

**INDIGENOUS WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS: SETTLER-COLONIAL
CAPITALISM, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' LABOUR AND UNION ENGAGEMENT**

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Abstract

It is only in the last few decades that Canadian trade unions have expressed labour solidarity with Indigenous peoples by bringing their attention to the distinct concerns of Indigenous workers in the workplace and beyond it. Trade unions have taken important steps to express support for their Indigenous members and their communities, yet little is understood about Indigenous peoples' experiences in the capitalist labour market shaped by land dispossession, the ongoing manifestations of settler-colonial oppression, and the systemic economic marginalization by Canadian institutions and employers. It is pertinent to identify what unions are doing to support them and where they can strengthen labour solidarity so that they can develop critical sites of resistance against colonial-capitalist power. A closer analysis is needed to understand Indigenous peoples' relationships to unions, relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working people, and the challenges for unions to build united struggles with Indigenous peoples.

This study examines the spaces of union engagement with Indigenous workers and their communities amongst the challenges presented by the reality of ongoing colonial oppression in Canada. The purpose of this study is twofold: 1) to examine the roles that trade unions have had with Indigenous peoples in the paid labour market and recent initiatives that they have taken to meet the needs of Indigenous workers and unionists, and 2) to analyze the ways trade unionists understand and approach Indigenous peoples' concerns and anti-colonial struggles within the broader confines of settler-colonial capitalism, and to determine the challenges to transforming their practices of solidarity with Indigenous peoples. This study draws upon semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 22 Indigenous and non-Indigenous key informants who are elected trade union officials, staff, and rank-and-file unionists. The study's findings reveal emerging activism

of Indigenous workers within their workplaces, unions, and beyond, and the complexities between Indigenous peoples' relationships with paid labour, unions, and struggles for self-determination. I argue that unions are turning their attention to support the distinct needs of Indigenous workers and to support anti-colonial struggles, but they are limited to redressing the effects of settler-colonial capitalism. They face difficulty engaging in solidarity due to the structural limitations of settler-colonial capitalism. By reflecting on participant insights into these challenges, this study proposes an anti-colonial framework for unionists to transform their practices of labour solidarity.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| CAS | Children's aid society |
| CAW | Canadian Auto Workers' Union |
| CCF | Cooperative Commonwealth Federation |
| CLC | Canadian Labour Congress |
| CPC | Communist Party of Canada |
| CPR | Canadian Pacific Railway |
| CUPE | Canadian Union of Public Employees |
| DIA | Department of Indian Affairs |
| DBC | Dominion Bridge Company |
| HBC | Hudson's Bay Company |
| IBA | Impact benefit agreement |
| ILA | International Longshoremen's Association |
| IMT | Indigenous Mobilization Team |
| IWW | Industrial Workers of the World |
| JLC | Jewish Labour Committee of Canada |
| LiUNA | Laborers' International Union of North America |
| NDP | New Democratic Party of Canada |
| OCBTU | Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists |
| OFL | Ontario Federation of Labour |
| OLRB | Ontario Labour Relations Board |
| OPSEU | Ontario Public Service Employees' Union |
| OSSTF | Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation |
| P3 | Public-private partnership |
| PSAC | Public Service Alliance of Canada |
| RCMP | Royal Canadian Mounted Police |
| TLC | Trades and Labour Congress of Canada |
| TRC | Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada |
| UFAWU | United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union |
| USW | United Steelworkers of Canada |

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introducing the research

Indigenous peoples created their own multi-faceted modes of life in what is now known as Canada and they have resisted colonial domination for over 500 years.¹ The systemic and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands, effects of colonial policies to control almost all aspects of their lives, and the exclusion and racism by Canadian institutions has resulted in intense economic marginalization. These issues deserve critical attention. Though it is seldom recognized that Indigenous peoples have been, and continue to be, active as paid labourers and union members. There is little acknowledged within the labour movement about Indigenous people's leadership and participation in historic workers' struggles alongside non-Indigenous people. While there has been some excellent work done by labour activists and scholars to uncover these 'hidden' histories, we are still piecing together the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the context of the labour movement, and more broadly.

Some Indigenous peoples entered commercial industries on their own terms, balancing one foot in the capitalist mode of production and another in Indigenous modes of life. At times, they organized their own workplace actions. In some cases, they actively organized strikes, union organizing drives, and other political actions in labour unions and workers' organizations.

¹ I use the term Indigenous peoples to collectively denote many nations with distinct cultures, histories, circumstances, and political institutions whose ancestors are the original inhabitants of Canada, and who for this reason share a special relationship to this land. This includes people who are not "Status Indians" as designated by the *Indian Act*.

However, in many cases, they have been severely exploited by the state and shut out of an increasingly competitive and racially segmented paid labour market. Widespread racism on the part of the Canadian ruling class and non-Indigenous peoples has been a contentious issue for a long time preventing non-Indigenous workers and unionists from acting in solidarity with their Indigenous counterparts.

Only in the 1960's did unions begin to publicly declare labour solidarity with Indigenous peoples after gaining momentum against the Canadian state to renegotiate treaties, land claims, economic development, and political participation. Today there is shared sentiment amongst many non-Indigenous unionists that their organizations need to express solidarity with Indigenous members and their communities as a critical piece of their social justice activism, both in terms of bringing their attention to the distinct concerns of Indigenous workers and trying to address their needs in the labour market, and by supporting Indigenous-led movements for self-determination. It is pertinent to better understand how settler-colonial capitalism structures affect Indigenous peoples in the context of the labour market and anti-colonial struggles, what unions are doing to support them, and where they are falling short.

This research study is concerned with trade union engagement with Indigenous workers and their communities amongst the challenges presented by the reality of ongoing colonial oppression in Canada. It explores the activism of Indigenous workers within unionized segments of the labour market and asks what they would like their unions to do to better meet their needs in the workplace and their livelihoods. Indigenous trade unionists who participated in this study shared their lived histories of racism and precarity in the labour market which has led them to push for

unionization, better wages and working conditions, resist occupational segregation, and bargain collective agreement language to try to meet their distinct needs. Secondly, this study investigates the roles of trade unions in building support for anti-colonial struggles for self-determination within the broader confines of settler-colonial capitalism. I navigate union understandings of settler-colonialism, their attempts to show labour solidarity, and the multi-layered conflicts between unions and struggles for self-determination which have come into conflict with capitalist production. I uncover ground-breaking activism by grassroots Indigenous-led groups, such as the Ontario Public Service Employees Union's (OPSEU) Indigenous Mobilization Team. They used union resources to reach out to educate unions members and First Nations band councils in ways that have not been pursued before, to develop relationships amongst them, and to provoke much needed discussion about reforming services to Indigenous peoples as informed by their experiences of ongoing colonial oppression.²

Altogether, this study maps the spaces of union engagement with Indigenous workers and the immense challenges and possibilities in building common understanding and solidarity. By looking at these phenomena, I extrapolate the ways that unions are beginning to turn their attention to issues concerning the needs of Indigenous members and their communities, and where unions face immense challenges to engage in solidarity on both fronts.

² The term First Nations “refers to that group of people officially known as Indians under the *Indian Act* and does not include Inuit or Métis peoples” (Vowel, 2016, p. 11). It is used in this dissertation to refer to a band under the administration of the *Indian Act*. As I note earlier in this dissertation, this state-imposed system means that bands and their councils do not have sovereignty from the Canadian government.

1.2 Overview of the chapters

This thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the thesis. It provides a personal reflection on my motivation for pursuing the study and describes the qualitative methodology on which the study is premised. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive literature review to explain the objectives of settler-colonial capitalism and historicize the Canadian state's dispossession of Indigenous peoples which sought to eradicate their modes of life and shape all aspects of their lives, including their lives in the paid labour market. This chapter traces the development of Canada's settler-colonial capitalist economy to explain where Indigenous workers have been exploited by the state, where they have participated in workers' struggles and unions and been excluded, and why they are limited to precarious positions in the contemporary labour market. As my dissertation seeks to understand how Indigenous peoples envision the future of their livelihoods on their own terms, this chapter also details the varying perspectives of what Indigenous self-determination is.

Chapter 3 provides theoretical groundings for my study to better understand the limitations of unions and the complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the context of the labour movement. I analyze interrelated strands of Marxist, anti-colonial and historical materialist thought to explain how racism, processes of racialization, and state intervention in the settler-colonial context of Canada have contributed to tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working peoples. Drawing upon the literature of labour scholars and Marxist theorists, this chapter theorizes the contradictions of unions which present challenges for their struggle to challenge the structural limitations of capitalism and stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the key findings of the study. Chapter 4 delves into the reflections and findings from my participant interviews about their lived experiences in the labour market and within their unions: Indigenous trade unionists' experiences of labour precarity and occupational segregation, their responses to the systemic discrimination in the workplace, and the challenges they have faced in their unions when trying to advance their social influence via demands for equity representation. In addition, this chapter explores union attempts to bargain collective agreement language to meet the distinct needs of Indigenous workers and experiences trying to unionize Indigenous workers in unique jurisdictional circumstances, such as First Nations reserve workplaces. Chapter 5 provides insight into union engagement with Indigenous peoples' concerns and movements for self-determination, and their structural limitations within the broad confines of settler-colonial capitalism. I examine the labour movement's historical approach to understanding colonial oppression and expressions of solidarity to support Indigenous peoples' concerns and struggles for self-determination. Here I also focus on the activism of Indigenous unionists by looking at OPSEU's Indigenous Mobilization Team (IMT), which sought to develop relationships between unions, First Nations band councils, and Indigenous communities, and advocate for the reform of public services through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples. Additionally, this chapter outlines the challenges for unions in navigating Indigenous employers, First Nations band councils, and Indigenous peoples seeking self-determination, and the challenges in building labour solidarity in the broad confines of settler-colonial capitalism. This chapter also suggests where unions could strategically engage in anti-colonial struggles to better support Indigenous peoples fighting for self-determination and where they face structural limitations.

In Chapter 6, I complete the thesis by mapping the main spaces of engagement between unions and their Indigenous members and with Indigenous movements for self-determination. I outline recommendations to strengthen practices of labour solidarity with Indigenous trade unionists and their communities which I believe contributes to an anti-colonial framework for the labour movement. I provide my thoughts on my dissertation contributions, its limitations and paths for future research, as well as my concluding remarks on the potential for unions to better support Indigenous anti-colonial struggles.

1.3 Locating myself as the researcher

“... There comes a time when all oppressed people must join together in a united struggle and form a new revolutionary class. It appears that this new class will comprise women, youth, natives, and workers. At the same time, the ruling class must be prevented from isolating any one group from the remainder, as they did in 1885 and again in 1970 during the Québec crisis.”

- Howard Adams

“The only reason it became such a historic victory in Seattle was because black, brown, white workers all rejected that false divisiveness. Workers of colour and white workers recognized — and we wouldn’t have won if they hadn’t—that we have to fight for this together, because our fates are interlinked.” - Kshama Sawant on the Fight for \$15 movement in Seattle

The heart of my research is the notion of working class solidarity and power. There is an urgent need to build a renewed, unified working class movement that can not only make real, impactful

improvements in the workers' lives but go further to challenge the structures of settler-colonialism and capitalism. I am still fairly new to the labour movement in the Greater Toronto Area but I gained the most experience during three years of my Ph. D studies when I organized in the Fight for \$15 and Fairness campaign. Our campaign aimed to raise the provincial minimum wage to \$15 an hour and demand "fairness" in employment standards in terms of gaining paid sick days, equal-pay language, job security, and predictable scheduling. The campaign deeply shaped me—intellectually and emotionally. It provided a glimpse into the labour movement where I have met people who are serious about building working class power. I have also seen incredible new leaders—women of colour, Indigenous workers, immigrants, migrants, and LGBTQ2S+ workers—gain the confidence to begin organizing in their workplaces and communities.

One of my most fond memories of the campaign was organizing student actions in solidarity with campus food service workers in 2017. The workers, most of whom were recent immigrant women of colour from the Caribbean and South Asia, said that they deserved higher incomes, better health benefits, and to feel respected for their labour. Their struggle with corporate management reached a boiling point after years of differential treatment between different racial groups on the shop floor. I organized alongside a multiracial coalition of student groups and campus unions to show these workers that they did not stand alone. Over just a few months, we forced so much pressure on management that they caved in—workers won \$15 an hour starting wages and health benefit coverage for both full-time and part-time members. I will never forget when a worker explained to me: "With the help of student power, we could fight back harder, 100 per cent. We learned how to fight back". I was so moved to see workers like her reject the

false divisiveness management tried to impose on her and her colleagues. They seized the opportunity to strike against the deplorable forms of workplace racism and sexism instead of accepting the status quo.

Those moments give me hope and made me realize that unionists have the potential to building working class power to resist employers and governments, though unions have serious limitations. I've met rank-and-file unionists who are daring to take direct action in their workplaces, and young ones who are aware of historic victories in the labour movement. They want to rebuild labour militancy and ultimately challenge the systemic roots of capitalist exploitation, both in terms of the impacts of this exploitation in workplaces and beyond. But there is barely any real discussion within unions about challenging the power of capital accumulation, let alone confronting the limitations unions face on a day-to-day basis, like challenging the serious limitations of the labour relations regime. That the regime is designed to simply manage the capitalist employment relationship is problematic because we are limited to redressing the worst impacts of state power and capitalist exploitation. It creates a sense of compromise for workers in their day-to-day lives, that they should just give up on challenging systemic power because it doesn't seem possible.

And yet, unions and other workers' organizations have historically mobilized to win important victories, like ending the widespread exploitation of child labour, helping establish a universal health care system, and so much more. We can win such transformative and life-changing struggles again. I also know that unions are truly concerned with the ways that racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination divide working class communities—labour

activists have undeniably been at the forefront of human rights struggles for decades. I think that is why unions know that social oppression is a problem for the labour movement, and they critique the ways that the Canadian government, institutions, and employers deeply oppress groups of people, like Indigenous peoples. Therefore, I'm very interested to know how and why unions have acted to support Indigenous peoples and their communities. I don't think this is because they suddenly realized they should do something—I think it is the outcome of Indigenous peoples' influence on the non-Indigenous society. Through the pain-staking struggles of resisting state power since the first European traders and officials tried to change their modes of life, Indigenous peoples have demanded attention to their anti-colonial movements. Although sadly, unions (and the broader political left) have only come to the realization that they should support Indigenous peoples' acts of resistance in recent decades. And they are still coming to terms with understanding what colonial and capitalist oppression means and what to do about it. These are not only systems which impact Indigenous peoples—they affect non-Indigenous people too.

It took me years to think about my own understanding of settling on Indigenous peoples' traditional lands. I, like many other people who grew up in the Greater Toronto Area in the 1990's, never learned about Indigenous people's resistance to settler-colonial capitalism, let alone their histories through their perspectives. I only began to learn about Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination when I joined a few university friends to support a blockade for a day in Elsipogtog First Nation in the spring of 2014. Community members of the First Nation led a blockade against shale gas exploration by SWN Resources Canada, which was given approval by the New Brunswick government. The footage of Mi'kmaq women holding their

ground in front of dozens of RCMP officers was incredibly striking for many people when it was covered in the news. My friends and I decided to go to Elsipogtog First Nation to do what we could to support Mi'kmaq land defenders. I was amazed by the militant organization of the blockade itself and I remember seeing the police vehicles set ablaze. Although I also remember feeling genuinely afraid of the police who constantly surveilled the area and who were heavily armed. When I was there, we didn't face any police violence like the land defenders, but I was still afraid in case something unexpected would happen.



Figure 1. Mi'kmaq land defenders in 2014 (Photo by author).

The experience made me develop a profound respect for the Mi'kmaq land defenders whom I saw as not only rightfully protecting their land but resisting the corporate destruction of ecological life which impacts everyone. However, truthfully, even after that experience I didn't understand that settler-colonization of Indigenous peoples is *ongoing*, and I didn't comprehend it

as something that continuously *reshapes* Indigenous existence, as Kanien'kehá:ka scholar Taiaiake Alfred argues. I also didn't see my positionality in settler-colonialism. I didn't understand that I have rights and privileges that are denied to Indigenous peoples and that the state constantly tries to obstruct genuine self-determination. I only realized these truths after learning from the works of Indigenous theorists I draw upon in this dissertation.

After beginning my Ph. D, I began to think more about what I'd like to do in the labour movement and what it means to support Indigenous peoples in their anti-colonial struggle. That unions have long played a leading role in advocating for social equity in workplaces and advancing human rights is inspiring to me, although I've come to realize that there is a lack of understanding and practicing solidarity from an anti-colonial framework. I'm intrigued that after movements like Idle No More, and reactions to the revelations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), there are increasing calls for a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples. I know that some non-Indigenous unionists have taken action to show labour solidarity with Indigenous peoples following the public discourse on the TRC's final reports in 2015, noting that we as non-Indigenous people need to know the histories of residential schools, past and ongoing forms of colonial oppression, treaties, and more, and to think about our positionality in settler-colonialism. Yet, when thinking about union engagement with Indigenous peoples there are very complex situations to grapple with, like when unionists in oil, gas and other extractive industries are reliant on their jobs for their livelihoods, but who are complicit in exploiting Indigenous peoples' lands (and for that matter, participating in the destruction of our ecosystems). And all of us in the working class who are complicit in our jobs and livelihoods on Indigenous lands. There is no way to easily grapple with these situations and

try to advocate for an alternative system which is free of colonial and capitalist oppression.

I know now that I want to dedicate my life to building working class power and to supporting Indigenous peoples' anti-colonial struggles. I want to assess what unions are doing to express labour solidarity, how they understand their relationships with Indigenous peoples, and to theorize what they can do to try to oppose the structural limitations of settler-colonial capitalism. I know it's possible for non-Indigenous unionists to foster meaningful relationships with Indigenous workers and their communities, but at times it seems difficult amidst the 'false divisiveness' imposed by governments and employers every day, and the deep racism which persists on a societal level. I'd like to work on these relationships.

As a socialist, I'm also aware that the Canadian political left has had a tenuous relationship with Indigenous theorists, not only due to widespread racism, but ignorant beliefs, such as that Indigenous peoples should assimilate into the non-Indigenous working class. Indigenous theorists rightly oppose Marxist-inspired arguments stating that Indigenous peoples must 'subsume' themselves into the non-Indigenous proletariat as a necessary step to a socialist revolution. For example, Leanne Simpson argues (2017, p. 82):

The goal of radical resurgent education and mobilization cannot be the proletarianization of our people... The massive shift of Indigenous peoples into the urban wage economy and the middle class cannot be the solution to dispossession, because this consolidates dispossession.

In no way do I wish to support this political approach in my research and work. I think Indigenous peoples must be in control over their own destinies and that they must be supported

in their distinct anti-colonial struggle. When there is a call for non-Indigenous socialists to support Indigenous struggles for land and modes of life, we should be there. We should demonstrate that the fight for Indigenous self-determination is a struggle that concerns all working class people.

I am excited about the potential for the non-Indigenous left, both within academia and within the Canadian labour movement, to build on the rich insights of Indigenous theorists like Lee Maracle, Howard Adams, Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard. As my dissertation will show, there are a few examples of past struggles where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have united against their employers and against governments. Whether the labour movement is truly supporting Indigenous members and anti-colonial struggles by building deep solidarity is an open question. There is much to do to have non-Indigenous trade unionists realize that there needs to be systemic change. We have unfulfilled lives under settler-colonial capitalism as our living and working conditions are exploited in the name of profit. As Maracle and Adams argue, the Indigenous and non-Indigenous left have great potential to learn from each other. Those active in the Canadian labour movement and political left have an important role to play in building anti-capitalist struggle and supporting movements for Indigenous self-determination because they are critical sites of resistance—if these struggles are built to their full potential, they could unleash revolutionary power.

