some Indigenous workers that we interviewed are proactive in supporting unionism. One woman asked her supervisor to include union information and the names of union representatives in orientation kits so that new hires would know how to reach the union, and she told us that she refers fellow workers to the union. Another described how he persuaded a co-worker who was thinking of leaving to stay with the City of Winnipeg because of the benefits of working in a union environment. So there is, at the very least, latent support for CUPE 500 among all those Indigenous workers that we interviewed.

However, only four of the Indigenous workers that we interviewed have ever been active in any way with CUPE 500. For most of those we interviewed their only contact with their union is the newsletter and emails sent to members. All but four have had no personal, face-to-face contact with union representatives, although those four spoke highly of the work done for them by their union representatives. Many told us that they don't know much about CUPE and about unions in general, but they want to learn. One woman, for example, said: "I would like to be more in the loop. It would be nice if employees were given the opportunity to talk with the union." An Indigenous man with more than six years of experience working with the City of Winnipeg said "I don't know anything about a union, I don't, I'm just learning now."

As one Indigenous member told us, CUPE 500's Aboriginal Council was established as the result of the efforts of Indigenous union members in 2003, because of their observation that neither the City nor the union were addressing their specific needs as Indigenous workers. However, the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council appears now to be largely unknown to Indigenous CUPE 500 members. Most Indigenous workers that we spoke with know of CUPE 500, but were unaware of the existence of the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council. One Indigenous worker said: "like, the Aboriginal Council, I had no idea they had this, I had no clue. And I've been here for five years." Another said "I've been with this union now for nine years and only now I've heard about this Indigenous component? And I've not been completely dead to the union. I have been keeping up to date. I had no clue we had an Aboriginal Council." Yet another worker, who has been a City of Winnipeg employee for 10 years, said about the Aboriginal Council: "No, I haven't even heard of that, ever." One of those we interviewed who has had an active involvement with CUPE 500 said, when asked if she thinks the CUPE Aboriginal Council is a good idea, that "I got a feeling it's just tokenism at this point."

The Chairperson of the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council at the time that we interviewed her said that when she took over as Chair in December, 2015, she learned that the Council was largely inactive — "they weren't trying to reach out, they hadn't met for a number of years."

In other words, it appears that the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council has largely atrophied. Yet most of those we interviewed expressed an interest in learning more about CUPE 500's Aboriginal Council. For example, one said: "Well, I didn't even know they had an ... Aboriginal Council on the union and that's a big help, a lot, a big eye-opener, you know?" Most Indigenous members we interviewed know little or nothing about, but are interested in, the Aboriginal Council.

By contrast, there is a City of Winnipeg Aboriginal Employees' Group that is not a part of CUPE 500, and it is better known by those we interviewed than CUPE 500's Aboriginal Council. What is more, it appears to be doing more work than the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council. One long-time Indigenous worker said about the City's Aboriginal Employees' Group: "if I have questions or concerns or looking at another job within the City, those are the people I go to. I never even thought to go to our union." The City's Aboriginal Employees' Group appears to have remained active, while CUPE 500's Aboriginal Council appears to have atrophied.

It is important to note, however, that the City of Winnipeg's Aboriginal Employees Group, although not a CUPE undertaking, was created as the result of an initiative taken by Indigenous City of Winnipeg employees. They were concerned that at that time, in 2003, there were relatively few Indigenous people working for the City and those that were employed by the City felt they were getting no support in moving up in the job hierarchy. This is precisely the concern expressed by women in CUPE starting 50 and more years ago. And 100 years ago it was workers of Eastern European descent who were confined to the lowest levels of the job hierarchy at the City of Winnipeg.

So a small number of Indigenous workers, acting in 2003 in the immediate aftermath of a racist incident, created the City of Winnipeg Aboriginal Employees Group to provide mentoring and support to Indigenous City of Winnipeg employees. One or two of those involved in creating the City of Winnipeg's Aboriginal Employees Group established the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council shortly afterward. It was created for the same reason as the City's Aboriginal Employees Group, as described by one of its Indigenous founders: "In my opinion at the time, we were under-represented in higher paying jobs, limited opportunities, and there had to be a mechanism to be able to move issues forward with the assistance of our union." The City's Aboriginal Employees Group appears to have remained active and relevant to Indigenous employees, while the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council has not.

But of particular significance is that both were created as the direct result of the actions of Indigenous workers. As one said, referring to their efforts to support Indigenous workers: "You know, there's the three or four of us that have been moving this along, fighting the good fight, you know, with the bureaucracy at City Hall, but also within our peers...it is a lot of work." That this work is being and has been done by Indigenous workers, and that most of those Indigenous workers that we interviewed expressed an interest in knowing more about the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council, suggests to us that there is a great deal of untapped potential here for a re-invigorated Council.

There is certainly no shortage of issues that are specific to Indigenous workers, and that the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council could be addressing. For example, most (not all) of those we interviewed have experienced racism in the workplace. When the City of Winnipeg Aboriginal Employees Group was created in 2003 they organized a forum to which all Indigenous City of Winnipeg employees were invited, and "racism was a big part of that forum. A lot of people still experienced racism.

You know, it was actually pretty emotional for a few of those people." The Indigenous worker who told us this then related a story about another Indigenous worker whose co-workers put feathers in his lunch box, thinking doing so was funny. Another of those we interviewed told us that "when we were working in [a particular City Department] we were getting told we all looked the same .... I was like, "really?" Because we look nothing alike. Like, absolutely nothing." She added that oftentimes "it's a feeling, right? So you walk into a room and it's like, 'oh, now what do *they* want.'" Perhaps worse, when she and others talk about the need to remove various barriers facing Indigenous people seeking employment with the City, "people don't want to make those changes ... and trying to explain, it's exhausting. And so that's just where you shake your head and just, sometimes you don't even want to deal with certain people so you try to get around that."

A young Indigenous worker at a City of Winnipeg site used by significant numbers of Indigenous people told us about "almost daily incidents of racism that I witnessed. It was not against me but it was against the Aboriginal community, the Indigenous community." Because of the high incidence of poverty in the area, lots of Indigenous people use the facility and incidents of racism are common. "Very rarely has it ever been addressed by the staff...like, I mean, there's a different Winnipeg, there's suburban Winnipeg, and there's urban poverty, Aboriginal or minority, or just poverty. And if you don't see it, if you don't understand it, there's no way on earth that you will be able to pick up some of the things that happen every day. You just don't see it." Indigenous people are consistently treated worse than other users of this City facility. "They were always thrown out faster than other people, I mean, if they came back and said, "that's racist," the staff would totally deny it, and like, I've seen it with my own eyes, Aboriginals treated differently than whites. Greeted differently, their complaints not taken seriously.... So there's this tension

that nobody does anything about, because they either just don't understand [or] they don't have someone in a higher position that's Indigenous, which is a really, really big issue." She added: "The Aboriginal people who use this [City facility] feel so discriminated against, and the staff have such little clue about that."

Another Indigenous worker told us of non-Indigenous co-workers who've been with the City for more than 20 years and yet don't know about the City's Aboriginal Youth Strategy. "It's mind-boggling because you've been here for 20-plus years." And when attempts are made to work with Indigenous organizations in the community for various purposes, "there's that little bit of resistance to build partnerships" with these organizations. Another Indigenous employee who has been active in working to promote Indigenous interests said, when asked if he had experienced racism or discrimination in the workplace: "Absolutely, in the workplace, in the union, I've dealt with it ... personal discrimination against me but that's linked directly to what I may be doing," that is, promoting Indigenous issues within the workplace and the union.