1.4 Reflections on the research methodology

I interviewed 22 participants for this study to gather a substantial diversity of perspectives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous trade unionists. My study employs a qualitative research

methodology which I found to be the most appropriate research approach considering that my study is interested in the politics and social phenomena of unions. Much of my study seeks to understand how trade unionists make sense of their lived experiences at work, in their activism, and their worldviews more broadly. I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews and observation to allow the research to be close to the natural settings of the social phenomena that were being studied (Palys, 1997). I strongly believe that the interviews sparked participants to deeply reflect on their trade unions and to critique where they feel their unions are falling short to support Indigenous peoples in the workplace and beyond it. I designed my interviews to focus on specific issues, however, I allowed participants to respond open-endedly so that they could discuss topics that interested or intrigued them. My primary goal via the interview process was to uncover how my participants “[made] sense of their own experience” with regard to their real, lived experiences in trade unions (Peirce, 1995, p. 571).

Another reason why I employed a qualitative research approach was to understand trade unionists’ worldviews, experiences, and interactions with one another. While quantitative methods are necessary to give us an indication of the overall reach and proportional composition of social phenomena, I think that a qualitative research approach adds another dimension of historical interpretation that cannot be obtained through quantitative measurement. For instance, storytelling in interviews enables participants to assert their worldviews in their own words. I designed my interviews to allow my participants to share their life histories concerning their union activism. This technique was borrowed from life history methods where the researcher guides the participant to explain details of the life he or she has lived, what he or she remembers of it, and what he or she wants others to know of it, usually because of a guided interview by

another person (Lewis-Beck *et al.*, 2004).

My study is politically motivated. I agree with a growing number of qualitative researchers that it is “neither possible nor desirable for researchers to stand outside of a social world of which they are necessarily part” (Joshee, 2012, p. 641). In fact, I agree with Reva Joshee’s assertion that “research is always and forever a political enterprise” (*Ibid.*, p. 643) due to the manifestations of social power in the research process itself. I do not wish to separate my research from my experiences in the Canadian labour movement and thinking as a socialist. I see research as a political endeavour to challenge the status quo in any way I can, and I hope for my research and life’s work to help build the power of the working class people I encounter daily. In my interviews I often spoke to participants about my experiences in trade unions, labour campaigns, and university politics. One can say, therefore, that being honest about my vantage point as an engaged researcher improved the objective quality of the research results by facilitating “self-awareness, reflexivity, and interactivity” (*Ibid.*, p. 770) in the research process. I believe that my political identification as an activist in labour and student movements created comfort for participants, although I cannot be sure.

1.5 Participant selection and location

I began my fieldwork process by selecting participants from existing contacts and colleagues within the Canadian labour movement. Key informants included elected trade union officials, staff, and directors (e.g., staff of human rights, equity, and anti-racism), and rank-and-file unionists who have extensive experience in the labour movement. Additionally, I made sure that key informants had a minimum 3-year experience in their unions. I established this criterion so I

could delve into the insights of experienced trade unionists who have taken root in their unions and have institutional familiarity with their respective organization's strategies, especially regarding Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. The majority of participants had well beyond 3 years of experience in their unions. While I recognize that the labour movement encompasses organizations and activists from non-unionized workplaces, community groups, workers' action centres, and more, my study draws upon unions because they are the clearest expression of the most organized and active components of the labour movement.

After interviewing my initial contacts, I conducted snowball sampling to reach further participants and trade unions with which I had limited contact. I selected initial contacts to interview with whom I have known in my past experiences in the labour movement. As someone who has been involved with unions who publicly express interest in equity-seeking issues, human rights, and/or a social justice agenda, it was easy to spark interest in my study among my contacts there. But I note at this time I faced little success securing any participation from private sector unions. I was very interested in hearing from unions who have members in construction, oil and gas extraction, and related industries because I wanted to learn how their Indigenous members have explored activism within these unions, and I wanted to better understand how these unions navigate conflicts which arise when Indigenous-led struggles for their land and resources pose a threat to unionized jobs. I also was interested in exploring how unions have participated in impact benefit agreements negotiated between them, First Nations band councils, and private corporations. After calling and e-mailing several of these private sector unions of interest, and asking my initial contacts if they know of anyone they could put me in touch with, I did not achieve much success. The silence of these unions tells me that they are not interested in

openly discussing their union activism to either support the needs of their Indigenous members or the relations they have with First Nations band councils and other Indigenous communities they are in contact with. Despite this challenge, I managed to recruit 4 participants from private sector unions whose members are involved in some of the aforementioned issues. At the same time as I contacted and interview participants, I reviewed various records held by trade unions (e.g. reports, press releases, and archival materials) concerning histories of Indigenous peoples' union activism and campaigns to support Indigenous' struggles for self-determination.

My final sample of research participants includes 10 members of union staff, 4 trade unionists who are retired, and 8 current union members. My participant selection consists of 15 unionists who currently or formerly were in public sector trade unions (CUPE, PSAC, OPSEU, and OSSTF), 4 from private sector trade unions (Unifor and USW), and 2 staff from labour federations. 15 participants are currently living and/or working in the Greater Toronto, Hamilton and Peterborough area, 6 are from the Ottawa region and 1 from the Mattawa region. I note that a higher number of non-Indigenous participants commented on being in senior elected union leadership and staff positions, compared to Indigenous participants. I interviewed 6 non-Indigenous elected trade union leaders, staff and directors, and only 4 Indigenous participants in similar positions.

I interviewed 13 participants who identified as Indigenous and 9 participants who identified as non-Indigenous.³ Indigenous participants included 7 women and 6 men who identified as Mohawk, Cree, Métis, and Anishinaabe. Non-Indigenous participants included 5 women and 4

³ Before I asked participants to self-identify themselves as "Indigenous" or "non-Indigenous" I informed them that this is a voluntary ask in the study.

men. Of those participants, 5 identified as white from European backgrounds, and 4 from African, South Asian and East Asian backgrounds. 3 participants in total identified as LGBTQ2S+ and a few participants identified as religious minorities (Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, etc.). I sought diversity in the selection of my participants because I agree with Sukti Dasgupta's notion that "the view of unions as expressing the collective voice can prevail only if their concerns are sufficiently broad to encompass those of widely differing types of workers, notably the vulnerable ones" (Dasgupta, 2002, p. 413). I believe that my study highlights the perspectives of minority workers whose views are not reflected in the collective voice of trade union leaders. I also hope that these minority perspectives help to "confer legitimacy on perspectives and knowledge forms that have generally been devalued and excluded from the public realm" (Joshee, 2012, p. 641), particularly when it comes to the perspectives of Indigenous trade unionists.

I conducted my interviews in the southern Ontario region because this is the region where I am most familiar with the labour movement. I know that the limitation with this research design is the inability to gather perspectives from the French-speaking labour movement and to gather very diverse perspectives across Canada. I did not conduct interviews further than the southern Ontario region due to time and resources constraints. The vast majority of my interviews were conducted in Toronto, Hamilton and Ottawa. I do not wish to neglect less populated areas, but I also recognize that cities such as Toronto, Hamilton and Ottawa are the main centres for trade union gatherings and political activities, so that is where I performed most of my fieldwork.

1.6 Data collection and analysis

My face-to-face, semi-structured interviews allowed for a personal interaction with the participants and provided me with the opportunity to probe deeply into their thoughts (Palys, 1997). Several interviews lasted over 1 hour and 30 minutes in length and a few interviews were near 2 hours. I created fictitious names and concealed identifiable details to maintain the confidentiality of the participants' identities. In a further attempt to minimize the risk of disclosing their identities I only provided limited background context of each participant. Due to the anonymous character of my interviews and open-endedness of the interview questions, I did not sense that any of my participants felt uncomfortable to speak frankly about their experiences in their unions. In fact, I was very humbled by the openness, excitement, and thoughtfulness from many of my participants on personal subjects, such as their experiences trying to build relationships between their unions and Indigenous communities. To my surprise, some of my participants brought campaign materials to our interview and gave them to me, showing a real sense of pride in their union activism.

I began every interview by asking my participants some demographical information, such as where they currently live and their gender and any other information they would like to include (e.g., the unions and/or labour organizations they have been a part of throughout their lives). I then asked the question, "How did you first become involved in your union?" because I was interested in exploring what motivated participants to pursue union activism. I asked what their personal experiences were like in their unions trying to push for better working conditions as Indigenous workers (or in solidarity with Indigenous members) and/or showing solidarity with Indigenous movements for self-determination. I wanted to allow participants to freely discuss

these experiences to tell me what has struck them about the broad relationships between unions, their Indigenous members, and Indigenous communities. From there, I turned to more specific questions to direct the interview as outlined in my interview guide in Appendix A. Interview questions and topics included the following:

- Union responses to racism and precarity faced by Indigenous workers in the labour market
- Union equity representation concerning Indigenous unionists
- Successes and challenges unions face in organizing Indigenous workers
- Successes and challenges unions face in bargaining collective agreement language to support Indigenous unionists
- Experiences in union campaigns and/or other initiatives in support of Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination
- Conflicts between unions, First Nations band councils, and other Indigenous communities (e.g. land defenders) having to do with issues such as land claims, oil and gas extraction, etc.
- Other forms of union solidarity with struggles for Indigenous self-determination
- Challenges of building common understanding and unity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous trade unionists

For the data analysis, I transcribed the interviews and familiarized myself with the contents of the data by doing multiple readings of them, as well as reviewing my fieldnotes made during the interviews. I engaged in John Lofland *et al.*'s process of "focusing" (2006, p. 119) as a prelude to data analysis, meaning that I became acquainted with the data, examined it, and asked

questions to facilitate the identification of possible broad themes on which to concentrate my analysis. I will admit that I came across unexpected responses in the interviews, which were sometimes unsettling to me. For example, one participant stated that unions are a colonial institution, which I did not initially understand, so I had to take time to think about these arguments because I was unfamiliar with them. I came to accept these moments as a challenge to my ideas, assumptions, and overall thoughts. I think that this process reflects Deirdre Davies and Jenny Dodd's argument that "the ability to reflect on unexpected or contradictory research outcomes as points of knowledge and information, rather than just failures in research methods, can mean that aberrations become redescribed as revelations" (2002, p. 286). However, when it comes to my interpretations of what participants said, I acknowledge that it is still possible that my reading of "what was really going on" and "what was really being said" (Palys, 1997, p. 162) will be at variance with the participants. Therefore, I offered the opportunity to them to review my discussion of the interviews in my final draft of the thesis to minimize discrepancies.

After that process I coded the data using *Nvivo* qualitative analysis software. My nodes in *Nvivo* included some of the following: Critique of settler-colonial capitalism, racism at work, tensions between leaders and rank-and-file, union campaigns for Indigenous peoples, union education, and where unions need to improve. I believe that *Nvivo* was a useful tool to physically highlight nodes in my data which in turn, provided me a general picture of the data. I took a grounded theory approach which allowed the data to 'speak for itself' and allow for themes to emerge from the 'ground up' without a preconceived hypothesis (Bryant, 2017). The participants came from several different unions and personal backgrounds, but I identified instances where similar language was used to describe the nodes as an indication of the universality of experiences

within the labour movement. After the nodes were analyzed, I identified core themes and chose theoretical perspectives for discussion.

1.7 Ethical considerations

There were ethical considerations for my research including: ensuring my research methods carried minimal risk to Indigenous participants, maintaining accountable relationships between myself as a researcher and the participants of my study; showing respect of the worldviews and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, and reviewing the findings with participants (Kovach, 2009; Louis, 2007; McGregor, 2010). Considering my positionality as a researcher at a major English-speaking university in Canada, I take seriously the fact that studies by Western researchers have been harmful in creating and perpetuating imperial beliefs about colonized peoples (Smith, 1999; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Louis, 2007; McGregor, 2010). As Māori scholar Linda Tuhwai Smith (1999) explains, “History was the story of people who were regarded as fully human. Others who were not regarded as human (this is, capable of self-actualization) were prehistoric” (Ibid., p. 32). In Western academia, Indigenous peoples have been historically portrayed as sub-human and even non-human. In doing so, Western research historically served as a tool to justify forms of colonization as the construction of such narratives have been “about power” through which the capitalist class dominates Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999, p. 34).

As previously discussed in my literature review, scientific racism popularized throughout the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used so-called ‘scientific’ methods to justify European superiority over inferior ‘races’, which had a severely harmful impact on colonized Indigenous peoples around the world. These racist ideas have had influence in Canadian governments and

academe too. For instance, between 1942 and 1952, Canadian federal departments led biomedical experiments on Indigenous children in residential schools and malnourish communities. In these experiments, researchers exploited Indigenous children as a ‘baseline’ to study nutritional deficiencies (Mosby, 2013). Scholars have generally moved away from these explicitly racist research approaches and are increasingly using Indigenous methodologies for research practices and outcomes. In fact, new centres of research have recently emerged to adhere to Indigenous methodologies and ethics, including The Indigenous Peoples Health Research Centre, between the First Nations University of Canada, the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan, and the Yellowhead Institute at the University formerly known as Ryerson. But despite these developments in academia, some scholars still engage in harmful research practices which impose Western research methodologies on unwilling Indigenous populations, subjugate Indigenous knowledges and worldviews, lack appropriate ethics protocols (such as informed consent), or misrepresent Indigenous modes of life (Sinclair, 2003; Smith, 1999). It is not my intention to use my research and social position to exploit Indigenous peoples or anyone who participated in my study. Nor do I wish to present myself as an expert on Indigenous peoples’ issues. Rather, I conducted my research with the understanding that the Indigenous participants in this study are experts in their own lives. For this reason, I asked my contacts in unions who identify as an Indigenous person to review my research objectives (listed on my research participation forms) and the interview questions to seek their feedback on them before I began my interviews.

When I contacted participants, I carefully reviewed the objective of the study and I let them know that they may participate only as far as they would like to. I did not find that any questions

made participants feel uncomfortable because they posed minimal risks, but I always informed them that they did not have to answer all questions—particularly ones relating to experiencing and observing racism. At the beginning of my interviews, before I recorded them, I informed participants of the research process, plans for dissemination and their rights to anonymity. Participants were informed that they could end the interview at any time and chose to redact anything in their interview—in one case, a participant did request to have a statement redacted. Due to the open-endedness of several of my interview questions I left Indigenous participants the ability to speak more about the topics of their choosing. I think this further helped to mitigate risk and facilitated the ability for participants to have agency in the interviews. My project was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Office of Research Ethics at York University. Transcripts and recordings will be stored securely for five years following the completion of the project, and then destroyed.

Chapter 2: Historicizing settler-colonial capitalism, Indigenous people's wage labour, and self-determination

2.1 Introduction

Scholarly research has only touched the surface to fully understand the Canadian state's objective to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their modes of life and shape their lives in the interests of settler-colonial capitalism. These forces have affected Indigenous peoples' experiences in the labour market and with unions. This chapter will expose how the Canadian ruling class has exploited Indigenous peoples for their labour power where they needed it. I discuss where they attempted to compel Indigenous peoples to conform to the Protestant work ethic or state enfranchisement to 'assimilate' them into mainstream society. I review how Indigenous were eventually put in a position of being shut out of an increasingly competitive and racially segmented paid labour market. It is these forces which have constrained Indigenous peoples' positionality in the contemporary labour market and the relationships between unions and Indigenous workers we see today.

2.2 The roots of Indigenous peoples' labour exploitation

Objectives of settler-colonial dispossession

Indigenous peoples' land dispossession lies at the core of Canada's settler-colonial project. As more scholars document and theorize the dispossession of Indigenous lands and resources, many conclude that expansion of the capitalist mode of production depends on the imperial exploitation of Indigenous lands to create new opportunities for capital accumulation (Coulthard, 2014; Pasternak *et al.*, 2021; Vimalassery, 2013). Indeed, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands represents the historical moment in which global capitalist expansion

originated. This is an aspect of what Karl Marx calls the “so-called primitive [i.e. originary] accumulation of capital”. According to Marx (1967), the objective of ‘originary’ accumulation is to create a *new* mode of production; that is, to bring capitalism into being via the transformation of land and resources into capital.⁴ The emerging capitalist class establish a private property regime, create a servile proletariat, and use the power of the state to generate political, social, legal and economic support for capital accumulation. In the settler colonial context, the possession of land is central to the power base of the capitalist class, so that the land can be exploited and used to settle labourers. Rosa Luxemburg’s revision of Marx’s originary accumulation thesis is a much more accurate historical reading of capitalist expansion because she explains that originary accumulation does not stop at one time and place. For Luxemburg, originary accumulation is an *ongoing* process that is renewed with the spread of colonial-capitalist expansion in multiple geographic locales. The dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the subsumption of their traditional modes of life is accompanied by the ruling class’s violent clashes over land and resources, as Marx recognizes. “Each new colonial expansion is accompanied, as a matter of course, by a relentless battle of capital against the social and economic ties of the natives, who are also forcibly robbed of their means of production and labour power”, she explains (Luxemburg, 2003, p. 350).

Patrick Wolfe (2006) explains that the objective of settler-colonialism has been to permanently occupy Indigenous lands for the purpose of meeting the demands of the founding metropole.

Wolfe argues that settler colonialism persists in the *ongoing* elimination of Indigenous

⁴ Marx (1959) observes the historical violence in this process: “... it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the great part...As a matter of fact, the methods of primitive accumulation are anything but idyllic” (p. 714).

populations and the assertion of state sovereignty over Indigenous lands. For these reasons he argues (*Ibid.*, p. 388), “Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element”.

Similar to Wolfe, Cole Harris (2004) defines settler colonialism by its need for territorial expansion and he adds that the aim to dispossess Indigenous peoples is motivated by the interest of profit-making. The profit motive demands the imperial domination and control of Indigenous lands to give access to resource exploitation. Speaking of the impact on Indigenous peoples, Taiaiake Alfred succinctly argues (2009, p. 46, emphasis added):

It is the forced, rapid reshaping of Indigenous existence during [the] process of colonial-capitalist expansion and consolidation which is the most important aspect of the colonial experience for Indigenous peoples themselves—*every aspect of their lives was reshaped in the interests of capitalism* and to ensure the opportunity and profit potential of the white population recently settled in their homelands.

Alfred explicitly argues that Indigenous peoples’ experiences of settler-colonialism are continuously shaped by capitalism’s totalizing logic as a force for economic and social reproduction. The expansion of global capital into Canada relied on the severing of Indigenous peoples from their pre-capitalist, communitarian and land-based modes of life.⁵

The beginnings of Indigenous peoples’ labour exploitation

As mercantile trade networks bolstered into North America over the eighteenth century, the British, French and other rival fur trading companies competed for control over trade networks

⁵ Métis historian Olive Patricia Dickason (2008) explains that pre-colonial Indigenous nations had political, economic and social relations based on reciprocity; for instance, potlatch ceremonies distributed food and material goods to everyone, though they also reaffirmed the status of chiefs. Political decision-making was made by either consensus or by decision-making by tribes, as was practiced in Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Chiefdoms on the North-west coast were hierarchical insofar as they had chiefs and common people structured by hereditary clans (Dickason, 2008; Miller, 2017).

and began to impose social, economic and ecological impacts on Indigenous peoples as they depleted fur bearing animals more rapidly and competition erupted in warfare (Miller, 2017). Colonial powers did not fundamentally seek to transform Indigenous modes of life since they relied upon Indigenous peoples for their extensive knowledges of ecosystems, access to trade routes, and military alliances.⁶ Britain's dependence on the military strength of Indigenous nations was recognized in the Royal Proclamation of 1763 (Slattery, 2015). King George claimed ultimate "dominion" over the entire region now known as Canada, thus creating a foundation for British imperial domination, but the Proclamation promised to protect against British settler encroachment because Indigenous peoples remained "in possession of" their unceded territories (Tennant, 1990, p. 11).⁷ It is without a doubt that the first European traders depended on Indigenous peoples' labour in the fur trade. For example, they supplied pemmican to the fur trade, and they laboured as guides, interpreters, and voyageurs (Bourgeault, 1983; Palmer & Sangster, 2008). Indigenous trappers collected furs to access expanded trade networks while British and French traders purchased furs and fish for export to overseas markets (Miller, 2017; Ray, 1998; Trigger, 1985).⁸ But the fur trade saw a paternalistic relationship develop between fur trade managers and voyageurs which resulted in some labour disputes as the latter were not always pleased with the demands for quotas (Podruchny, 2006, 2008; Ray, 1998).⁹

⁶ Due to the European mercantilists' dependence on fur trappers, they often extended lines of credit to workers, or wrote off their bad debts affected by outbreaks of disease or other catastrophes that resulted in a shortfall of returns (Ray *et al.*, 2000).