A significant number of those Indigenous workers that we interviewed expressed the concern that their culture and spirituality are not valued, either by the City of Winnipeg, CUPE 500 or City employees. They said that they would like to be able to smudge 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. One long-time City of Winnipeg worker described it this way:

There are a lot of things that are recognized in other cultures that aren't recognized in ours. And I think that's completely unfair .... I've been Sundancing for over 20 years, and every year, I mean like, why isn't that recognized? .... Some of us do live our lives like that. Not all of us do but some of us do, and I do that. Actually, to be honest with you, they [Sundances and

other Indigenous cultural practices] are more important to my family than, like, Christmas or whatever .... It's our way of life, it's my way of life.

Another example of the importance of traditional cultural practices is the case of an Indigenous worker who struggled with addiction, and at least in part through the efforts of the City of Winnipeg Aboriginal Employees Group was sent to the Native Addictions Council of Manitoba rather than a non-Indigenous treatment centre. As a City of Winnipeg worker that we interviewed described it: "He was pretty happy about learning about his culture because he never had that in his life before, so he's pretty happy."

This injection of Indigenous culture into the City of Winnipeg workplace produced positive results. But more broadly, as an Indigenous worker told us: "Conditions around sometimes don't make it easy [for Indigenous people] to exist in a large workplace." This is made clear not only by the dearth of Indigenous people in senior management positions, but also by the instances of racism, examples of which are described above, and the disrespect with which Indigenous workers believe their cultural practices and spirituality are treated. A long-term Winnipeg inner city activist, speaking in a different context, described the difficulties Indigenous people experience and feel in large, non-Indigenous organizations:

I've worked in non-Aboriginal organizations ... it's always been a struggle ... to maintain my sense of who I am because a lot of the things that are done inside of those systems go against my own values base, personally and as an Aboriginal person. That whole sense of competitiveness and over-competitiveness that exists there is just totally inconsistent with the notion of community and sharing, so as an Aboriginal person you can get lost in that (quoted in Silver 2016: 194–95).

And yet, in principle, the Indigenous values of community and sharing are completely consistent



with the trade union values of collective action for the common good. But this is missed in many cases because of the wide gulf that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, which is the product of many decades of colonialism and racism.

It is not surprising, then, that several of those we interviewed expressed concerns about the recruitment and retention of Indigenous workers by the City of Winnipeg. One woman told us that: “I feel like it’s really hard to recruit or to keep staff that are Aboriginal .... in [her department] I find they have trouble finding workers to work. Because I know [at one site in her department] they are constantly stealing spares, stealing my workers to go work at their site.” Another long-time Indigenous worker talked about “getting Aboriginal youth to apply to these positions, not making it so difficult.” She said that it is difficult to get the City and City employees to understand that there are barriers for Indigenous people: “you’re trying to make it more welcoming for Indigenous [people] to apply for City of Winnipeg jobs, and [to remove] some of the barriers they face, and they’re looking at those, in particular, those barriers—people don’t want to make those changes.” Non-Indigenous workers and senior management seem unable or unwilling to make the effort to understand the particular circumstances and barriers faced by Indigenous workers.

At least some of the Indigenous workers we interviewed said that their union has similarly proved unable or unwilling to respond as well as is necessary to the needs of Indigenous workers. One expressed his frustration at trying to get the union to act on these Indigenous issues, saying: “I think that the leadership at the Local really needs to stop pretending that they have an interest in this. They have to start producing the results.” He added further, referring to the fact that Mayor Brian Bowman declared 2016 to be the City of Winnipeg’s “Year of Reconciliation” (Welch 2016), that: “When an employer declares a year to be reconciliation it’s really only window

dressing.” Another long-time Indigenous worker said about the union: “I don’t see them reaching out .... So I don’t know, unless the union changes and makes it more supportive and culturally inviting as well, and standing up and speaking out a little bit, then yeah, I don’t see them being huge for us.”

A major part of the changes that have to happen is the hiring of Indigenous members to be part of the CUPE staff. Indigenous activist and former union leader Leslie Spillett insisted, when we spoke with her in 2016, that this is essential. One Indigenous CUPE 500 member expressed her frustration about the lack of such hiring by identifying a bitter irony: “But there isn’t a lot of jobs for Indigenous people. There are a lot of jobs for white people that go to workshops. Workshops, going to sweats, it’s not enough.” The CUPE staff has to include Indigenous staff members if Indigenous workers are going to become more active in the union.

There is support for the idea of the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council. When asked if he thought the Aboriginal Council was a good thing one Indigenous CUPE member said: “I absolutely think it is good and I think it is vital.” But he added, “and I think that in order for the union to stay relevant in our area, in this organization, it has to have a place that’s equal to the rest of the committees that are there. It has to be a contributing partner. It can’t be a partner that is just populated come election time to be the tool of the President or the Executive.”

Part of the problem, one interviewee argued, is the standard union ways of making decisions and doing their business, and in particular the formalized and majoritarian decision-making process. It disadvantages minorities like Indigenous people, and Indigenous people see these majority-rule processes as barriers to change. He added:

I don’t think that they [unions] fully understand and I don’t think that they are prepared to do,

or to take the necessary steps to ensure that we don't have to keep asking the same questions every year, every two years at Convention time. There's no direct resolution of the problems. All that happens is people move along, new people get elected and the same problems exist.

He expressed his frustration in being a minority in a large organization that is democratic, but in a formalized and majoritarian way.

Added to this is that the union, according to most of those we interviewed — people who are supportive in principle of trade unionism — does not speak or reach out to Indigenous members. First, this seems in too many cases to be literally so. Neither the union nor the Aboriginal Council meets personally or collectively with Indigenous workers in a consistent and proactive fashion. Recall the comment by one such worker: "I would like to be more in the loop. It would be nice if employees were given the opportunity to talk with the union." Second, it seems likely, according to at least some of those we interviewed, that the union, like the City and like many non-Indigenous workers, does not really understand Indigenous issues. This, of course, is the case for many and perhaps even most non-Indigenous people, and has recently found expression in Winnipeg being called Canada's "most racist city" (Macdonald 2015). And third, the union, at least in some cases, does not use language

that rank and file Indigenous members can relate to. As one Indigenous worker described it: "There's a lot of union speak, I wouldn't say that is friendly, I mean *they* are friendly, but I'm just saying that...you have to have a general background to sort of understand what is going on, otherwise you just sort of feel that there's a lot of words that are spoken but that you don't know what's happening.... You have to do a lot of work on your own to understand what they're talking about half the time." And in some cases the union does not address issues that reach Indigenous workers and that matter to them.

This is expressed most clearly in the frustration felt by those Indigenous workers who are aware of the existence of the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council. When asked his opinion of the Aboriginal Council one long-time CUPE member said: "Honestly? It's not very helpful at all. No, as an Aboriginal employee, this Aboriginal Council, I don't find it very helpful at all — unfortunately." Our interviewer, Larry Morrissette, told us that there were many more comments along these lines that were made after the recorder was turned off. This is consistent with what the former Chair Person of the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council told us about what she learned about the Council when she became Chair — "They weren't trying to reach out, they hadn't met for a number of years."

## Diversity, Inclusion and Union Renewal

Canada's labour force and unions' membership are becoming increasingly diverse: "virtually all of the growth of the Canadian labour force now comes from immigration" (Briskin 2006: 102); the labour force has become "feminized" (Foley 2009: 3); and in western Canada and particularly in Winnipeg, the Indigenous population continues to grow faster than and to be younger than the non-Indigenous population (Ultra Insights Planning and Research Services 2014). Growing numbers of Indigenous people have already moved into the paid labour force, and their numbers and proportion of the labour force will continue to grow for decades. It is essential that unions respond effectively to these dramatic changes.