⁷ Later, however, the British would gain control of Canada from the French and claim Indigenous peoples under British imperial authority.

⁸ Miller notes that Indigenous peoples began to work the land in different capacities. For example, the British system of trading posts required Indigenous trappers to travel far distances to deliver the furs, thus adapting nomadic movement (with the exception of nations like the Haudenosaunee Confederacy who already engaged in forms of permanent agricultural production).

⁹ Ron Bourgeault (1983) adds that inland penetration by mercantile companies created a need for permanent labourers to manage trade infrastructure, which created a wage labour market. Some Indigenous peoples performed

Métis scholar Ron Bourgeault explains (1983), “The Indians’ class position in the production of fur came to be the basis of their economic exploitation and racial oppression and, as well, the basis of the colonialism and colonial relations that developed” (p. 48). Indeed, from the early 1800s, the Métis had already been subjugated by colonization projects, such as the Red River Colony, where they laboured for the HBC (Andersen, 2014).¹⁰ Bourgeault also details how British mercantilists specifically exploited Indigenous women’s political roles in order to expand commercial trade.¹¹ Ultimately, they aimed for a systemic transformation of Indigenous peoples’ productive mechanisms: from producing goods for communal use to producing commodities for private exchange and surplus value.¹² To Bourgeault, the labour of Indigenous peoples in the fur trade was “increasingly appropriated by the merchant capitalist, resulting in the *creation of surplus-value* from the circulation of the commodities in the European marketplace” (emphasis added, p. 52).

The trade drastically changed with the amalgamation of fur trade enterprises in 1821. Indigenous nations in the West lost bargaining power to a consolidated buyer, the HBC, who drove down provision prices and took advantage of competition between trappers (Colpitts, 2012). This

wage labour but some who were ‘mixed-race’ were given higher-status junior clerk positions and could receive education in Britain.

¹⁰ Métis historian Chris Andersen (2014) states categorically that the Métis nation should not be deemed as a “mixed” race (i.e. part ‘Indigenous’ and part ‘white’), but as a *political construct* whose rights were recognized in the statutes and orders-in-council from the early 1800s and further consolidated in political uprisings, such as the Red River Rebellion in 1885. Métis author Howard Adams writes (1999, p. 33), “The Métis were reluctant to abandon their land and economy. Partly for this reason, they strengthened and forged a distinctive culture that was a combination of French, English, Indian and Celtic”.

¹¹ In one case, British traders captured a Dene-Chipewyan woman near York Factory in the early eighteenth-century. They forced her to learn about the exchange value of British commodities and made her organize trade meetings with the Dene-Chipewyans.

¹² Indigenous women and men had mutual decision-making power over their productive relations (Bourgeault, 1983; Lawrence, 2003; Simpson, 2017).

marked beginning of a colonized labour hierarchy as fur trade managers compensated Indigenous workers at a lower rate than their European counterparts. For instance, in 1829, Swampy Cree boatmen in Oxford House, Manitoba, refused to work for the HBC for only 10 pelts per season, and they demanded that they receive the same “European wages” as their counterparts at York Factory (Hanks, 1982, p. 108).

Dispossession and resistance

After the British victory over French forces in the Battle of Québec¹³ and France surrendered its colonial possessions, the British gradually moved toward the structural, violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples to make way for a private property regime and establish a colonial monopoly over economic production (Miller, 2017).¹⁴ Colonial officials decided to make a huge encroachment upon Indigenous lands in the West after several events unfolded: the British re-granted the HBC trade monopoly over Rupert’s Land; the aftermath of the War of 1812 saw declining hostilities between the British and the Americans but also an influx of Loyalists who were allotted land in Central and Eastern Canada (some of whom brought their slaves with them); and Indigenous peoples suffered horrendous harm from foreign diseases (Andersen, 2014; Gordon & White, 2014; Harris, 2004). Since British colonial officials no longer relied on Indigenous peoples’ military power, their drive to dispossess became much more aggressive.¹⁵ It

¹³ Also referred to as the Plains of Abraham.

¹⁴ Indigenous peoples across the country have had uneven experiences with violent dispossession to make way for agricultural settlement and industrial production. Far northern regions remained under the influence of merchant capital well into the twentieth century. For example, Weledeh Dene scholar, Glen Coulthard (2014), explains that until the 1960’s, the Dene had a mode of life sustained by traditional land-based harvesting, state transfers, and some engagement in the capitalist mode of production through seasonal wage-labour.

¹⁵ As early as 1829, the Superintendent of Indians, H.C. Darling began to draft proposals to ‘civilize’ Indigenous peoples by assimilating them into Christianity and a colonial model of sedentary agriculture. The goal of newer treaties was the surrender of Indigenous peoples’ lands to make way for non-Indigenous settlers (Pettit, 1997).

was in the mid-1850s that politicians in the newly formed Province of Canada planned to *fully sever* Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands by going forth with large-scale industrialization. Alongside the Maritime colonies, they desired access to the Western hinterland to create a new market and provide exports for the eastern ports (Miller, 2017). These growing industries required large pools of labourers and a colonial business elite to establish a new financial market for industrial expansion. Indigenous resistance grew when colonial officials pushed for fundamentally unfair treaty negotiations to accommodate their vision for a private property-based agricultural regime.¹⁶

In 1870, the British Crown claimed possession of Rupert's Land without any concern for the grievances of the Métis who laboured as voyageurs, hunters, small landowners, and cart operators (Bourgeault, 1983). By this time, the Métis made up nearly three-quarters of the HBC's labour force, proving to be an indispensable component of fur trade work (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001). When Europe's fur prices hit a decline, the HBC began to lay off Métis casual workers and extinguished buffalo herds, an integral foundation of the Métis economy (Andersen, 2014). The possession of Rupert's Land provoked a breaking point. Louis Riel describes the dispossession of the Métis in a letter published in 1885 (*Ibid.*, p. 73).:

Our lands... Have since been torn from us, and given to landgrabbers who never saw the country... English lords... And the riches which these lands produce are drained out of the country and sent over to England to be consumed by a people that fatten on a system that pauperizes us.

¹⁶ James Frideres (2016) observes that treaties signed before that period were subject to colonial persecution. For example, one French policy in 1663 had a provision to use arms to subjugate Indigenous peoples if they did not comply. In 1749, Edward Cornwallis sent soldiers and mercenaries to drive the Mi'kmaq away from settlement and created the Scalping Proclamation (Paul, 2006).

Bourgeault (1983) claims that the Métis resistance leading up to the Red River Rebellion indicated the rising of a national consciousness as a distinct people that grew out of their land dispossession and exploitation by European fur trade managers.¹⁷ It was an explicit anti-colonial political struggle against British colonialism that was gaining traction as the dominant global colonial power. He explains: “The subjugation of the Métis was completed with the formation of Canada as a nation-state. By 1885, Riel came to view imperialism as a system and saw what it was doing to the native population as a whole, and what it was doing to other people around the world” (*Ibid.*, p. 73). Colonial officials succeeded in their goal to clear land for settlements—as much as 80 per cent of the original Métis population left and 85 per cent of the original 1.4 million acres of land set for Red River was dispossessed (Andersen, 2014). The Canadian state, in accordance with the British Crown, well understood the potential for capital accumulation if they forcefully ‘opened up’ access to Indigenous peoples’ lands.

Colonial officials planned and executed calculated acts of violence to dispossess Indigenous peoples, particularly to clear a path for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and its accompanying settlements. Some officials like Joseph Trutch, the first Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, invoked *terra nullius* by insisting that Indigenous peoples had never owned land (Miller, 2017). A numbered treaty framework was put in place in the West to “forever” surrender Indigenous lands to the Crown (Wotherspoon & Satzewich, 2000, p. 25). Scrip was issued to Métis people with the intent of “extinguishing” Indian title to communally held lands by granting land or cash payments; yet the system led many to sell their scrip to wealthy, private speculators at a deflated price below its real market value (Frideres, 2016). The scrip system had

¹⁷ Andersen (2014) and Tough (1996) also argue that the Métis nation’s resistance at this time gave rise to Canada’s formal recognition of them as a distinct people.

the effect of forcing several Métis into impoverishment on tiny strips of land on roadsides (Tough & McGregor, 2007). Colonial officials used torturous tactics to force Indigenous peoples onto federally designated reserves. John A. Macdonald took the policy a step further by ordering the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) officials to deny food to Indigenous peoples to the point of starvation (Daschuk, 2013).

Enforcing a settler-colonial capitalist paradigm

As violent dispossession unfolded, nearly every detail of Indigenous life was made subject to disciplinary state programs aimed to eradicate Indigenous political, socioeconomic and cultural practices.¹⁸ Again, the Canadian government justified their social programs and interventions as a mechanism of Euro-Christian ‘civilization’.¹⁹ The *Indian Act* (1876) concretized their paternalistic control of Indigenous peoples and entirely stripped them of their political autonomy to rule over their affairs.²⁰ Indigenous peoples were ‘compartmentalized’ onto reserves in isolated areas far away from European settlements where they were confined by the Pass system (Frideres, 2016). Colonial officials knew that isolating Indigenous communities meant that they would lack the productive capacity to compete with industrial monopolies, and they specifically

¹⁸ Land dispossession was, and continues to be, unevenly experienced across Canada. For example, the Inuit had contact with traders, missionaries or government agents by the early twentieth century but they were forcefully relocated when the Arctic region became important to the Canadian government in the post-WWII period (Miller, 2017).

¹⁹ The Canadian state’s goal of socially ‘engineering’ Indigenous peoples’ ways of life so that they would be further subsumed in the capitalist mode of production falls in line with Luxemburg’s argument that originary accumulation requires the need to fully destruct Indigenous peoples’ non-capitalist social systems as a *permanent* characteristic of imperialist expansion. She explains, “Since the primitive associations of the natives are their strongest protection for their social organisations and for their material bases of existence, capital must begin by planning for the systematic destruction and annihilation of all non-capitalist social units which obstruct its development” (2003, p. 350).

²⁰ Before the *Indian Act* the *Gradual Civilization Act* (1857) defined who was an “Indian” and compelled people to renounce Indian status to join Canadian ‘civilization’. Subsequent amendments to the act were much more sinister, adding a blood quantum requirement for Indian Status, and enforcing gender discrimination to deny women of Indian Status if they married a non-Indian (Lawrence, 2003).

desired to undermine Indigenous peoples' ability to unite in a nationalist, anti-colonial resistance movement. But they went further—a stratified gender and class-based system was put in place by the *Indian Act* as the term “Indian” only applied to males and women who married Indian males, meaning that women became the full property of men (*Indian Act* 1876, s. 3.3). Among the many restrictions in the act, the government rejected traditional forms of political governance. Reserves were mandated to have band councils that were never permitted genuine sovereignty by the federal government because their decisions had to be approved by the DIA. In all, the state developed a paternalistic system of political, social and cultural ‘engineering’ on Indigenous peoples going forward. For instance, they mandated Indigenous children to attend residential schools mostly run by the Catholic Church, outlawed Indigenous potlatches and cultural dances, and violently confronted Indigenous communities using the North West Mounted Police (Carter, 1990; Frideres, 2016; Miller, 2017). These interventions sought to “get rid of the Indian problem”, as a Superintendent of the DIA, Duncan Campbell Scott, explains (Miller, 2017, p. 281).

Colonial violence resulted in an estimated 96 to 99 per cent elimination of the Indigenous population in North America (Palmer, 2009). For Indigenous peoples who survived dispossession meant a complete affront to their ontological understandings of the world. Glen Coulthard explains that for his nation, the Weledeh Dene, land embodies an ontological framework of “*relationships* of things to each other”, or, what he calls “grounded normativity” (2014, p. 61). Land is fundamental to the being of Indigenous peoples; it is the foundation of Indigenous place-based ethics and political, socioeconomic and cultural sovereignty (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2016; Kuokkonen, 2011; Rotz, 2017; Simpson, 2008, 2014;

Sunseri, 2011). The Canadian state's attempts to separate Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands meant the violent disruption of their ontological frameworks. Coulthard explains, "struggles are not only *for* land, but also deeply *informed* by what the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship... ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, non-dominating and non-exploitive way" (*Ibid.*, p. 60). Therefore, Indigenous movements against settler-colonial capitalism to redeem their lands means a reclamation of their modes of life. For instance, Oneida scholar, Lina Sunseri, contends that the Oneida's political relationship to land informs how to treat other nations as codified in the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's Great Law of Peace (Cannon & Sunseri, 2011). Dispossession is all-encompassing—Indigenous peoples were not only removed of their rights to land, but the Canadian ruling class radically changed Indigenous peoples' relationships with land from an intimate spiritual, social, and political connection, to a settler-colonial capitalist paradigm which sees every facet of nature as a commodifiable resource (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2017; Cannon & Sunseri, 2011). As Indigenous peoples try to reclaim land they have had to resist Eurocentric understandings of land centered around a capitalist private property regime that has "become defined by bundles of rights and values that were foreign to their ways" and vigorously defended by English common law in the Canadian legal system (Harris, 2004, p. 177-178).

Ongoing forms of dispossession

Coulthard's work (2014) argues that the dispossession of Indigenous peoples did not occur at one time and in one place—it is ongoing in the present day. The government's intent to ensure state and industry's access to Indigenous land and resources for extractive projects has been made clear through recent struggles such as the resistance by James Bay Cree to the Québec

government's pursuit of the James Bay Hydroelectric Project in 1971, the standoff in 1990 by Mohawk of Kanehsatà:ke against disputed land that included their burial ground, the Inuit's opposition to Muskrat Falls hydro dam, and Indigenous peoples in the present-day fighting against tar sands production, fracking and pipeline expansion (Coulthard, 2014; Laboucan-Massimo, 2014; Satzewich & Wotherspoon, 2000; Simpson, 2014). The Canadian government claims to be "exploring new ways of working together" with Indigenous peoples based on negotiating modern treaties (Government of Canada, 2018), but Coulthard argues that the contemporary land claims process constitutes a form of originary accumulation because "non-capitalist social relations are transformed into market ones" and Indigenous territories "remain open for exploitation and capitalist development" (2014, p. 77).

Direct violence against Indigenous peoples continues to dispossess them of their lands for resource extraction, although the Canadian state has turned to more 'indirect' interventions via assimilatory policies. This was very clear in the Indigenous-led struggle against Pierre Trudeau's 1969 'White Paper', which aimed to abolish the *Indian Act* and legally define Indigenous peoples as Canadian citizens, eliminate the DIA, and extinguish treaties and reserve status (and thus open up reserve lands to a private property regime) (Nickel, 2019).²¹ In response to Trudeau's proposal, Cree writer Harold Cardinal and other Indigenous activists insisted that the federal government return to the governing principles of original treaty relationships. As Cardinal argues in *The Unjust Society* (1999, p. 14), "...no government, including and particularly the one in power today, has yet committed itself to the simple honesty of fulfilling its

²¹ Several Indigenous activists spoke out against Trudeau's 'White Paper' as another attempt of the colonial state to assimilate them and to absolve itself of any responsibility for historical injustices against Indigenous peoples (Frideres, 2016; Palmer, 2009).

obligations to our people as outlined in the treaties”. At that point in time, colonial power relations shifted from “a more or less unconcealed structure of domination to a form of colonial governance that works through the medium of state recognition and accommodation”, as Coulthard claims (2014, p. 25). After Trudeau abandoned the ‘White Paper’ the Canadian federal government came to legally acknowledge certain Indigenous cultural rights, limited forms of political sovereignty in the band council system, land claims, and so on, but only insofar as these forms of ‘recognition’ did not interfere with processes of capital accumulation (e.g. in pursuing state-funded resource extraction projects in and around Indigenous territories). Alfred (2009) criticizes these processes for defining Indigenous peoples’ rights and identities in relation to the colonial state and its legal apparatus, rather than Indigenous modes of life.

2.3 Industrial capitalism and exploitation of Indigenous peoples’ wage labour

Indigenous peoples’ paid labour in the emergent capitalist economy

As originary accumulation unfolded, it not only demanded the severing of Indigenous peoples from their traditional socio-economic means of production but also their labour. Whereas scholars such as Wolfe (1999) claim that colonial officials in North America were far more interested in acquiring land from Indigenous peoples than exploiting their labour, there are studies to show that their labour power was in fact very much sought after. Research by Rolf Knight (1975), John Burrows (1986), Alicja Muszynski (1988), Steven High (1996), Andrew Parnaby (2006), and John Lutz (2008a) documents the historical roles of Indigenous peoples in performing wage labour in this period, which is critical to revealing how Canadian settler colonists and employers made deliberate attempts to shape the working lives of Indigenous peoples. Where the European immigrant population was low, Indigenous peoples laboured in

fairly large numbers as wage workers, forming a critical part of the workforce that the emergent capitalist economy depended on (Burrows, 1986; High, 1996; Knight, 1975; Muszynski, 1988; Parnaby, 2006, 2008). Knight's extensive research in *Indians at Work* (1975) provides thorough insight into Indigenous peoples' wage labour in British Columbia from the 1850s to the Great Depression. Indigenous peoples worked in virtually every commercial primary industry as wage labourers or as owner-operators. They laboured in sawmills, fisheries, forests, ranches, canneries, and in longshoring and domestic service, and mines in the 1858 Gold Rush along the Thompson River and in the Kootenays.²² An estimate in 1885, based on reports of Indian agents, showed that of the 28,000 Indigenous peoples in British Columbia over 85 per cent belonged to bands that earned substantial incomes through wage labour (Lutz, 2008a). Lutz (2008a) goes so far as to claim that Indigenous peoples were the *main* labour force of the early settlement era in British Columbia:

Coal would not have been mined in B.C. in the 1840s and 50s, export sawmills would not have been able to function in the 1860s and 70s, canneries would not have had a fishing fleet, or the necessary precursors in the 1870s and 80s, without the widespread participation of Aboriginal people. (*Ibid.*, p. 29)

Lutz' scholarship stands in stark contrast to many researchers who assert that Indigenous peoples' cultural values and attitudes limited their participation in the emergent capitalist economy. Both Lutz and Knight agree that there should be no assumption that they had a poor work ethic. Indeed, in British Columbia, Indigenous workers were active in their nations while at the same time being "adept in their new jobs" (Knight, 1975, p. 19) as they labored in industrial, factory-like conditions.

²² Muszynski (1988) emphasizes that Indigenous workers were reduced to subsidiary work as guides and prostitutes.