But this may require changes in the ways that unions operate. In particular, as Anne Forrest (2009: 115) has argued: "these changes would de-centre the blue-collar, industrial male breadwinner who many believe is unionism's core worker." Carol Wall (2009: 79), an African-Canadian trade unionist, adds that "in order to have a vibrant, strong labour movement we must view the issues we face through an equity lens rather than what can be considered the dominant view of straight, white, Anglo-Saxon male Protestants."

Part of what this might mean for CUPE 500 is hiring Indigenous staffers. As Leslie Spillett puts it: "I think there has to be a lot more Indigenous people who are in leadership positions" in Manitoba-based unions. "That's where the transformation takes place, is when unions, not just CUPE but all unions, actually make an investment in Indigenous leadership and bring them in and give them jobs and support them to be that liaison or that bridge to its membership."

Cathy Woods, the Aboriginal Liaison with the Manitoba Government and General Employees' Union (MGEU), added in a 2016 interview that it is difficult for a union to connect with Indigenous members without a staff person dedicated to the task. CUPE resources are concentrated at the national office, so any effort to boost Indigenous staff would have to originate there.

Figuring out how to bring more Indigenous people on to unions' payrolls and increase the number of Indigenous union members may well be challenging for many in the union movement, but the result is likely to be stronger unions. Linda Briskin (2006: 101) argues that "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."



## CUPE 500 Initiatives

It is important to note that CUPE 500 has, in fact, taken steps to reach Indigenous members. The founding meeting of CUPE 500's Aboriginal Council took place on May 10, 2003. CUPE 500 had consulted the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Workers Council for advice, as well as the Manitoba Federation of Labour and the Canadian Labour Congress. CUPE 500 identified and communicated with Indigenous members to see if they wanted to be active on the Council.

The mandate of CUPE 500's Aboriginal Council is to provide leadership and support for Indigenous members. Its role is to produce newsletters, host a website and run new employee and seasonal recall orientations, as well as shop steward orientations.

The Aboriginal Council has collaborated with the City of Winnipeg's Aboriginal Employees Group's annual forum, and has made efforts to connect with the broader community. Former President Mike Davidson reached out to the Manitoba Metis Federation to discuss employment opportunities at the City of Winnipeg, and CUPE 500 has supported internship programs at the Centre for Aboriginal Resource Development, and high school and post-secondary summer employment for Indigenous students. It has collected and distributed hockey equipment to Indigenous communities throughout

Manitoba, contributed water bottles at Aboriginal Live events at the Forks, and sent letters of support to officials regarding the Shoal Lake #40 Freedom Road Campaign.

CUPE 500 contributed \$50,000 from its Joint Education Fund for Awareness for CUPE members at the City of Winnipeg and is currently pushing the City not to eliminate the Indigenous Awareness and Diversity Training program. It also actively supports civic initiatives such as the Oshki Annishinabe Nigaaniwak (OAN), which is the City of Winnipeg's Aboriginal Youth Strategy, and the Intergovernmental Strategic Aboriginal Alignment's Memorandum of Collaboration.

In 2016 Don Moran, CUPE 500 President Gord Delbridge and CUPE 500's Equality Representative met with Mayor Bowman and shared information on education and training in order to enable all City of Winnipeg employees to understand Indigenous history and culture, and to make the workplace more respectful and inclusive.

These efforts notwithstanding, the Indigenous CUPE 500 members with whom we spoke, pro-union though many appear to be, feel disconnected from CUPE 500 and their Aboriginal Council. More needs to be done.

## Conclusions

What these findings suggest to us is that Indigenous City of Winnipeg workers have been marginalized in the workplace and — despite some important steps by CUPE 500 — in their union as well. Many experience racism in the workplace, and feel that their unique identities as Indigenous people are not recognized and valued, or even understood either by the employer or by their union. This is consistent with the findings of Mills and McCreary (2012: 122) that any efforts that have been made to educate non-Indigenous workers have not reached the rank and file. CUPE National has done some very good work on Indigenous issues at the national level, and CUPE 500 has also made numerous efforts to reach its Indigenous members. Yet Indigenous members of CUPE 500 continue to feel disconnected.

Nevertheless, those Indigenous workers that we interviewed are supportive in principle of trade unionism, and are aware of the advantages of working in a unionized workplace. Many are keen to learn more about, and potentially to become involved with, CUPE 500 and the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council. We did not find any of the anti-unionism among the Indigenous workers that we interviewed that might have been expected given what has historically been

an often negative relationship between unions and Indigenous people. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we interviewed only fifteen Indigenous City of Winnipeg workers, and anti-union members may simply have chosen not to be interviewed.

The comments made by those we did interview, however, make it clear that CUPE 500 and the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council are going to have to reach out personally and meaningfully to Indigenous members if they are to secure their active involvement. It is a positive step to have created an Aboriginal Council. But a more proactive and more personalized approach to including Indigenous workers is required. In the Indigenous community in Winnipeg it is often said that “it’s all about relationships.” The CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council has to be proactive in reaching out to Indigenous members, listening to and responding positively to their specific concerns, building relationships with them and actively and genuinely inviting and encouraging their involvement in the union. Building relationships can only be done in a face-to-face fashion, and requires that non-Indigenous partners to the relationship be prepared to learn in a genuine way about the Indigenous experience

with colonialism and racism, and about Indigenous cultural practices and spiritual beliefs.

In addition to listening to Indigenous workers, the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council could usefully develop and implement an educational program consistent with what appears to have been part of the original purpose. One long-time Indigenous union member told us that early in the life of the Aboriginal Council “we learned that one of the things that we had to do was we had to educate our Aboriginal members, sort of, [about their] rights within the workplace, and how they go about getting promoted and those kinds of things.” Another senior worker with previous experience as a steward said, about CUPE 500 and its Aboriginal Council, “I just think they should recruit, get more involved, educate them on unions, people don’t know anything about unions.... That’s how we’re going to make change.” This would be consistent with what Stephanie Ross and her colleagues (2015: 175–6) described as “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.”

Part of the issue, however, is that educational efforts have to go beyond the “surface” level. The fact that Canada’s history is a colonial history, and that Indigenous people have been badly damaged by colonialism, and that the damage done has had consequences that persist to this day cannot be genuinely learned simply by inviting an Indigenous leader to deliver an hour-long talk to non-Indigenous members. A deeper, more sustained and more experiential approach is necessary, and we make a recommendation below.

A deeper and more sustained approach to the racism that so pervades City of Winnipeg workplaces also has to be developed, and CUPE 500 and its Aboriginal Council ought to take the lead on this. When asked what she thought CUPE 500 and the Aboriginal Council ought to be doing, one Indigenous worker said: “tackle the racism issue — in some way, shape or form — that we see

every day.... But because it’s so swept under the rug all the time it gets soul-crushing.”

It is also clear that many (not all) Indigenous City of Winnipeg workers have particular workplace needs that are specific to their being Indigenous people. They want their cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices to be understood and recognized as being equal to the cultural and spiritual beliefs of non-Indigenous workers. This has been a major concern of Indigenous workers in many Canadian workplaces. This should find expression, to the extent that this is possible, in City of Winnipeg/CUPE 500 collective agreements.

And many of the Indigenous workers that we interviewed want the barriers that prevent so many Indigenous people from being employed by the City to be broken down. CUPE Saskatchewan has already shown the way forward in this regard, with their work in that province to implement the Representative Workforce Strategy. The goal of the RWS, as expressed by the Saskatoon Health Region (2010) — “to effectively attract, recruit, retain and promote First Nations and Metis employment” — is one that could usefully be replicated at the City of Winnipeg, with leadership from CUPE 500 and the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council.