Emergent commercial industries relied heavily on the Indigenous workforce, such as commercial salmon canneries where Indigenous men fished alongside the large workforce of Indigenous women and Chinese men who performed fish preparation and canning (Knight, 1975; Muszynski, 1988).²³ Several Indigenous workers moved to company cabins built around plants to work year-round although others moved back home to pursue other wage labour or subsistence activities in the off-season (Knight, 1975). The employment of Indigenous labourers in the province's canneries was extensive. One estimate suggests that the 11 canneries operating the Fraser River in British Columbia in 1883 employed upwards of 1,000 to 1,200 Indigenous fishermen plus hundreds of women who worked on an assembly line basis to process the fish. Indigenous peoples were also among the region's first factory workers: Vancouver Island saw the operation of the largest sawmill on the West Coast where Tsehaht people of the Alberni Inlet laboured and lived in company cabins (Lutz, 2008a). They also performed labour for the construction of every railway in BC from 1881 until WWI (Knight, 1975).

In addition to wage-work, Indigenous reserve enterprises and small Indigenous-owned businesses (e.g. hotels, inns, cafes, and pool halls) were common in British Columbia.²⁴ In the 1870s, one mission village had its own sawmill, trading schooner, tannery and cobbler shop, spinning and weaving shop, glass workers, brick kiln workers, blacksmith, hardware shop, trading post, and more. Yet, the gradual centralization and concentration of capital spelled the decline of Indigenous independent producers who could not compete with larger corporations.

²³ Burrows notes that Indigenous women also worked as harvesters and as domestic servants for settlers.

²⁴ Knight argues that provincial restrictions on Indigenous peoples to use Crown resources reduced the existence of off-reserve enterprises such as ranching, farming, logging, and sawmilling, but some farms and enterprises persisted in spite of the restrictions.

The completion of the CPR in 1886 led to the mass incoming of ‘white’ European immigrants who replaced Indigenous wage labourers. For instance, Indigenous people had worked for wages clearing bush in Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba, “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, p. 191). Moreover, industries began to relocate closer to CPR routes in urbanized areas and away from remote reserves and communities (Burrows, 1986; Elias, 1988; Knight, 1975).

Migratory work and ‘mixed’ modes of production

Other scholarly works provide glimpses into the many experiences of Indigenous peoples’ wage-work across Canada. Carmela Patrias’ analysis (2016) of agricultural labour by Haudenosaunee families in the Niagara region examines Indigenous peoples’ migratory work similar to the early fishing and canning industries in British Columbia. In response to Niagara’s burgeoning fruit and vegetable production between 1880 to 1945 Indigenous families periodically moved from reserves to harvest alongside eastern and southern European immigrants. Patrias argues by the end of the nineteenth century, both groups faced changing attitudes concerning the racialization of their labour—they were seen by Niagara growers and canners as racially ‘inferior’ to Western Europeans and thus “inherently suited” for menial labour (*Ibid.*, p. 70). Yet, Indigenous workers appeared to experience more of a burden than their eastern and southern European counterparts due to their colonial positionality. Widely held colonial constructions of ‘white’ Europeans as a ‘superior’ race, and Indigenous peoples as ‘uncivilized, indolent and ‘traditional’ (and therefore unable to make the transition to industrial, capitalist production) formed the basis of employers’ racist hiring practices. This justification led to their widespread recruitment as cheap labourers to

perform seasonal and migratory work, restricting their access to better paid, year-round jobs and good housing. Indigenous women in particular faced interlocking oppressions of class, race, and gender discrimination because they were deemed as ‘immoral’ and unchaste by British Canadians in Niagara. Yet, media reports at the time claimed that the farm labour by “Indians” saved the Niagara fruit industry (*Ibid.*, p. 81). The migratory aspect of many Indigenous peoples’ wage labour participation is also evident in the experiences of Mi’kmaq men and women in Nova Scotia who travelled to Maine to harvest in large family groups (Wien, 1986). A local journalist in Maine reported in 2016 that this seasonal labour in Maine’s blueberry farms is still a long-standing tradition where both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families work and camp together (Trotter, 2016). One worker says, “One of the reasons [we came to] Maine was we love nature. Micmac love nature, we’re part of nature. We believe that. To be with nature and to find employment [went] hand-in-hand together” (*Ibid.*, para. 31).

Research by Thomas Dunk (1987) about Ojibway peoples on the north shore of Lake Superior, and Robin Jarvis Brownlie’s study (2008) concerning the wage-work of Mohawk and Anishinaabe women from the 1920s to 1940s in Ontario also show their extensive employment. Dunk claims that the Ojibway were involved in road and railroad construction, lumbering, mining, commercial fishing, and the tourist industry, which they simultaneously pursued alongside land-based modes of life. In the nineteenth century, attempts were made by the Canadian state and their Indian agents to ‘civilize’ Indigenous workers by turning them into farmers, but the Ojibway refused due to the material advantage of wage-work in their region. A late nineteenth century report by an Indian agent in Fort William reveals: “They do not take enough interest in farming. Work at good wages being plentiful, they can secure employment at

any time and prefer a quicker return for their labour than the land affords” (Dunk, 1987, p. 5). Brownlie’s study (2008) of Mohawk and Anishinaabe women workers in the Georgian Bay and Tyendinaga reserves shows their large-scale participation in forest, fishing, and transportation industries in the southern Georgian Bay. At their height, these industries provided a steady source of income for Indigenous workers. Wage labour and market-oriented farming became the main sources of Mohawk and Anishinaabe peoples’ subsistence as their lands were forced into private ownership by non-Indigenous people, and, like so many others, their natural resources were over-extracted or otherwise destroyed by encroaching settlements.²⁵

Several families from reserves in southern Ontario and Québec successfully obtained jobs in ironwork, a unique case of Indigenous peoples’ participation in the industrial-capitalist labour market. In 1886, the Dominion Bridge Company (DBC) constructed a cantilever railroad bridge across the St. Lawrence for the CPR where they recruited Mohawk workers from the nearby Kahnawá:ke First Nation (Mitchell, 1960). Mohawk men entered the field unloading and transporting materials and then took on bridge work as they walked the high beams, informally earning the title as “skywalkers” (*Ibid.*, p. 3). It appears that these workers were especially interested in riveting, one of the most dangerous and highest-paid jobs in construction. Journalist John Mitchell explains (*Ibid.*, p. 14):

As the work progressed, it became apparent to all concerned that these Indians were very odd in that they did not have any fear of heights. If not watched they would climb up into the spans and walk around up there as cool and collected as the toughest of our riveters.

²⁵ A similar observation is made in Frank Tough’s book, *As their natural resources fail* (1996). Tough chronicles how Indigenous peoples in northern Manitoba participated in commercial lumbering, fishing, lumbering, steamboating, in railway and power line construction, and more, because these jobs provided more economic security, although some went back and forth from seasonal jobs to months of hunting, trapping, and fishing.

Riveting jobs were high demand because few took them on and the DBC decided to provide training specifically for Mohawk workers. After the completion of the DBC project across the St. Lawrence, Mohawk workers laboured on the Soo Bridge in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and numerous high steel projects in southern Ontario. By 1907, more than 70 structural ironworkers from Kahnawá:ke were working on bridges (*Ibid.*). In time, they were joined by workers in large groups from the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve and the Mohawk nation of Akwesasne (Katzner, 1988). Gradually they took seasonal jobs across North America, travelling to Cleveland, Detroit, Buffalo, and New York City where they famously worked on buildings and bridges such as the Victoria Bridge, Empire State Building, George Washington Bridge, Chrysler Building, and the World Trade Center (Blanchard, 1983; Katzner, 1988; Mitchell, 1960).²⁶ Interestingly, David Blanchard (1983) notes how the workers continued to have “a strong, matrilineal society” (p. 57) as women retained control over community decision-making, and the historical continuity of ironwork became very intimate for Indigenous men, seen as a rite of passage for youth.²⁷

It should be noted that Indigenous peoples in the southernmost regions faced much more competition with European settlers for land and resources, but the Canadian ruling class did not leave the north untouched (Wotherspoon & Satzewich, 2000). Colonial attempts to subsume Indigenous peoples into wage labour in Canada’s northern trapping regions was a “spatially discontinuous process” (Lutz, 2008a, p. 24) which did not affect all groups simultaneously or in the same way because industrialization varied over time in different regions. In the case of the

²⁶ It is not entirely clear what women in these families did besides bring their families to travel with the workers as well, although Mitchell reports that they sometimes worked in factories and in domestic work.

²⁷ There are still workers in the trade today, although recent improvements in reinforced concrete infrastructure have lessened the demand for steel construction (Gass, 2013). Considering the Mohawk ironworkers’ predominant role in this type of industrial labour it is questionable as to why they are largely unacknowledged in Canadian labour history.

far north, it was only until the early twentieth century that the HBC loaned credits to the Inuit to foster a class of consumers who began to rely on manufactured goods and wage-labour (Mitchell, 1996). Marybelle Mitchell (1996) states that “the HBC had to teach the Inuit to become trappers instead of hunters, and with this went a whole new attitude towards work and the products of labour... the benefits of employment tended to be regarded as private property” (p. 131). The experiences of the Inuit show how originary accumulation came ‘late’ in the north, yet the Canadian ruling class was certainly intent to assimilate to the capitalist labour market, though they have been incredibly resilient in maintaining their traditional, place-based ways of life. In many instances, Indigenous wage labourers have created ways to combine seasonal and casual labour at the same time as they pursue traditional, land-based modes of life.²⁸ Rauna Kuokkonen (2011) and Rebecca Hall (2016) argue that these ‘mixed’ modes of production reveal how some Indigenous peoples, particularly women, perform labour to *resist* settler-colonial capitalist subsumption.²⁹ From the fur trade onward, the northern economy featured some protected areas for subsistence production in Inuit, Métis and Dene nations (Asch, 1977; Coulthard, 2014; Hall, 2016). Hall (2016) details how these women have engaged in intergenerational reproduction of their communities and to perform “resistance to capital as the only alternative, and carv[e] out spaces of well-being, meaning and hope” (p. 106). Inuit, Métis

²⁸ In one case beginning in the 1930s the Sahtú Dene transported radioactive pitchblende for Eldorado Mining and Refining Limited (van Wyck, 2012). Their other forms of labour “from providing moose, caribou and fish for the mine’s kitchen, firewood, and building timbers, beading, crafts and clothing, and other miscellaneous jobs” (*Ibid.*, p. 176) based on their traditional modes of life, was crucial for mining production. As Peter C. van Wyck argues, the Canadian government knew of the environmental damage from the mine which they did not inform to the Sahtú Dene, nor did they provide any health and safety training to handle the radioactive pitchblende (van Wyck, 2012). It is another historical example of the insidious exploitation of Indigenous peoples and their territories and it also shows how little is known about cases of labour Indigenous peoples have historically performed for such large-scale extractive projects.

²⁹ Hall (2016) characterizes this labour is unhindered by the imperatives of capital accumulation because it is not performed for surplus value. Non-capitalist labour includes hunting, trapping, fishing, foraging, drying and preserving meats (and using skins for clothing and household use), and making teas and medicines.

and Dene resistance to settler-colonial capitalist subsumption through non-capitalist labour means that they maintain a very unique position in the capitalist mode of production.

2.4 State coercion and enfranchisement

Attempts to instill the Protestant work ethic

The Canadian state's disciplinary methods employed on Indigenous peoples to fit the Protestant work ethic show that the ruling class was not only motivated to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands—they hoped they would leave reserves to 'assimilate' into mainstream society as Canadian workers (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001). By end of nineteenth-century, Indigenous peoples were increasingly viewed as 'uncivilized' by the Canadian federal government, the Christian missionary churches, and the Euro-Canadian working class (Miller, 2009; Milloy, 2003). Scientific racism and the Protestant work ethic prevalent in the British Empire proclaimed that Indigenous peoples were not 'full' and 'proper' human beings if they remained in their traditional modes of production; they needed to pass through an evolutionary 'stagism' moving from a peasant mode of production to capitalist industrialism (Carter, 1990). According to J. A. Macrae (1886), an Indian Affairs Inspector of Schools in the North West, Indigenous peoples were not ready for the rapid industrialization of Canada and they would have been made extinct if it were not for the "benevolence" of the federal government (as cited in Milloy, 2003, p. 27). State programs and policies sought to create a 'new' Indigenous person who conformed to 'civilized', subservient Canadian working class life. Therefore, to colonial officials, it was imperative that work discipline be *instilled* into Indigenous peoples so they would fit the idealized capitalist division of labour (Carter, 1990). These disciplinary methods were directed by the state and the churches, but it was private capitalist interests that reaped the

economic benefits of the harsh measures.

The first attempt at large-scale education of the Protestant work ethic was in ‘industrial’ schools of the late nineteenth century. The initial ‘industrial’ schools taught Christian values and generally advocated for assimilation into a British lifestyle (Gordon & White, 2014).³⁰ Nicholas Flood Davin, a journalist and MP in Assiniboia West produced his *Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds* (1879) in which he advised the Canadian federal government to institute residential schools for Indigenous children. The report outlines how a Protestant work ethic was to be crafted and systematically replicated. Davin’s advice was that the problems posed by Western Indigenous peoples could be solved “only by educating Indians and mixed-bloods in self-reliance and industry” (Davin, 1879, as cited in Milloy, 2003, p. 32). His policy ideas were utilized as a template for mass education in the new ‘residential’ system where the schools were “meant to be servants ministering to industrial society’s need for lawfulness, labour, and security of property” (Milloy, 2003, p. 33).

Indigenous children were taken from their families to attend residential schools where their distinct identities as Indigenous peoples were obliterated (White & Peters, 2009). In addition, the children were also required to perform a half-day’s manual work, rooted in strict compliance with ‘order’ and ‘authority’ (McCallum, 2014). The training was divided according to what was considered innate by gender: boys received training in husbandry, agriculture, and mechanical trades, and girls laboured in nuclear-family domestic work including dairying, canning, needlework, sweeping and cooking (*Ibid.*). Mary Jane Logan McCallum (2014) claims that the

³⁰ The first industrial school was the Mechanics’ Institute on the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve operated by the Anglican Church of Canada in 1828. It later became the Mohawk Institute Residential School.

girls' work was "simply a thin veneer to induce the student labour that was needed to run the institutions" (*Ibid.*, p. 29).³¹ Terry Wotherspoon and Vic Satzewich (2000) go further to argue that residential schools ultimately constituted a basis for the low-cost production of labour power. Indigenous workers would be useful as the cheapest to employ, easily exploitable, and in desperate economic situations.³² In fact, McCallum argues (emphasis added, 2014, p. 36),

The removal of children from their homes for school gave the state a particular advantage in terms of a *pool of labour to draw upon*, even more so when the students were orphans or from impoverished families and communities that could not readily support them.

Her claim is supported by the fact that Indigenous children were targeted for future employment as domestic servants in private homes, homes of chronically ill people, nursing homes, and hospitals well into the 1960s. She shows that Indigenous peoples have been historically confined to the least desirable, 'low-skilled' and 'unskilled' jobs.

Reserve agriculture and economic exclusion

In the early years of the reserve system, colonial officials attempted to entirely reject Indigenous peoples' precapitalist modes of life and instill the Protestant work ethic via reserve agriculture in the Prairies (Carter, 1990, p. 64). As early as the 1880s, Edgar Dewdney, a DIA official in Cypress Hills, imposed a policy of 'no work, no rations' to force the Cree into adopting the colonial model of sedentary agriculture (Miller, 2017). Colonial officials operated with racially

³¹ McCallum (2014) notes that the early Indian Health Service relied almost entirely on part-time, unpaid, or low paid domestic labour by Indigenous women and men who laboured as laundry workers, cooks, cleaners, nurse's aides and ward aides.

³² Tough (1996) appears to support this claim. He explains that most Indigenous peoples never had suitable land and enough resources on reserves to pursue commercial farming, so many reserves functioned as a reserve army of labour for fish stations, sawmills, and other primary industries located near reserves. This was desirable for employers because the workers supplied 'unskilled' wage labour when needed.

motivated ideas that Indigenous peoples should be forced to adapt to the capitalist mode of production as their precapitalist ways of life made them ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilized’. Colonial officials such as Duncan Campbell Scott vehemently opposed Indigenous modes of life centred on more egalitarian, reciprocal, and autonomous values, especially where beliefs of communal landholding were considered essential to Indigenous modes of life (Miller, 1997; Titley, 1995). They aimed to dismantle the “tribal” or “communist” Indigenous system and break the supposed ‘yoke’ of hereditary chiefs (as cited in Miller, 2017, p. 256). Therefore, in tandem with the creation of reserves to reject a broad, communal notion of land ownership, DIA officials made a system of reserve farming to try to eliminate any traces of Indigenous peoples’ precapitalist structures (in this case, Cree ways of life) and transform them into good, ‘civilized’ Christians with agricultural discipline. Indigenous resistance to colonial domination led DIA officials to conclude that Indigenous peoples are ‘non-industrial’ and lack a ‘natural’ impulse to accumulate wealth. Former Indian Affairs Minister, Frank Pedley (1909, as cited in Miller 2003, p. 185-186), explains:

It must not be forgotten, that we are working in a material that is stubborn in itself; that the Indian constitutionally dislikes work and does not feel the need of laying up stores or amassing wealth. The idea which is engrained in our civilization appears to be that a race must be thrifty and must surround itself with all manner of wealth and comfort before it is entitled to be considered civilized. The Indian has not yet reached that stage, and it is doubtful if he will—were such desirable.

Pedley’s remarks provide a glimpse into Canadian colonial officials’ motive to force Indigenous peoples into Protestant labour roles and nuclear family groupings—only when they entered the

capitalist market would they be made into ‘full’ and ‘civilized’ human beings. Yet, as Indigenous peoples were dispossessed across the country, they were never afforded suitable land and enough resources on reserves to pursue commercial farming as settlers did.³³ The Department of Indian Affairs even made amendments in the *Indian Act* to protect the market share for non-Indigenous farmers. In 1880, they prohibited the sale of agricultural products grown on reserves (except in accordance with government regulations), required Indigenous farmers to obtain permits to sell produce, and placed further restrictions on acquiring loans or other private-sector financing to establish new businesses (Carter, 1990). These restrictions partially explain why the ability to farm and sustain development from it was taken away from many Indigenous peoples.

In *Lost Harvests* (1990) Sarah Carter’s extensive research into reserve farming on the Prairies reveals how Indigenous farmers tried to establish agricultural economies but they were bound by colonial restrictions that prevented their success. Despite ill-conceived attempts in the 1870’s to teach farming to Indigenous peoples in present-day Saskatchewan, the DIA tried again to establish a new program in 1889. Headed by DIA Commissioner Hayter Reed, he expected the reserve agriculture program to alleviate poverty and contribute to “the laborious and often dangerous work of transforming bands of savages into peaceable agricultural labourers”, in his own words (*Ibid.*, p. 16).³⁴ He also echoed other DIA officials’ anti-communist beliefs in stating

³³ In negotiations of Treaty 4 (as referred to as the Qu’Appelle Treaty), Cree, Assiniboine, and Saulteaux peoples requested that they be provided with agricultural supports in light of forced poverty, starvation, and the state’s systematic killing of their buffalo herds. Government officials ended up breaking promises on those provisions by giving damaged seed, ploughs unsuitable for Prairie conditions, and cheap equipment which could not be repaired (Carter, 1990).

³⁴ Carter further argues that Reed was convinced that private property created law-abiding citizens. According to his logic, subsuming Indigenous peoples into a private property regime would make them averse to disturbing the law as “among them as among white communities, the lawless and revolutionary element is to be found among those who have nothing to lose but many perhaps gain by upsetting law and order” (2008, p. 110). Ironically, Indigenous peoples’ were already participation in farming on their own accord where they had more ideal conditions. For example, throughout the nineteenth century the Algonkians and Ojibway in Ontario grew wheat, grain and

that the “policy of destroying the tribal or communist system is assailed in every possible way, and every effort made to implant a spirit of individual responsibility instead” (*Ibid.*, p. 146).