These are tangible goals that CUPE and the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council can work to achieve, and this is work that should and can be done in the spirit of reconciliation as described in the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*.

There is much unions can do to implement the Calls to Action in the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Call to Action number 92.ii stipulates that Indigenous people 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.” Call to Action 92iii calls upon corporations and presumably other “mainstream” organizations to “provide education for management and staff

on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015: 337).

Although historically unions have often been just as guilty as other institutions of discriminatory practices, many have more recently been concerned about reaching out to Indigenous workers and pushing employers to such actions as set out in the *Final Report of the TRC*.

With their large memberships and influence in workplaces, unions are well placed to play an important role in Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. This is especially so given that unions have long played a leading role in the promotion of progressive causes, and “unions remain the most responsive and democratic of institutional arenas available in our society” for continuing to promote progressive causes (Brisken 2006: 110). In the process of doing so, unions can only benefit. As Brisken (2006: 101) has argued: “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*.”

# Recommendations

Based on what we have learned by speaking with Indigenous workers employed by the City of Winnipeg, we recommend that CUPE and the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council take the following steps in order to bring Indigenous CUPE 500 members into the union in a full, active and meaningful way. We believe that doing so will build a stronger union, which is better able to advance the interests of all its members, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike. We recommend that:

- The CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council initiate and carry out a “listening and learning” campaign with Indigenous CUPE 500 members. This should entail meeting personally with every Indigenous CUPE 500 member, either one-on-one or in small groups. The campaign should involve listening, learning, developing relationships and inviting the active participation of Indigenous members in the union and especially in the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council.
- Arising out of the “listening and learning” campaign, Indigenous CUPE 500 members be encouraged to revitalize, and be

supported in revitalizing, the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council. Equity-seeking groups have self-organized within their unions for 40 years and more, and this has been an essential causal factor in the gains that they have made. However, too many Indigenous CUPE 500 members are unaware of the Aboriginal Council, and the Council is not sufficiently energetic and demanding to make the gains that are needed. This process is likely to require not only the hiring of Indigenous staff, but also the development of leadership training for interested Indigenous members of the union.

- CUPE 500 make it an immediate priority to push CUPE National for resources to hire Indigenous staff to take the lead in carrying out the “listening and learning” campaign, and in providing support to, and breathing life into, CUPE 500’s Aboriginal Council. This process should include encouraging the active engagement of Indigenous workers with the union and with the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council.
- In order to adopt the same successful strategy for coalition building that women

employed, the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council should work to build meaningful alliances with the many vibrant Indigenous community-based organizations in Winnipeg.

- An educational strategy for non-Indigenous CUPE 500 members be developed, and that consideration be given to modeling it on the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb's "Breaking Barriers and Building Bridges" (CCPA-Mb 2012). This educational initiative will need to be developed in conjunction with Indigenous elders and leaders, and should be piloted at Thunderbird House. In broad terms this would involve bringing non-Indigenous CUPE 500 members together for an entire day with Indigenous CUPE 500 members and elders in an Indigenous space located in a largely Indigenous part of the city — namely Thunderbird House at Main and Higgins — to get to know each other, and to develop a deeper

understanding of Indigenous ways of being and Indigenous concerns.

- CUPE 500 and the CUPE 500 Aboriginal Council develop a strategy, in consultation with Indigenous community-based organizations and with Don Moran, CUPE's National Aboriginal Advisor, to work with the City of Winnipeg to significantly increase the numbers of Indigenous City of Winnipeg employees and to make sure that their numbers remain proportional to the growing Indigenous population. Efforts to move existing Indigenous employees into more senior positions are also required. This would fit with the Truth and Reconciliation Call to Action 92. ii and iii as noted above;
- CUPE 500 collaborate with other unions representing City workers, such as Local 1505 of the Amalgamated Transit Union, in a combined effort to promote Indigenous workers' issues at the municipal level.

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