However, unlike most non-Indigenous farmers, Indigenous farmers were denied sufficient land for farming and the use of labour-saving technology to sustain an agricultural economy. While Reed pushed the farmers to cultivate small plots of land employing outdated peasant farming techniques, they protested the program.³⁵ Yet, Reed persisted in his policies, making it impossible for Indigenous farmers to get ahead. They became especially discouraged when they saw neighbouring white farmers use machinery, though they still tried to farm despite the colonial discrimination against them. By 1893, frustrations mounted over restrictions in the *Indian Act* and Reed’s program because they limited the farmers’ ability to sell produce. The leaders of the Pasquah and Muscowpetung bands addressed the House of Commons through a petition. They explain (*Ibid.*, p. 119),

Whenever we have a chance to sell anything and make some money the Agent or Instructor steps in between us and the party who wants to buy, and says we have no power to sell: if this is to continue how will we be able to make a living and support ourselves? We are not even allowed to sell cattle that we raise ourselves.

To their dismay, the petition did not receive action and colonial officials falsely attributed setbacks to Indigenous peoples’ supposed character—they were blamed as being “beggars” and chronic complainers willing to go to any lengths to avoid work, just as colonial officials falsely accused of all Indigenous peoples (*Ibid.*, p. 51). Other Indigenous nations in the West continued

vegetables, some of which they sold to settlers. However, when remaining reserve lands were given away, Indigenous farmers fell behind the economic gains of non-Indigenous farmers (Carter, 1990).

³⁵ Reed believed these farmers should learn peasant subsistence farming before being allowed to compete with white farmers as commercial farmers (Carter, 1990).

to critique the program in Ottawa.³⁶

After the turn of the century, the federal government falsely concluded that Indigenous peoples failed to farm on their own accord. They encouraged land surrenders to make good agricultural land available to settler farmers who replicated racist mythologies of Indigenous peoples when they saw their uncultivated lands. Subsequent programs such as the 1918 Greater Production Campaign aimed to stimulate agricultural production on Prairie reserves but again failed to provide any substantial support for Indigenous farmers. Even when farmers applied to make individual purchases or use band funds the Commissioner did not approve them and continued to lease reserve land to non-Indigenous farmers (Vowel, 2016). The blatant discrimination by colonial officials destroyed any chance Indigenous peoples had of making agriculture a stable economic base. In fact, Miller (2017) suspects that colonial officials actually did not want to move them beyond their status as ‘peasants’. They were consistently hounded by recently landed European immigrants who resented any ‘subsidizing’ of agricultural support for Indigenous farmers, making the DIA anxious to restrict their agricultural production and participation in the market.

Exploited when needed

The collapse of the Canadian economy in the Great Depression and competition for remaining

³⁶ In addition to organizing protests against state programs some Métis community organizers like Mike Brady, who tried to establish cooperatives in the northern Prairies in the 1930 and 40s as a way for the Métis to build an economic base and work towards their self-determination. Brady wanted to bring his community in line with a Leninist, anti-colonial vision and to partner with white working class people in the region. Métis scholar Molly Swain (2018) argues that Brady’s cooperatives were short-lived as community members preferred to labour in a mix of trapping, fishing, wage labour, and seasonal, land-based modes of life. Social Credit and CCF provincial governments did not provide start-up resources to support a unified cooperative organization, despite them seeing the cooperatives as a way to have the Métis assimilate into the non-Indigenous population and open up their lands for resource extraction.

jobs forced massive numbers of Indigenous workers out of the industrial workforce and into the need for state-assisted welfare from the DIA (Knight, 1975; Muszynski, 1988). For instance, after the high demand for canned salmon in WWII the canneries began to cease operations when demand shot down, forcing their workers to live on reserves with no paid employment (Muszynski, 1988). All working class people suffered but Indigenous peoples experienced a double burden of unique racial discrimination in the capitalist marketplace. For instance, Anishinaabe trapper Edward Paibomsai wrote to the Department of Indian Affairs in 1930: “In a great many places of employment they will not employ an Indian to do their work” (as cited in Brownlie, 2008, p. 43). The Canadian government merely filled the gap with paltry unemployment insurance, welfare, and old age pensions. Burrows claims that Indigenous workers were especially disadvantaged when the European immigrant population grew enough to meet the demands for local labour. “At that point prejudice against the Indians or, if one wishes to be generous, favouritism towards white labourers eliminated Indians from the labour force”, Burrows writes (1986, p. 45). At the same time, Indigenous peoples could hardly compete in the broader industrializing economy “as marketing boards, licensing boards and regulatory agencies proved to be unwelcoming or worse to those perceived as Indian” (Palmer, 2009, p. 375).

Despite the fact that many Indigenous peoples faced intense competition and racism in the paid labour market in the Post-War period, the Department of Indian Affairs continued to target Indigenous workers for menial jobs when their supply of immigrant labour dwindled. Ron Laliberte and Victor Satzewich (1999) provide one of the only accounts of how the Canadian state used incredibly coercive methods to recruit Indigenous workers in farming. Following

WWII, the DIA colluded with manpower committees to recruit workers from northern Alberta and Saskatchewan reserves for European sugar-beet farmers.³⁷ These farmers faced a constant search for inexpensive labourers to perform low wage, tedious and back-breaking farm work, without any labour law protection. In periods when the flow of ‘unskilled’ immigrants fell, they became more desperate for cheap labour, although Laliberte and Satzewich claim that it was the DIA, as opposed to the farmers themselves, who conceived the idea of using Indigenous workers to fill these jobs. Having already developed paternalistic control of Indigenous peoples (via the *Indian Act*), the state intensified their power to force them onto sugar-beet farms. For example, in the early summer seasons in the late 1960s—the peak period when farmers required labour—the DIA and Alberta and Saskatchewan agencies terminated welfare payments for nearby Indigenous families to make them desperate for income and agree to go to the farms. There are also first-hand accounts of threats from the DIA to take away Indigenous children if their parents did not labour on the farms (Carreiro, 2017). Even though they toiled over 12 hours a day, they still did not receive enough pay to curb hunger and impoverished living conditions. The DIA continued this coercion for decades, making Indigenous workers the largest component of the labour force in the industry until the early 1980s (Laliberte & Satzewich, 1999). In effect, this case shows the extent to which colonial governments have intensified their paternalistic, colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples to use them as a reserve army of labour when needed.

³⁷ Laliberte and Satzewich further argue that some colonial officials saw reserves as temporary locations within which Indigenous peoples would learn to become like ‘Europeans’ through a gendered division of labour. They explain (1999, p. 65), “From the perspective of the federal government, Native males were to be prepared to either become yeoman farmers or accustomed to the discipline of wage labour, while Native women were to become domestic servants and ideal-typical European mothers”.

State enfranchisement

Due to the economic depression forced upon many reserves and their distance from labour markets in cities, many Indigenous peoples resorted to state enfranchisement which terminated a person's Indian status and conferred Canadian citizenship. Several were motivated to endure state enfranchisement by the per capita share of treaty annuities and band funds, but it came at a cost—the loss of treaty rights (including the loss of hunting and fishing rights) and the loss of the right to live on a reserve and to receive treaty payments (Brownlie, 2008; Miller, 2017). For the Canadian federal government, the aim of enfranchisement was to shed the confines of the *Indian Act* and to be assimilated into the 'civilized' non-Indigenous population (Frideres, 2016).³⁸ Carter (1990) astutely points out that enfranchisement also meant the final 'solution' to the fiscal obligations of treaties, including any legal and economic rights. It is crucial to note that the process was distinctly gendered as Indigenous women who married non-treaty men, white men, or Métis were considered "enfranchised" and could be provided with a one-time payment of ten years' worth of annuities (Lawrence, 2004).

By WWI there were hundreds of enfranchisements due to the lack of employment and social services on reserves. The number increased exponentially after 1920 with compulsory enfranchisement of war veterans and people who left reserve for education or a secure income (*Ibid.*).³⁹ Brownlie's (2008) examination of enfranchisement case files show that Mohawk and Anishinaabe women found limited employment opportunities in low-status, poorly paid work.

³⁸ Canada's state enfranchisement ended in 1985 with the passage of Bill C-31 when the enfranchisement process was removed from the *Indian Act*. Clauses of the *Indian Act* that involuntarily enfranchised Indigenous women also lasted until the same year.

³⁹ The federal government also took it upon themselves to remove women from annuity rolls and reduce the annual treaty expenditures owed to band councils.

Their work was concentrated in the service sector (mostly domestic service), factory work and manufacturing, although a few women obtained ‘middle-class’ jobs, even while the Great Depression. Despite experiencing racialized and gendered discrimination, Indigenous women exhibited perseverance in obtaining city jobs and higher education, effectively counteracting myths of them as ‘idle’, undependable, and unwilling to work in the ‘modern’ capitalist economy. In addition, Brownlie observes that enfranchisement did not necessarily mean a complete departure or rejection of reserve life; in many cases, those who moved to urban areas for wage-work traveled back to be with their communities.

McCallum’s research unveils how state-directed initiatives, such as the Indian Placement and Relocation Program that the DIA introduced in 1957, targeted the exploitation of Indigenous workers in urban areas as well.⁴⁰ The prevailing economic argument was that Indigenous peoples needed to be ‘awoken’ from their outdated, traditional economies that were based on hunting, trapping, and fishing. Again, Indigenous peoples were coerced to become part of the ‘civilized’ non-Indigenous working population, though this time around the state intended to use vocational training and permanent work placements to sever Indigenous peoples from their communities. “The idea was that, through permanent full-time employment, Indians would take a place in a labouring citizenry and serve the state, the city, and industry”, McCallum observes (2014, p. 77).⁴¹ To the Canadian state, these labour roles would supposedly pull them out of ahistorical obscurity, poverty, and marginality and eventually lead to their social equality. Those who

⁴⁰ Whereas early forms of state assistance focussed on short-term, seasonal employment such as domestic work, reserve construction, resource-based labour (for example, harvesting, logging, mining, canning, and hops and tobacco picking), and a few federal service positions.

⁴¹ McCallum also explains that the Indian Placement and Relocation Program came with the promise that funding would be small. This was a direct response to colonial officials who argued that Indigenous peoples were a burden to Canadian taxpayers. In reality, Indigenous peoples ended up paying for the program themselves via loans.

participated laboured as hairdressers, welfare officers, artisans, shopkeepers, musicians, restaurant owners, dressmakers, bank cashiers, stewardesses, servers, secretaries and stenographers, nurses and nurse's aides, and radio presenters. McCallum emphasizes that Indigenous women were paid less and had fewer opportunities for advancement than men. The state's paternalistic regulation of Indigenous women's working lives surveilled their recreational time, hygiene, and consumption of alcohol. Yet, even despite the state's attempt to shape their social lives, McCallum believes that many Indigenous workers "forged lives that remained distinctly Indigenous" (*Ibid.*, p. 239) and exemplified resistance to low pay and false assumptions about their work ethic, educational standards, and behaviour.

2.5 Precarious work and today's labour market

Reflections on precarity

As the above accounts show, the Canadian state made deliberate attempts to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the 'civilized' capitalist labour market and non-Indigenous population. Their vicious combination of land dispossession, state-directed employment interventions, major economic confinement, resource depletion, competition with encroaching settlements, and racist hiring practices by the Canadian ruling class have affected the ability of most Indigenous workers to find secure, well-paid jobs. Without an analysis of how colonization of Indigenous peoples affects their present-day lives, the non-Indigenous population maintains a perspective inundated with negative associations of Indigenous peoples: reports of terrible housing conditions on reserves, unsafe drinking water, dismal educational outcomes and the overrepresentation of Indigenous prisoners (Frideres, 2016; Simpson, 2017; Vowel, 2016). Non-Indigenous people also struggle to confront beliefs that Indigenous peoples are a tax 'burden',

they receive housing and social services ‘free’ from the federal government, and that they are solely culpable for their problems (Angus Reid Institute, 2018; Ipsos Reid, 2013; Vowel, 2016). Harold Cardinal (1999) recognized this in the late 1960s in his critique of Trudeau’s ‘White Paper’ (p. 58-59):

There are white men who believe that the lack of economic advancement among Indians is caused by their unwillingness to grasp opportunities presented them. More, perhaps, believe that all Indians really want is handouts, a welfare existence. Some will tell you that the problem is simpler, that the Indian just naturally is too lazy to work or that Indians lack the imagination and creativity to do anything for themselves. No thinking could be more viciously stupid and wrongheaded.

Reflections by Indigenous writers in the second half of the twentieth century fully illustrate how false ideological depictions of Indigenous peoples are carried over into the contemporary capitalist economy. Employment discrimination is highly evident in Métis and socialist theorist Howard Adams’ work *Prison of Grass* (1975). Adams recalls how white bosses used (p. 4) “stereotypes of drunkenness and laziness as excuses to exploit halfbreeds”, and they constructed occupational segregation by employing Indigenous peoples in “menial and low-paying jobs which whites [did] not want, such as picking stones, harvesting beets, and fighting forest fires” (p. 145). The precarity of these jobs had a detrimental experience for him. He explains (p. 146): “The casual, ‘dead-end’ jobs we do obtain have serious psychological effects: they are soul-sucking experiences and force us into hopelessness, frustration, and hostility”.

Likewise, in *Bobbie Lee* (1990), Stó:lō theorist Lee Maracle chronicles precarious work experiences of the protagonist, Bobbi, based on her own life. Her work includes helping her

family with a crab shack business, washing and ironing for whites, fruit picking, and serving at a fast-food restaurant where she recalls racist comments from her boss and white coworkers.

Maracle describes the unpaid work by Indigenous women and she reflects on the debilitating effects of precarious work on her sense of self. She explains (1990, p. 97):

I used to think that there had to be something I could do to leave my mark, to be useful to other people. I'd tried working, but most of my jobs were of 'shit work' variety and I didn't find them meaningful... I was only fourteen but even then started thinking that this working business was pretty useless—just an empty existence.

Later, she remarks (p. 238), “work must be a sane, rational and productive thing”, and insists that Indigenous labour “has never been appreciated so it has gone unpaid... We should not be expected to subsist on welfare and work for nothing” (p. 240). Gendered racism means that Indigenous women are subject to further marginalization in part-time, temporary, and manual work. Both authors' experiences in their workplaces show limited mobility in the labour market, or even the access to enter it. They confront a racially segmented labour market in which Indigenous workers are ‘ghettoized’ into low wage industries and are denied equitable access to skills training and education in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts (Galabuzi, 2006).

Marginalization in the labour market today

Indigenous workers continue to be a minority group in Canada's labour market.⁴² From 2008 to 2018, Indigenous peoples continued to experience worse outcomes in labour force participation

⁴² Note that the labour force participation rate does not account for non-wage labour such as unpaid domestic labour, fishing, hunting, bartering, and other similar economic activities which have historically been important for Indigenous peoples' livelihoods.

rates, employment rates and unemployment rates compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (OECD, 2018). As Suzanne Mills and Louise Clark (2009) describe, the present landscape of Indigenous peoples' paid employment is contingent on many factors: the availability of paid employment opportunities; the availability of education and training; the extent of a First Nation's self-government and their ownership over lands and resources; and reliance on traditional subsistence. In the past few decades, the Canadian government and business organizations have been pressured to turn their attention to increasing the availability of paid employment, job education and training. For instance, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1990 found alarming gaps in Indigenous peoples' paid labour force participation (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001; Frideres, 2016; RCAP, 1996). The RCAP report in late 1996 criticized federal and provincial governments for failing to increase Indigenous peoples' paid employment, saying that it "must be addressed if the poverty and despondency of lives defined by unemployment and welfare are to change" (RCAP, 1996, p. 3). In fact, they proposed a "10-year initiative to overcome barriers to Aboriginal participation in the labour force" (*Ibid.*, p. 14) calling for federal investment in education, training, and First Nations economic development. But labour critics say the federal government has not adequately responded to the RCAP's recommendation decades after the report (Moran, 2017).

The Indigenous population is now growing at a much faster rate than the non-Indigenous population (MacKinnon, 2015). Approximately 350,000 Indigenous youth will turn 15-years-old between 2016-26, meaning that they are critical group seeking paid employment in the labour market (OECD, 2016). Where Indigenous workers have accessed paid employment, they are overrepresented in 'unskilled', 'low-skilled', and manual jobs (AANDC, 2013; Fernandez &

Silver, 2018; OECD, 2018). According to the Labour Force Survey, in 2015, Indigenous peoples were overrepresented in agriculture, natural resources and utilities; construction; health care and social assistance; public administration, and business, building and other support services (Moyser, 2017). Comparatively, they were underrepresented in higher-paid knowledge industries, and they are prevalently employed in industries and occupations which require lower levels of educational attainment—a sign that the federal government has denied ample opportunities in education and training for them, along with their failure to address systemic economic inequalities.⁴³ More recent data from the 2017 Aboriginal Peoples Survey shows that the top industries which employed First Nations women, aged 25 to 54 years, living off reserve were: healthcare and social assistance (23.7 per cent), retail trade (10.7 per cent) and educational services (10.2 per cent), public administration (9.8 per cent), and accommodation and food services (8.3 per cent) (Anderson, 2019).⁴⁴ For First Nations men in the same age group and also living off reserve, they were predominately employed in construction (17.1 per cent), public administration (9.1 per cent), manufacturing (8.8 per cent), retail trade (7.7 per cent) and transportation and warehousing (7.7 per cent).⁴⁵ Their survey also found that men were more likely to work in the trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations, whereas women were employed predominately in sales and service occupations. Both employed men and women were more likely to have permanent jobs (85 per cent) although women were less likely

⁴³ Private-sector and crown corporations have implemented programs to provide training opportunities for Indigenous peoples (e.g. Nova Corporation in Alberta, Inco Metals Company Manitoba Division, and Saskatchewan Power Corporation) but the programs are not typically funded beyond the training stage, so there are few opportunities for Indigenous workers to have guaranteed long-term job security (MacKinnon, 2015).

⁴⁴ This survey was conducted from January to August 2017. Their survey relied on respondents to self-report as being an Aboriginal person and belonging to one or more Aboriginal groups: First Nations, Métis or Inuit. Their criterion of “First Nations” includes Status and non-Status Indians.

⁴⁵ They note these trends varied greatly depending on where survey participants were located. For example, there was more availability of construction jobs in Saskatchewan and Alberta compared to Québec and the Atlantic provinces.

to be employed and more likely to work on a part-time basis.

Employment of First Nations men and women living off reserve (2016)

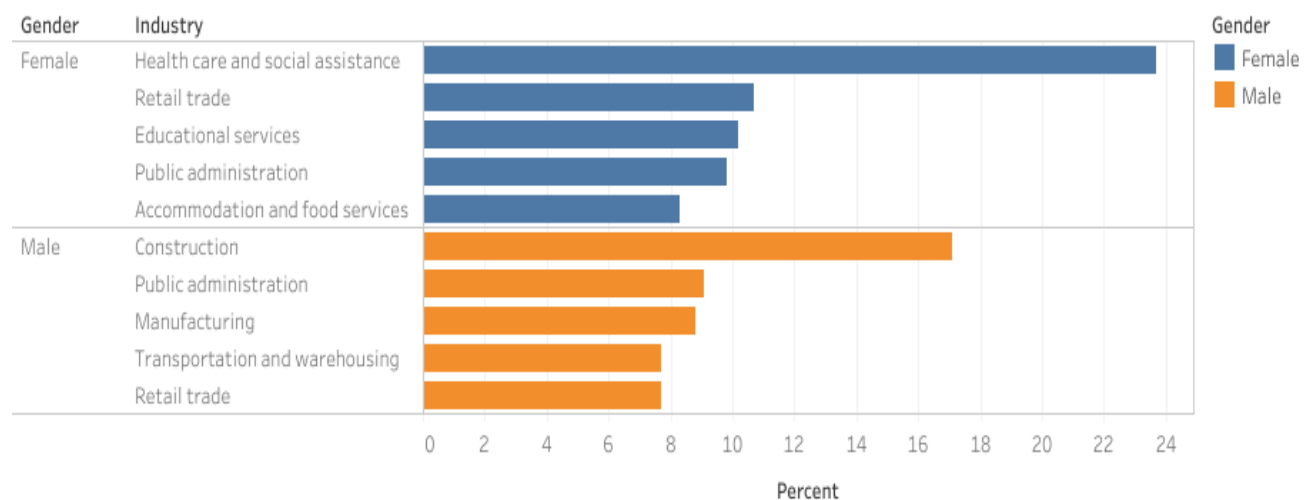


Figure 2. Employment of First Nations men and women living off reserve, 2016 (Statistics Canada 2017).

For the on-reserve population, access to employment looks different as First Nations band councils are a major employer. The 2016 First Nations Regional Early Childhood, Education and Employment Survey reported more than half of the on-reserve workforce were employed in a First Nations organization, including their public administration, health, and education sectors (FNIGC, 2016).⁴⁶ Following that, construction and resource industries accounted for about 15 per cent of employment. Nearly 4 per cent were working in temporary or contract work. The bulk of higher-paid, full-time and secure jobs remain in urban areas which are more difficult for on-reserve populations to access (CLC, 2015).

⁴⁶ For their data collection, the First Nations Information Governance Centre collected 20,428 surveys from 243 First Nations between November 2013 and May 2015. This sample size accounts for an estimated 5.3 per cent of individuals living on First Nations reserves. Their results did not provide a gender-based analysis.

As shown throughout this chapter, these contemporary employment outcomes have resulted from a long history of structural forces that can be traced back to the structures of colonial-capitalism and ongoing problems of colonial oppression and systemic economic marginalization. Vast inequalities in the Canadian labour market remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers and it is problematic that Indigenous workers are overrepresented in low-paid industries and occupations. Change on multiple levels is needed to increase the availability of well-paid, unionized employment opportunities, improve access to public education and training, and navigate the complexities of enhancing employment and economic development for First Nations communities (AANDC, 2013; MacKinnon, 2015; OECD 2018). As it stands now, unions are beginning to speak up about the need to push back against hiring discrimination against Indigenous peoples and improve the availability of paid employment, job education and training for them, although more attention is needed to the issues.

2.6 Experiences with unions and organizing workplace actions

Indigenous peoples have historically been restricted to seasonal and casual wage labour in the capitalist labour market, which means that they had limited opportunities to join early trade unions; although in some areas they have either co-organized labour struggles with non-Indigenous workers or initiated their own workplace actions. Research by Rolf Knight (1975) and Andrew Parnaby (2006, 2008) reveal Indigenous peoples' participation in early industrial unions and workers' struggles in British Columbia. Indigenous labourers were known for their participation in salmon fishing and cannery labour, and Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam nations had a reputation for their fast pace of longshoring in the Burrard Inlet (*Ibid.*). Longshoremen on the Vancouver waterfront organized with the Knights of Labour, fishermen

joined the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union (UFAWU), and labourers in natural resource industries became members of the International Woodworkers of America and the Western Federation of Miners. At times, Indigenous workers took initiative to form union locals with high numbers of Indigenous members. Fisheries workers in the Cowichan area established their own local of the B.C. Fishermen's Union in 1900 and Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh longshoremen were central to organizing with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1906 (Jamieson, 1961; Knight, 1975; Parnaby, 2008).

Parnaby's research (2008) finds that the decentralized and syndicalist orientation of unions like the IWW accommodated the 'gangs' of longshoremen very well due to the casualized nature of the labour. That labour arrangement was not typically ideal for most working class people but longshoremen struck a good balance between periodic labour in B.C.'s waterfronts and engaging in traditional, land-based modes of life in the 'off' seasons. The IWW was accepting of casualized employment without loss of jobs or pay and unlike many early trade unions they encouraged multiracial solidarity. These workers asserted their Indigenous identities in many ways which also enabled them to build workers' power—from their nickname *Bows and Arrows*, to hosting union meetings on reserve, and using their native languages on the job to subvert their white managers. They did not have to culturally 'assimilate' into the white European working population to be active unionists. These workers exhibited solidarity with their non-Indigenous colleagues and intense working class militance by co-organizing at least sixteen strikes in the Vancouver waterfront between 1889 and 1923. *Bows and Arrows* and their IWW local "were responsible for a level of militancy on the waterfront that was unmatched by most other occupations, provincially or nationally" (Parnaby, 2008, p. 9). Squamish longshoremen later

joined the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) in 1913. Though they faced a racialized division of labour in the waterfronts, they took part in union-building with non-Indigenous workers they laboured beside. One anonymous lumber handler remarks (2008, p. 88):

The Indians used to handle nothing but lumber and the whites, the general cargo.

Sometimes they'd be working in the next hatch to each other and they'd get talking.

That's how some Indians learned English and that kind of talk led to the formation of the ILA.

Their first president of the ILA local 38-57 was William Nahanee, a member of the Squamish nation. It was maintained as an independent political organization and after merging with other Vancouver ILA locals it went on to support syndicalist approaches affiliated with the One Big Union formed in 1919 which aimed for mass industrial labour organizing.

Shared struggles

There is other historical evidence to demonstrate that Indigenous and non-Indigenous wage labourers have organized together in early industrial labour struggles. Jamieson (1961) estimates that as many as 8,000 non-Indigenous fishermen and allied Indigenous workers conducted militant strikes in the 1890s to early 1900s. White, Indigenous and Japanese fishermen sometimes united to demand wage increases—Knight estimates that at least one third of the fishermen on the Fraser River were Indigenous in the late 1890s to early 1900s, which made their participation crucial to strike actions (Knight, 1975). In 1893, Indigenous fishermen joined one of the first strikes by the Fraser River Fishermen's Benevolent and Protective Association (Knight, 1975). Three Indigenous strike leaders addressed a Vancouver rally and according to a report in *Vancouver World* they “fully understood the grievances of the white fishermen and

being in sympathy therein, had joined the union” (Knight, 1975, p. 201). However, the strike collapsed when Japanese fishermen returned to the river and made minor concessions, revealing how their employers sometimes succeeded in instilling a racialized division of workers to break their solidarity. From 1900 onward, tensions prevailed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers against Japanese internment labourers brought into Canada to supply cheap labour (Jamieson, 1961; Knight, 1975). Through the United Fishermen and Allied Workers’ Union (UFAWU) both Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers’ struggles united in a form of ‘ethnic defense’ against the competition of Japanese workers (*Ibid.*). By allying with non-Indigenous unionists, Indigenous workers greatly improved their conditions in fisheries and canneries, achieving some of the largest wage increases in that field of seasonal employment (Jamieson, 1961). In Jamieson’s review of Indigenous workers in early industrial unions in British Columbia, he concludes (1961, p. 225),

Trade unionism has been one of the few contexts in which native Indians in British Columbia have had the opportunity... to participate on a fully equal basis with whites and to share equally in losses as well as gains.

However, in industries like longshoring, Indigenous workers eventually faced mass layoffs and blacklisting by their employers in response to some of their job actions. When non-Indigenous labourers overwhelmed the labour market in the early nineteenth century tensions erupted with former Indigenous workers who tried to return to work as strike-breakers (Parnaby, 2008).

At times, the concentration of Indigenous workers scattered along the coastline in industries like salmon fisheries and canneries enabled them to express considerable bargaining power. Both men and women labourers along the Skeena and Nass rivers took strike actions to negotiate the

prices for caught fish and wage rates for cannery labour (Jamieson, 1961). They even turned to their own bands to engage in ‘informal’ collective bargaining. As Stuart Jamieson explains (1961, p. 221):

This structure gave local Indians in different areas some degree of bargaining power with canning companies, and gave rise to a type of indigenous collective bargaining supported at times by strike action. The basic unit was the native Indian *band*, and the main negotiations were carried on by the local chief.

From 1927 to 1951, when Indigenous land claims processes were outlawed, the Native Brotherhood of B.C. (1931) and the Pacific Coast Native Fishermen’s Association (1945) essentially functioned as collective bargaining agents for Indigenous workers in fisheries and canneries (Mills & McCreary, 2012; Muszynski, 1988). Jamieson reveals that these workers faced the unique colonial oppression of Indian agents who intimidated Indigenous workers and had the ear of cannery operators who appealed to Indian Affairs whenever they took strike action. There is also indication to show that Indigenous workers in B.C. participated in union organizing alongside struggles to advance Indigenous self-determination. When Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh longshoremen unionized with the IWW in 1906, representatives from their nations nominated a delegation to London, England, to depute their land title grievances to King Edward VII (Parnaby, 2008). The three chiefs in the delegation included Chief ‘Joe’ Capilano who paid for his journey to England using his wages from longshoring (*Ibid.*). Although the delegation was denied a just resolution to their grievances, Parnaby argues that their political organizing led them to establish pan-Indigenous political organizations in the Pacific Northwest.

For the most part, union structures have not been suitable for Indigenous workers in migratory labour because the seniority system means that migratory workers lose their seniority status upon leaving their jobs at the end of the season. There have been few instances of migratory work outside of B.C. where Indigenous workers have joined unions, such as Mohawk ironworkers in Ontario and Québec who were early members of the International Association of Bridges, Structural and Ornamental Ironworkers, and some continue to be part of the union today (Mitchell, 1960). A range of factors has resulted in Indigenous workers' limited ability to access unionized jobs, such as hiring discrimination against Indigenous peoples and the fact that many continue to be confined to the lowest tiers of the labour market which are not unionized. There is currently no data sources to verify how many unionized workers identify as an Indigenous person and what sectors they are in. However, since the 1960s, public sector unions have gained members who identify as Indigenous because they have been in public sector positions, namely in healthcare, elementary, high school and post-secondary education, social services, government and public services administration (Fernandez & Silver, 2018; Mills & McCreary, 2012). Since the 1970s, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) has represented Indigenous workers in the federal government (Mills & Clarke, 2009). Unionization of Indigenous workers has shown some importance in public sector unions like CUPE, particularly in Saskatchewan where they represent workers at Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, three Friendship Centres, and the Fort Qu'Appelle Indian Hospital, and they have also pushed for representative workforce strategies. There is little known about Indigenous workers' current involvement in the private sector unions, however. Major private sector unions, such as Unifor and the United Steelworkers of Canada, have small numbers of Indigenous workers in diverse industries, such as gaming, hospitality, construction, resource extraction (oil and gas, forestry, etc.), retail, manufacturing,

warehousing, and transportation (Mills & McCreary, 2012; Unifor, 2021). There is a growing current of construction corporations who are targeting on- and off-reserve Indigenous workers by pushing for hiring and skills training programs and thus helping to secure unionized employment though little is known about their successes in these areas (Hunter, 2017).

2.7 Divergent perspectives on Indigenous peoples' self-determination

When it comes to thinking about Indigenous peoples' livelihoods, including how they may want to engage in the paid labour market and with unions, it is critical to consider their perspectives on Indigenous self-determination. In recent decades, Indigenous peoples have demanded and, in some cases, attained greater legal recognition of rights over their lands and natural resources, although the push for capitalist development by governments, corporations, and even some Indigenous academics and leaders have forged varying perspectives on what Indigenous self-determination entails and how to achieve it. I will outline some of these different perspectives which I believe the Canadian labour movement needs to be aware of and I will explore what Indigenous theorists say could be the basis of solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

'Red' capitalism

The momentum of greater legal recognition of rights for Indigenous peoples has led some to establish First Nations businesses, equity deals, and joint ventures in oil and gas, fishing, small regional airlines, and land companies (Anderson *et al.*, 2004; Newhouse, 2000; Wotherspoon & Satzewich, 2000).⁴⁷ Others are trying to gain economic benefits from resource development

⁴⁷ These businesses and ventures have also been pursued independently of First Nations band councils too.

projects that are located on or impact Indigenous peoples' lands and rights, like negotiating impact benefit agreements (IBAs) between First Nations band councils, extractive corporations, and unions.⁴⁸ Some Indigenous theorists believe these economic arrangements will lead to greater self-determining authority for Indigenous peoples. Onondaga scholar David R. Newhouse (2000a) argues that capitalist development is necessary for Indigenous peoples to prosper. He claims, "We have participated at the edges of capitalism, as labourers, as small business people, as debtors. Now we seek to enter its heart" (*Ibid.*, p. 153) and he claims it is not possible to seek anti-capitalist alternatives because "capitalism will absorb Aboriginal cultures" (p. 154). For him, the only thing that Indigenous peoples can do is intervene against the worst effects of capitalist development. Moreover, he argues that capitalist values, such as the notion of progress as defined through social competition, can be adapted in accordance with Indigenous cultures, values, and self-determination, in what he calls "capitalism with a red face" (2000b, p. 55). He is hopeful that individuals who accumulate greater wealth from this development will share it with community members and there could be more collusion between them and band councils to mitigate against economic inequality. "The process itself will tend to be collaborative rather than competitive", he argues (p. 58). While Newhouse argues for band councils and individuals to start their own businesses, scholars Stephen Cornell and Joseph P. Kalt (1998) see downfalls in start-ups because they are prone to short-term failure. Instead, they encourage making reserves

⁴⁸ Supporters of IBAs argue that they work toward Indigenous self-determination because they enable signatory band councils to have a greater stake in decisions regarding resource development on their lands. IBAs are favourable because they may offer royalties, subcontracting opportunities, and preference for Indigenous workers and contractors, apprenticeships, and advanced training programs (Cameron & Levitan, 2014; Mills & Sweeney, 2013). However, critics such as Shiri Pasternak (2019) point out that IBAs do not allow for First Nations community members to know what their band councils are signing to since they are commonly bound by confidentiality agreements. A fundamental problem is that IBAs do not allow Indigenous peoples to resume full jurisdiction and governance authority over their lands, which some Indigenous theorists argue is necessary to achieve Indigenous self-determination.

into “an environment in which people want to invest. They want to invest because they believe their investment has a good chance of paying off” (p. 7). Their approach curiously emphasizes Indigenous self-determination and self-governance without interference from federal and provincial governments, while also encouraging capitalist investment, whether it be from “cash-rich joint venture partner[s]” (*Ibid.*) or other investors.

Indigenous scholars have criticized visions of ‘red capitalism’ and otherwise arguing for a path of capitalist development will lead to immense inequalities and fail to achieve Indigenous self-determination. Clifford Atleo (Kam'ayaam/Chachim'multhnii) responds to proponents of ‘red capitalism’ such as Newhouse, Cornell, and Kalt, in stating: “A major concern I have with this approach is when tribal communities have supposedly freed themselves from poverty and government dependency, they then burden themselves with a new dependency: the capitalist market” (2015, p. 44). Wotherspoon and Satzewich (2000) observe an emerging bourgeoisie in First Nations reserves, made up of small groups of people who own large sums of band-based and/or private capital.⁴⁹ To them, a key issue that will emerge with the development of ‘red capitalism’ is the extent to which economic development based on private ownership and control will be the basis for new conflicts within First Nations, which include greater class conflict, income inequality, potential cuts to current forms of social welfare, and other social, economic and ecological ramifications (*Ibid.*). For instance, Angele Alook *et al.* (2019) express caution with Alberta’s oil industry as some Indigenous workers have started their own contracting companies after becoming journeymen or journeywomen, while the majority are targeted for

⁴⁹ Wotherspoon and Satzewich further explain that the funds transferred to reserve band councils through land claims settlements and resource royalties are in many cases ‘owned’ by that reserve, but the *control* over the distribution of these funds usually rests in the hands of a few band council authorities.

‘unskilled’ jobs. They explain further (p. 3):

With this emergence of small-scale Indigenous capitalists is the concern that capitalist relations will get implanted in Indigenous communities, hooking them into the trans-local practices of ruling that are integral to corporate power and dividing the community against itself.

In contrast to Newhouse, Alook *et al.* express skepticism that capitalist relations of production can coincide with “Indigenous understandings of being relations and caring for the collective good” (*Ibid.*). Numerous other Indigenous scholars have argued that the capitalist drive for perpetual profit-making and resource depletion will never meet the needs of people, animals and all forms of life (Atleo, 2015; LaDuke, 1999; Maracle, 1996; Simpson, 2017).

Indigenous scholars have already observed how First Nations band council negotiations with Canadian governments over modern treaties and land claims settlements have created tension within First Nations because these negotiations are limited to a small, select group of First Nations officials. Arthur Manuel, founder of the Indigenous Network on Economies and Trade, is critical of these negotiation processes, arguing that First Nations band councils join this process because it ensures them “privileged, extremely well-paid careers at government negotiating tables” (2015, p. 215). Theorists who are critical of ‘red capitalism’ also argue that efforts to recruit Indigenous peoples into the ruling class and the state bureaucracy are attempts to ‘buy off’ First Nations band councils and pit them against grassroots movements for Indigenous self-determination (Adams, 1999; Manuel, 2015; Simpson, 2017). Concretely, Coulthard and Adams warn about the small, conservative layer of First Nations “*compradors*” (i.e. political leaders and bourgeoisie) won over by the ruling class to simply fulfill their goals of

state recognition (Adams, 1999, p. 148). To Coulthard, these leaders are negotiating forms of state recognition to facilitate capitalist market integration of their own communities, so they only aim to redress some of the negative impacts of settler-colonial capitalism instead of trying to dismantle these systems of oppression. Adams argues that these state-directed processes could create a cultural, reactionary nationalism that “perpetuates the racist idea of ‘Indians in their place,’ and does not allow them to develop a radical consciousness or a reorganized culture that would be in harmony with liberation” (Adams, 1999, p. 197).

First Nations band councils pushing for capitalist development are developing tensions with unions trying to organize on-reserve workers. Unions encounter conflicts when launching organizing drives and band councils try to stop them by raising concerns regarding labour law jurisdiction (Mills & McCreary, 2012; Moran, 2006). They commonly argue that reserve businesses should operate outside of federal and provincial labour legislation regimes. For instance, in a 1984 case, teachers in Sagkeeng First Nation successfully appealed to Canada Labour Relations Board to recognize their right to collective bargaining (Miller, 2017). They had a tense dispute with band council members who were jailed for contempt of court and who refused to reinstate the teachers. In another unionizing drive in the late 1990s at Northern Lights Casino in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, band council members (backed by The Federation of Sovereign Indian Nations) made an argument that they should have the right to manage their own labour relations independently of the Canadian state. Anishinaabe scholar Brock Pitawanakwat explains (2006, p. 32-33):

The chiefs have used this false front of nationalism as a red herring to maintain their power over labour relations in Indigenous institutions. This form of red herring is a

classic divide-and-conquer technique to prevent marginalized people from organizing to confront their oppressors... The emerging capitalist class in indigenous communities has exploited the ongoing and deep-seated fears of assimilation amongst our people.

These divisions within First Nations have had the effect of disorientating workers as Pitawanakwat remarks that the casino workers ended up voting to decertify from their union only a few years later, in 2003. Pitawanakwat believes that some workers were confused over “vague notions that the union would in some way negatively “affect First Nations culture”” (Ibid., p. 32) and fighting for workers’ rights is not a part of ‘being’ Indigenous. However, as Pitawanakwat argues, these tensions must be viewed considering the *Indian Act* which replaced forms of Indigenous governance with state-sanctioned band councils, some of whom seek to replicate the settler-colonial capitalist relations of production for their own benefit. These cases also raise questions about the implications of Indigenous self-determination—if Indigenous peoples truly want to disengage from the state, then it is understandable that they would not want to be a part of the Canadian labour relations regime since it means that they will continue to be governed by Canadian governments and courts, even though non-Indigenous workers have struggled for a long time to improve labour legislation in favour of working class communities. In Moran’s experience trying to unionize on-reserve workers into CUPE, he explains that some band councils have tried to develop their own labour codes (Moran, 2006). For instance, in 2003, Scugog Island First Nation established their own labour code after employees at the Great Blue Heron Gaming Company decided to unionize themselves. The decision by Scugog Island was rejected by the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) who claimed that it did not qualify as an inherent right to Indigenous self-government (*Ibid.*). Whether the Scugog Island First Nation’s attempt to create their own labour code had malice in its intent towards its workers, or not, their

rejection by the OLRB demonstrates that they ultimately do not have the choice to disengage from the Canadian state in this regard. These are some of the situations that First Nations, unions, and workers employed by First Nations will keep encountering if a path of ‘red capitalism’ is taken. If First Nations continue to seek capitalist market integration, they will inevitably encounter class tensions with workers who desire union representation so that they can push back against their exploitive employers.

Anti-colonial and anti-capitalist self-determination

For Coulthard, Maracle and Adams, achieving Indigenous self-determination is necessarily a struggle to overcome the structures of settler-colonial capitalism. State forms of ‘recognition’ and ‘red capitalism’ will never achieve Indigenous self-determination since they fail to overcome capitalist and colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples. To Maracle (2021), Indigenous self-determination entails the “*full* access to resources; control of citizenship based on original law and custom; and governance that is connected to original law and custom and/or derived from within the nation” (emphasis added, p. 7). She points to the need to reclaim land and self-determining political autonomy. In *Tortured People: The Politics of Colonization* (1999), Adams lays out a potential path for this vision of self-determination. He encourages Indigenous peoples to organize sufficient pressure ‘from below’ to break through conservative and reformist leadership and allow for a radical nationalism to reclaim land and self-determining political autonomy. He then envisions an anti-colonial movement in the form of a ‘red’ or ‘radical nationalism’ which would first gain “economic, social, and cultural autonomy, and control over all political affairs concerning the natives as a nation, beginning with complete local control of Indian reserves, Métis communities, and native urban ghettos” (*Ibid.*, p. 193), and of course, he

argues that this struggle would mean “throwing off the domination of government bureaucrats” (*Ibid.*, p. 195). He insists that Indigenous peoples take steps toward economic, social and cultural autonomy via localized struggles for self-determination, yet a much broader anti-colonial *and* anti-capitalist movement with non-Indigenous people is needed. He explains,

This segregation under radical nationalism will mean greater class consciousness. It develops the understanding that a native liberation struggle is essentially the same struggle as that of the working class and all oppressed people *against a capitalist ruling class*. In this way, Indians and Métis can build alliances with workers and other oppressed and colonized groups of white society. (1975, pp. 194-195)

Both Adams and Maracle (1996) further suggest that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can build alliances in mass social movements together when they realize that struggles for Indigenous self-determination and the non-Indigenous working class have some commonalities against the ruling class. However, the way to build consciousness to reach that realization is not entirely clear. In his earlier work, *Prison of Grass* (1975), Adams only suggests that Indigenous peoples may try to collectively mobilize via Soviet-like local councils to deal with grievances over basic needs and to politically educate them at the same time.

Practical steps toward a shared struggle are more apparent in contexts where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples work side by side and may be able to see that they have a common class objective to resist their employer. For instance, Adams reveals real-world examples of non-Indigenous working class solidarity with Indigenous peoples when directly responding to state oppression. In the “Flour Power Operation” in the late 1960s and 70s when the Saskatchewan Métis Nation faced mass starvation and went to welfare offices to challenge the government’s

failed welfare system, The Saskatchewan Farmers' Union members donated surplus wheat and flour for the Métis. When the Liberal Minister of Agriculture denied their permit to grind the wheat that was brought in, the farmers decided to do it themselves and they transported to the Métis. As Adams explains (1999, p. 95),

This was a case where Métis and white united in an authentic, political movement...

For one thing, it strengthened the alliance with white groups. The most important, however, was the solidarity and intimacy this conflict inspired in Métis people. It increased counter-consciousness as no other confrontation had, and gave us a new realization of the inhumanity of the Canadian government.

Adams comments on Indigenous and non-Indigenous solidarity that grew into a political movement as both groups united in their opposition to governments that have not addressed their needs. In this case, it was the Métis who faced intense neglect from the federal government, yet non-Indigenous farmers united with them in a common objective to resist state oppression.

Today, unions and Indigenous peoples continue to oppose the federal government on several issues. Workers are generally concerned about the impact of government measures on their job security and working conditions, for example, austerity measures that are deteriorating public services, and free trade agreements which have decimated the manufacturing sector. The concerns of Indigenous peoples involve the failure of the Canadian state to return their traditional territories and agree on a path to have their own self-determining political, social, economic and cultural autonomy. Despite having these separate struggles, Adams' argument holds true that there have been historical moments where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have united, particularly in the labour movement, to support each other against the ruling class. Knowing that a fair number of Indigenous peoples have now gained employment off reserves in more urban

areas, while others continue to be isolated on reserves with access to limited employment, it is not entirely clear how to take practical steps to build that shared class struggle. Of course, in the context of the Canadian labour movement, this level of solidarity would require trade unionists (and the broader political left) to significantly build an anti-capitalist movement and figure out ways to develop strategic alliances with Indigenous peoples leading anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles for self-determination.

2.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to better understand the Canadian state's objectives of dispossession and assertions of settler-colonial power to shape Indigenous peoples' lives. The goal of settler-colonial dispossession has been to eliminate the Indigenous population and gain access to their lands in the interest of capitalist profit-making, though we also see where the Canadian ruling class has exploited Indigenous peoples for their labour power where they needed it. In many cases, the Canadian state attempted to 'assimilate' Indigenous peoples into mainstream and tried to 'discipline' them in certain forms of labour. The confluence of dispossession, settler-colonial oppression, and economic marginalization by Canadian institutions and employers has led to the present-day context where Indigenous peoples face a very precarious positionality in the capitalist labour market. This literature review also reveals the little-known histories of Indigenous workers' leadership and participation in workers' struggles and unions. It also begins to explain some of the tenuous relationships between Indigenous peoples and unions as some groups within First Nations seek capitalist development as part of their vision of self-determination. However, it is important to recognize that other Indigenous theorists envision an anti-colonial and anti-capitalist path of Indigenous self-

determination and they see a role for workers' struggles to be united with their anti-colonial struggles—thus, unions could have a role in helping unite these movements.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

The theoretical grounding of this study in a Marxist, anti-colonial and historical materialist framework provides a specific entry point to analyze the complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the labour market and in unions. Workplaces and union environments are located within a capitalist economy mediated by classism, racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination—all of which intersect in the building and fracturing of workers' solidarity. The racism of non-Indigenous working class people toward Indigenous peoples has been a long-standing issue in the relations between the two groups. I explore the broad tensions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people by analyzing social relations of oppression, processes of racialization, and the state's attempts to divide these groups. I explore why some workers accept racist ideas and I probe into unions' responses to racism. Additionally, this framework addresses the contradictions of unions which demonstrate their potential to overcome social fragmentation of the working class (and potentially to unite with Indigenous peoples' struggles) but makes them struggle to challenge the structural limitations of capitalism.

3.2 Social relations of oppression: Class, race and gender

I take the historical materialist perspective that racism is a social relation of oppression which operates in the real, lived experiences of individuals and as produced and reproduced in the material relations of production (Camfield, 2016; Das Gupta, 2007, 2008). I argue that racism is grounded in the material reality and the social relationships involved in production, so the historical roots of racism in capitalism must be traced to the working class's structural position to

capitalist relations of production.

To begin, I will discuss Marx and Engels's conception of a person's experience in the relations of production. They argue that the way that humans organize themselves in the economic organization of society, or 'mode of production', conditions the nature of society that is built upon it (Marx & Engels, 1970).⁵⁰ People's direct experiences in their everyday material conditions, particularly the ways through which they labour to produce and distribute the material necessities of life, shapes their consciousness and general conception of the world (*Ibid.*).⁵¹ In the capitalist mode of production, class oppression is the lived form of the experiences of working class people who are exploited by the bourgeoisie. They are "the ruling material force of society" and the power they have over the means of production means they heavily influence what the ruling ideas are (*Ibid.*, 1970, p. 39). As Marx explains, "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of their dominance" (*Ibid.*, p. 39). As the class which "has the means of material production at its disposal" they have "control at the same time over

⁵⁰ Marx is commonly accused of being deterministic by theorizing a dialectical relationship between economic organization and superstructure (for discussion, see Cohen, 1978). However, it should be observed that Marx and Engels formulate this relationship in terms of the superstructure 'arising from', 'corresponding with', and 'conditioning' the base, rather than to suggest a strict determination. For example, in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in 1859 (1971) Marx writes (emphasis added, p. 20-21), "The totality of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which *correspond* definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life *conditions* the social, political and intellectual life". He theorizes that forms of social consciousness correspond with a society's superstructure.

⁵¹ Note that people's ideas can sometimes contradict their experiences in material reality if there is a contradiction between the forces and relations of production. Marx discusses the moment of contradiction in *Preface* (1971, p. 21) when he discusses how "the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production", and again in *Capital: Volume One* (1959, p. 542): "The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralisation of the means of production and socialisation of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument".

the means of *mental* production” (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 39, emphasis added). They have a great stake in preserving its power and dominance over the working class because they gain economic, social and political advantages from workers’ exploitation, imperial conquest, capitalist accumulation, etc. (Shelby, 2003). Therefore, in the attempt to protect their class position, they legitimize their power over the working class in ways that they are generally convinced to accept, so the ruling class tends to present class relationships as ones that have developed ‘naturally’. In the capitalist mode of production, the ruling class stratifies the working class through the construction of social markers of identity and differential rights and privileges. In doing so, they try to present these differential markers of identity as phenomena that are ‘natural’ so that workers and all oppressed peoples uncritically accept socioeconomic divisions amongst them.

Himani Bannerji builds on Marx and Engels by arguing that the formation of racism is grounded in people’s everyday material conditions and shaped by relations of social, economic and political power that are *historically specific*. She describes the social construction of race as “a way—a power-inscribed way—of reading or establishing *difference*, and funding a long-lasting means for reproducing such readings, organization, and practice” (2005, p. 148, emphasis added). By stratifying working class people based on social ‘differences’, such as one’s ‘race’, and by attaching differential rights and/or privileges to ‘races’, the ruling class is better able to divide working class people and maintain power over them. It also obfuscates the daily exploitation against the working class, as Abigail B. Bakan explains (2014, p. 110):

What can be called special oppression divides the working class or any other oppressed class against itself, and in turn obscures class differences by creating new lines of

demarcation that are used as means of subordination. Special oppression is particularly necessary where there is a threat of unity among the oppressed classes against the hegemonic bloc.

The ruling class's construction of social markers of identity and differential rights and/or privileges for groups of workers and their communities are methods of special oppression to divide the working class so that they do not cooperate as a united class to fight the power of the "hegemonic bloc".

Bannerji further argues that the construction of 'race' is complicated by the mediating social relations of oppression. She theorizes a dialectic at play (2005, p. 149):

Capital is always a practice, a determinate set of social relations and a cultural one at that. Thus 'race', gender, and patriarchy are *inseparable* from class, as any social organization rests on inter-subjective relations of bodies and minds marked with socially constructed difference on the terrain of private property and capital.⁵²

Class relations are shaped by the relations of production, such as the ways people experience and relate to each other through productive and reproductive labour (Bannerji, 2005).⁵³ Therefore, we must consider the ways that the ruling class historically stratified the working class through the construction of numerous social markers of identity, such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. Workers and their social groupings experience distinct forms of oppression because of discrimination like racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, religious oppression, etc.

⁵² Das Gupta (1996) brings attention to anti-racist and feminist critiques of Marxist theory by declaring that a major problem with Marxist discussions of labour processes is that the working class is seen as a "faceless, monolithic abstraction" (p. 4). Thus, it is imperative to pay close attention to the different, contradictory experiences and responses of workers on the basis of markers of social identities, such as gender and race.

⁵³ It is important to note that Marx conceives of a person's relationship to the means of production as a *social* relationship (Bakan, 2014).

For example, Indigenous women in Canada face the intersection of racialized, gendered, and sexualized oppression. European male settlers accumulated their wealth through the fur trade and their pillage of land for private property which enabled them to establish ruling class male domination (Bourgeault, 1983). Whereas Indigenous peoples mutually exercised decision-making powers over production and distribution, settlers eroded the political authority and decision-making power held by Indigenous women over their reproductive labour and the goods they produced (Lawrence, 2004; Maracle, 1996, 1993).⁵⁴ Indigenous women were sexually exploited by male settlers so they could gain access to trade relationships (Bourgeault, 1983). This transformation created a settler-colonial model of identity based on the construction of heteropatriarchal and heteropaternal norms.

3.3 Marxist, anti-racist, and feminist theories on racialization

The question arises, why does racism exist and how do certain groups of people, such as Indigenous peoples, become ‘racialized’? Numerous historical materialist and Marxist scholars argue that the construction of racism is associated with economic imperatives concerning colonial conquest, genocide, world trade, and the search for cheap sources of labour power, dating back to pre-capitalist and early-capitalist relations of production (James, 1996; Roediger, 2007; Satzewich, 2011). After the first settlers in the Americas exhausted the majority of Indigenous peoples for their labour and nearly eliminated their existence from foreign diseases, the British imported predominately English, Irish, and religious minorities to labour as indentured servants, though they proved to be an insufficient workforce and they began to

⁵⁴ Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) describes how this historical transformation has affected Indigenous women’s sense of identity expressed through land-based modes of life: “Dispossession for kwe is not just about the removal of my body from the land... [it is] a gendered removal of our bodies and minds from our nation and place-based grounded normativities” (2017, p. 43).

challenge their masters based on mid-1600s revolutionary ideas developing in England (Williams, 1961). By the end of the 17th century, the price of these indentured servants outstripped the price of African slaves, and a vast amount of labour was needed to create and sustain plantations in the Americas. Thus, European colonial empires commenced the mass capture and sales of slaves to labour on plantations, which led to immense profitability (*Ibid.*).⁵⁵ Throughout the process of developing the transatlantic slave trade, European ruling class made a social justification for the exploitation of slaves and violence against them, as Marxist theorist Hubert Harrison explains (2001, p. 53, emphasis added):

It was found necessary to reconcile the public mind to the system of slavery. This was affected by building up the belief that the slaves were not human: that they belonged to a *different* order of beings.

Harrison's theory follows that African slaves were 'racialized' as an ideological justification by plantation owners and state apparatuses to rationalize colonial conquest. Their justification of their exploitative labour regime operated on the racist ideological notion that African slaves were biologically 'inferior' and 'uncivilized' compared to European labourers, so they were meant perform the most back-breaking and dirtiest jobs, with threats of extreme violence when they resisted (Bonacich *et al.*, 2008; Du Bois, 1969).⁵⁶ In many cases, they were also compared to chattel to be bought, sold, and 'tamed', so they were treated as private property of the white

⁵⁵ Eric Williams explains why enslaved Africans were sought for their labour (1961, p. 20): "the colonies needed labour and resorted to Negro labour because it was the cheapest and best. This was not a theory, it was a practical conclusion deduced from the personal experience of the planter. He would have gone to the moon, if necessary, for labour. Africa was nearer than the moon, nearer too than the more populous countries of India and China. But their turn was to come."

⁵⁶ Marx recognizes the historic "discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins" as "the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production" (1959, p. 751), referring to the 'non-capitalist', originary accumulation of wealth as a precondition for capitalist accumulation.

plantation owners (Du Bois, 1969). As these colonial empires competed for imperialist expansion, the vast majority of the world's colonized peoples came to be portrayed as 'inferior' races. In the case of slavery in the US, racial tensions between slaves and 'free' white labourers deepened as planters established institutions to enable whites to have social and material advantages over the Black population (*Ibid.*). Working class whites particularly benefitted from social and political privileges relative to Blacks through Jim Crow Laws based on differential access to voting rights, schools, housing, public services, and public gathering spaces (Bonacich *et al.*, 2008; Roediger, 2007). As W. E. B. Du Bois argues (1969, p. 700):

It must be remembered that the white group of labourers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white... White labour saw in every advance of Negroes a threat to their racial prerogatives.

DuBois suggests that racism is used in ideological ways by the ruling class to differentiate groups of workers and divide them, to the ultimate benefit of the ruling class. This had real life implications on American white workers as they came to see themselves as "not slaves" and as "not Blacks" (Roediger, 2007, p. 13).

Racialization was historically reproduced by the ruling class to typify certain groups of workers in the lowest strata of the labour market as capitalist societies took shape.⁵⁷ It is used to

⁵⁷ I am aware that these theoretical issues are closely related to Cedric Robinson's influential theory of racial capitalism, as expressed in his works such as *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983). I appreciate that the term 'racial capitalism' brings attention to the issue that the development of capitalist society is closely linked to ideas of race and racism, and I support Robinson's critique that Marxist theorists downplay the significance of oppressed groups (such as Black working class communities) as agents of revolutionary change. However, I do not agree with Robinson's claim that racism is a trans-historical phenomena and I question Robinson's claims of European proletarians as the first racial subjects. I recognize that there are ongoing debates surrounding the origins of 'racialism'. For these reasons, I decided not to engage in the theory of racial capitalism in this dissertation.

continuously justify the intensification of capital accumulation and to fulfill capital's need for cheap and 'unskilled' labourers, although the ways the ruling class attribute racial meanings to people's identities, and what those meanings entail, are always in flux. For example, Robert Miles (1982) explains that the British government decided to address their domestic vacancies of 'unskilled' labour in the post-WWI period by importing labourers from their colonies (particularly from India, Pakistan, and the Caribbean) to fill vacancies in agriculture, mining, healthcare, and textile industries. These groups, he argues, were already seen as 'racialized', colonial subjects to be exploited for their labour and the government's racial discrimination towards them continued in Britain where they were seen by governments and employers as 'predisposed' to do menial and 'unskilled' types of labour, and they were denied the same jobs and living standards as their non-'racialized', working class counterparts. The positioning of workers in the lowest strata of the labour market and public life was legitimized by renewed meanings of racialization. For example, the Canadian government developed restrictive immigration policies until the post-WWII, based on employers' demands for cheap labourers, so they resorted to using 'racialized' people from the colonies. Chinese and Punjabi migrants were recruited by mining corporations for the 1858 'Gold Rush' and building the Canadian Pacific Railway, South Asians and Japanese workers were used for low-paid, contract work (who were also denied access to agricultural land and fishing licenses), and so on (Creese, 1988a; Galabuzi, 2006).⁵⁸

After the wave of non-Anglo-Saxon immigration to Canada in the 1890s, the Anglo-Canadian ruling class began to voice concern about protecting their 'race', considering themselves to be

⁵⁸ Kenneth M. Holland claims that Chinese CPR labourers were paid only one-fifth of what 'white' workers earned for the same work (2007, p. 151).

civilized and orderly, while the rest were “savages” or ‘degenerates’ (Valverde, 2008, p. 176).⁵⁹

They produced a racialized hierarchy of desirability, whose components and their associated racial attributes shifted over time, though it formed this generalized structure: northern Europeans and ‘white’ Americans were preferred over southern and eastern Europeans, Protestants over Catholic and Jewish peoples and other religious minorities, lighter-skinned over darker-skinned, and Blacks and Asians were deemed as the least desirable and subject to racist policies, such as the Chinese head tax (1885), restriction of Black immigrants (1911), *Chinese Exclusion Act* (1923), Japanese internment (1942), etc. (Das Gupta, 2008; Galabuzi, 2006; Satzewich & Liodakis, 2010; Valverde, 2008). As Indigenous peoples were shut out of the labour force, they too were allocated to the lowest tiers of the labour market. Meanwhile, ‘white’ and able-bodied working class males were given preference by the government and employers for better jobs in Canada’s emerging industrial economy relative to all other workers (Das Gupta, 1996; Galabuzi, 2006; Lutz, 2008b; Satzewich, 2011).

Canada’s racialized hierarchy typified what types of labour immigrants and Indigenous peoples were deemed to perform, although these processes of racialization are constantly being redefined, reimagined, and reinforced. For example, the Canadian government historically restricted Black immigration and they simultaneously relied on recruitment of Black Caribbean women to labour as nurses in the post-WWII period. Agnes Calliste reveals that Canada’s immigration regulations required that the nurses’ employers had to be “aware of their racial origin” (1993, p. 88), reflecting Anglo-Canadians’ racist and sexist ideological notions that

⁵⁹ Mariana Valverde (2008) notes that we should be cautious when analyzing their use of ‘race’ as some Canadian writers considered Anglo-Saxon Canadians to be a distinct ‘race’ while others may have used the term to articulate Canadian nationality and/or culture, particularly as they endured economic conflicts with Britain.

Black women were inherently suited for work in the lowest stratum of the labour market. Although the Canadian government began to remove their most overtly racist immigration policies in 1967 with the points system, immigrants continued to face racial and gendered discrimination by employers (Galabuzi, 2006; Taylor, 1991). As mentioned earlier, some immigrants are permitted to come to Canada as ‘highly skilled’ workers and may find high-income employment but a significant number continue to be over-represented in labour-intensive, non-unionized and low-wage industries, and face higher rates of underemployment and unemployment (Block & Galabuzi, 2018; Lewchuk, 2017).⁶⁰ The government’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program which recruits racialized workers from the Global South to fulfill ‘unskilled’ and ‘flexible’ jobs.⁶¹ The Seasonal Agricultural Worker program denies access for workers to obtain permanent residency status, social welfare and fair labour representation, while consistently violating health and safety regulations. These programs permit employers to specify the sex and nationality of workers, thus enabling them to “segment production and divide the workforce on the basis of citizenship, language, gender and nationality (often a euphemism for race)” (Hennebry & Preibisch, 2012, p. e25). Writing in the late 1990s, Das Gupta describes the process of racialization in Canadian garment industries (1996, p. 3):

One example of how workers reproduce hegemonic ideas can be found in garment industries. While the workers produce garments at the factories they are simultaneously confirming notions about women’s roles as opposed to men’s roles or what workers of

⁶⁰ One significant reason why newly arriving immigrants experience these trends in the labour market is due to governments’ non-recognition of foreign credentials and/or education. As Harald Bauder explains (2003, p. 699): “professional associations and the state actively exclude immigrant labour from the most highly desired occupations in order to reserve these occupations for Canadian-born and Canadian-educated workers”.

⁶¹ The Canadian government’s reliance on migrant workers as a cheaper labour source is supported by the fact that the number of TFWP workers has greatly increased in recent decades, from 52,000 in 1996 to 310,000 in 2015 (Prokopenko & Hou, 2018).

Chinese heritage “are good at” for example, as opposed to Black workers, and so on.

Managers and owners also take part in this process of reproducing ideas by consciously or unconsciously organizing particular divisions of labour based on racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes.

Historically, capitalist employers targeted groups of dispossessed peasants to perform cheap and ‘unskilled’ types of labour. In time, the ‘races’ of these groups, along with other social markers of identity, became associated with that labour. Employers aim to make a profit, so it is advantageous for them to sustain a pool of cheap labourers and to dissuade the broader working class from revolting against them, although they may not always be aware of perpetuating processes of racialization, as Das Gupta suggests. She also reveals how workers may uncritically consent to racist ideas in time—in her example, confirming ideas of what certain racialized workers are supposedly “good at”. White workers have historically taken advantage of these racist ideas to protect their higher wages and better conditions of employment.

Das Gupta’s theorization relates well to Gramsci’s theory of a worker’s ‘economic-corporate’ conception of the world. Gramsci argues that a working class person typically has conflicting views of the world containing ideas that begin to express the real experience of the working class, and other ideas which reflect ‘common sense’ historic prejudices. He describes this point as such (*Ibid.*, p. 333):

One might almost say he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically

absorbed.

The notion of contradictory consciousness suggests, for example, that a worker can uncritically accept racist worldviews from the ruling class, but at the same time, be a loyal trade unionist who will not cross a picket line. What is important is for the “practical activity” of working class people, or how they act in real life, to develop their political consciousness. Gramsci theorizes ‘moments’ in the relation of political forces, referring to the collective political consciousness (*Ibid.*, p. 204-205).⁶² A person often begins with an ‘economic-corporate’ conception of the world, which focuses on the unity of a particular economic category, or a professional group (Rehmann, 2013). For instance, trades workers tend to unite with their co-workers concerning an issue that pertains to their shared trade, but they may not be aware of the need for unity with other workers. In the second phase, consciousness is reached within a social class, but it is restricted to an economic field and “within the existing fundamental structures” (*Ibid.*, p. 141). A particular group of working class people may make a demand for legal and political equality, such as the right “to participate in legislation and administration, even to reform these—but within the existing fundamental structures” (Gramsci, 2000, p. 205). In the final phase, a person fundamentally transcends his or her ‘economic-corporate’ conception of the world, battling through the previously formed ‘common sense’ and ideology conflicting with each other until one prevails, ideally “propagat[ing] itself over the whole social area” (*Ibid.*). A working class person begins to develop his or her consciousness beyond the ‘economic-corporate’ level to a ‘ethico-political’ level because they “transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too” (*Ibid.*; Rehmann, 2013,

⁶² Politics depends on the ‘relations of force’ which Gramsci defines as 1) the development of the material forces of production; 2) the relations of force which “refer to the degree of self-awareness organization of the different social classes” (Rehmann 2013, p. 141); and, 3) the military relations of force (Gramsci 2000, p. 200-209).

p. 141). Connecting Gramsci's ideas back to the issue of racism, then, the challenge is for working class people to confront 'common sense' historic prejudices they hold uncritically, such as their stereotypical views of Indigenous peoples, and eventually transform his or her 'economic-corporate' conception of the world.

3.4 Constructing Indigenous and settler tensions in Canada

The creation of colonial legal statutes and ideological characterizations of Indigenous peoples to contrast them with 'ideal' Canadian citizens helped the ruling class to justify their division of labour and social life. The prominence of the *Indian Act* (1876) is a distinct way that the Canadian state has, and continues to, shape processes of racialization of Indigenous peoples. The *Indian Act* defines who is defined by the category of 'Indian', while simultaneously constructing others as 'non-Indian'. Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson explains this constructed racialized binary to shape the ideal, new Canadian citizens in the immediate period of Confederation, and to confer differential rights and privileges to each group (2008, p. 254):

This binary maintained the ideological might and justification for claimed lands, contained peoples, and the "social problem" of unassimilable differences. Juridical efforts to incorporate or expel or contain difference such as the *Indian Act* were a way of disciplining Aboriginal and white bodies to a Victorian norm of white settler citizenship or Indian wardship ("Indian Status").

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Canadian state justified their objective to colonize Indigenous peoples with their claim that Indigenous peoples were devoid of 'civilized society' and they were thus characterized as 'savage' and 'uncivilized' (Vowel, 2016). The Canadian ruling class created material advantages for what would become known as the 'white' working class, further

aiding the constructed racialized binary of who belongs to the categories of ‘Indian’ and ‘non-Indian’. As part of the state’s goal was to permanently ‘settle’ Western and Central Canada with a burgeoning agricultural economy, they created racialized and gendered ‘boundaries’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples by enforcing a new property regime and determining who were the ‘ideal’ citizens to access land (Carter, 2016; Archives of Ontario, 2015). The *Dominion Lands Act* (1872) provided the legal authority under which the Crown granted lands to individuals, railway construction, the Hudson’s Bay Company, and so on, while also demarcating small portions of isolated lands for reserves (Library and Archives Canada, 2019; Rotz, 2017). From 1869 the Canadian government invested in advertising programs and agents to attract peasant and working class immigrants who found life in Europe to be unbearable. Many of these immigrants wanted to escape conditions of mass unemployment, overcrowding in urban areas, widespread poverty and criminalization, and religious and political persecution in their home countries (Archives of Ontario, 2015; Swyripa, 2010).⁶³

Immigrant homesteaders paid a \$10 administrative fee for a portion of land and they were gifted tools and seeds (*Ibid.*; Carter, 2016).⁶⁴ However, it should be acknowledged that the *Dominion Lands Act* was created with the aim of strictly *disciplining* this new class of farmers. They were used to do the menial labour of clearing land for farming, cultivating the soil, and building houses in the interest of adding value to the land to sell to future buyers. Only once state officials decided that a homesteader made progress on their first portion of land did they acquire legal

⁶³ Initially they attracted British, northern Europeans and Scandinavians, Irish escaping famine and Loyalists forced to leave the U.S. following the American Revolution. Italians, Eastern Europeans and European religious minorities migrated to Canada toward the end of the nineteenth century (Swyripa, 2010).

⁶⁴ Members of the military and Loyalists were given land for free as rewards for their allegiance and service to the British King (Archives of Ontario, 2015).

ownership and become eligible to purchase more land (Carter, 2016). If state officials did not approve of the homesteader's work, they could take back the land and make it available to others. They were adamant that homesteaders be male, have experience in farming, and be disciplined to a norm of Euro-Christian patriarchal settler citizenship. As Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior from 1896 to 1905, describes of the ideal settler, "I think that a stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and a half dozen children, is good quality" (Sifton, 1922, para. 8).⁶⁵ Sifton helped construct Canadian national narratives of the 'pioneering' Euro-Christian patriarch who, through sacrifice and toil, 'civilized' the unoccupied wilderness (Furniss, 1997).

Homesteaders laboured intensely in conditions of isolation and harsh weather that many of them were not prepared for (Carter, 2016). They did indeed experience privilege relative to Indigenous peoples because they were afforded access to land (along with the legal rights to hunting, fisheries, timber and electoral voting), and they experienced preferential treatment by social organizations like churches and the North West Mounted Police established in 1873—these social practices worked to create the ideal Euro-Christian citizen in contrast to their depictions of 'unproductive' Indigenous 'non-citizens'. This was all part of the historical plan by ruling class colonial officials to exploit homesteaders and farmers to serve in a permanent agricultural economy. They would plan subsequent booms of immigration to expand settlements,

⁶⁵ Sifton deviated from other colonial officials because he opened immigration to Ukrainian, Hungarian, and Mennonite immigrants rather than solely targeted on British and Scottish immigrants. Frances Swyripa (2010) claims that the "stalwart peasant" refers to an 'undesirable' "Galician" ethnic stereotype (p. 18) but he favoured it because he believed they have strong religious and social cohesion and experience in rural labour. His decision may also have been motivated by the fact that the Canadian government became desperate to attract more agriculturalists after the 1873-1896 recession (*Ibid.*). Sifton also contrasts the image of the agricultural peasant with a 'lazy' and 'unproductive' "[...] Trades Union artisan who will not work more than eight hours a day... and has to be fed by the public when work is slack" (Sifton, 1922, para. 8) revealing his opposition to left-leaning aspirations of resisting capitalist exploitation that were most clearly revealed in events like the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919.

transportation and shipping, and commerce as part of an imperial plan for British capitalist profiteering.

It is difficult to determine when exactly ‘whiteness’ historically emerged as a social construct in Canada and when ‘white’ working class people began to internalize the state’s racial binary as ‘common sense’ to them. The internalization of these ideas is most evident in practices such as deliberately excluding Indigenous peoples from access to their traditional lands. However, we know that the Canadian ruling class succeeded in conferring material and social advantages to an emerging class of ‘white’ workers, which had a psychological effect on them (what Du Bois refers to as a public and psychological wage) because they worked to preserve their preferential treatment in the labour market. John Lutz’s work, *Makúk* (2008) cites numerous historical examples where white working class people demanded preferential job hiring on their own accord. For example, in 1909, white workers of Ootsa Lake wrote to the Premier of B.C. to give them preference over Indigenous workers for road work jobs because of their explicit worry that “Indians are given preference at high wages for doing the work we are able and willing to do” (Lutz, 2008b, p. 251). As “white settlers and taxpayers,” who paid property taxes, they felt that they deserved access to public sector jobs they paid for (*Ibid.*). The former B.C. Premier Richard McBride granted their request by instructing government officials to hire the white workers first. Lutz claims that requests like these were commonly granted by Canadian governments at the time. The preferential treatment of white workers meant that they achieved greater earning power in the labour market and better access and treatment in healthcare, education, the justice system, etc., than Indigenous peoples—a general trend which persists in the present day. Racial tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of Ootsa Lake deepened to the point that the

DIA reported in 1912 that “white men are as a rule unwilling to work alongside of Indians” (*Ibid.*, p. 104). Gramsci’s theory of an ‘economic-corporate’ conception of the world applies well in this case because the white workers believed it to be ‘natural’ and self-evident for them to request preferential treatment from the government, though they consented to elements of racism as part of their immediate and short-term interests for job security, wages, and benefits. It is difficult for these workers to realize that these ideas have a long-term effect of undermining their capacity to organize together as a mass political force.

The Canadian state has enshrined differential privileges, rooted in material conditions, to divide white working class and Indigenous peoples. As Adams puts it (1999, p. 145):

The idea that class identity and unity between racial minorities and white workers is obstructed by racial conflict is fostered by the state in a deliberate attempt to prevent the two groups from forming a single working class with common interests and goals.

These differentials of privilege are internalized, at least in some part, by the non-Indigenous working class. This is evident when white workers demand and experience preference in the job market and feel entitlement to land and natural resources over Indigenous peoples. The sense of superiority white working class people may feel from selective economic, social and political advantages relative to Indigenous peoples is how oppression is ultimately used to maintain ruling class hegemony because it prevents Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples from supporting each other’s political struggles. As anti-racist and Marxist scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explains, differential privileges rooted in material reality have “a deleterious effect on the development of working class consciousness” (2013, para. 7) because they create a distorted worldview where certain characteristics are historically attributed to oppressed social groups and

seen as ‘common sense’. Taylor argues of differential privileges between Black and white American working class (2013, para. 8):

It necessarily complicates the fight against racism because it convinces white workers that they have something to lose by not being white—which, of course, is true. If they did not get some advantage—and with it, the illusion that the system works for them—then racism would not be effective in dividing Black and white workers.

Thus, overall, it is important to acknowledge that privilege exists and the experience of it can make it difficult for non-Indigenous workers to develop an anti-racist perspective.^{66 67}

It is crucial to note that even as the Canadian state aimed to deeply divide Indigenous and non-Indigenous working class people, in some instances they have united their grievances against the Canadian ruling class. For instance, Indigenous and non-Indigenous farmers were certainly divided regarding their competition for agricultural resources, but the latter also had grievances with the slow response from the federal government to help them (Miller, 2017). In 1884, Prairie farmers helped form the Manitoba and North West Farmers’ Union and joined the Métis in a campaign to demand that the government respond to their economic concerns (*Ibid.*). Knight (1975), Parnaby (2006, 2008) and Jamieson (1961) expose how Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers in longshoring, fisheries, sometimes acted in solidarity in their shared struggles for better working and living conditions. Additionally, there is evidence that groups of non-Indigenous trade unionists have episodically challenged racial discrimination against Indigenous

⁶⁶ Today, privilege is commonly depicted as white skin privilege or white privilege.

⁶⁷ I also argue, however, that when a theoretical framework of privilege is detached from a historical materialist analysis of social relations, it merely focuses on any difference in social condition (Camfield, 2019; Choonara & Prasad, 2014). Social power is thus reduced to endless gradations of individual privileges that are seen as the sources of social relations of oppression, rather than the broader social structure, such as the continued viability of settler-colonial capitalism that the ruling class benefits from.

peoples in the workplace, even when predominately European trade unionists in the mid-nineteenth century used exclusionary strategies to defend themselves against Indigenous workers. For instance, the B.C. Labour Heritage Centre has documented an anti-racist action by the UFAWU and the Native Brotherhood of B.C. to oppose washroom signs at a Namu fish cannery put up by management to segregate “Whites” and “Natives” (Isitt, 2011; The Fisherman, 1954; Sacuta, 2018). In August 1954, the Native Brotherhood of B.C. and UFAWU hosted a joint meeting where members unanimously voted to oppose the signs and then took them down together (*Ibid.*). Further reflections on these historical events are sparse, but I believe there is some indication to illustrate actual attempts on the part of Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers to express common objectives in their workplaces and take direct action to support each other.

3.5 Structural limitations of unions

Limitations in political orientation

As this dissertation explores union engagement with their Indigenous workers, as well as union support for Indigenous struggles for self-determination, in the following section I will contextualize union limitations but also why they are important organizations to build anti-capitalist and support anti-colonial struggles. The mandate of unions—to incrementally raise wages, benefits and overall working conditions—has been the guiding philosophy since early craft unions formed (Palmer & Sangster, 2008; Ross *et al.*, 2015). In *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1969) Engels comes to realize that the unions he witnesses in England’s manufacturing districts are capable of breaking down divisions amongst workers presented by capitalist competition in the labour market and their attempts to unify workers into

a new social force is what makes them a threat to the ruling class. Engels explains (*Ibid.*, p. 153):

...what gives these Unions and the strikes arising from them their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition. They imply the recognition of the fact that the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based wholly upon the competition of the workers among themselves; i.e., upon their want of cohesion. And precisely because the Unions direct themselves against the vital nerve of the present social order, however one-sidedly, in however narrow a way, are they so dangerous to this social order.

The ability of unions to bring workers together as a social force in opposition to their employers, demonstrates their potential to effectively overcome fragmentation of the working class.

However, in the same piece, Engels also recognizes that unions are limited to “holding the moneygreed of the bourgeoisie within certain limits” (*Ibid.*, p. 153), and he argues that “something more is needed than Trades Unions and strikes to break the power of the ruling class” (*Ibid.*) and they need to truly end the competition between workers. Engels insists that trade unionists “will soon learn how they have to go about it” (*Ibid.*). Only a couple years after Engels, Marx theorizes about the British union movement in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847, p. 173, emphasis added):

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class *for itself*.

According to Marx, unionists first become conscious of their common grievances against

employers and organize defensive actions against the ruling class. This is when they act as a class *in itself*. By battling with their employers and governments, unionists will develop class consciousness and realize the need to transform their defensive protests into a broader political struggle. When they see the need to unite as a social class to overthrow the power of employers and the capitalist class, they form a “class *for itself*”.

For Antonio Gramsci, writing in the immediate post-WWI period about his experience with trade unions in Torino, he insists that union officials, who direct the work of their organizations and who commonly see collective bargaining as an end-in-itself, are an obstacle to the ideological struggle to develop class consciousness because they accept capitalist relationships of production. Their work in unions does not aim to develop a revolutionary struggle against capitalism to put workers in control of the means of production (Annunziato, 1988). Gramsci came to this conclusion when he saw trade union officials in Turin refuse to join factory councils and the general strike in 1919 to 1920, which began when Fiat autoworkers occupied their factories (*Ibid.*; Gramsci, 2000). Here, Gramsci explains a fundamental contradiction of unions (Gramsci, 2000, p. 93):

The emergence of an industrial legality is a great victory for the working class, but it is not the ultimate and definitive victory. Industrial legality has improved the working class's standard of living but it is no more than a compromise—a compromise which had to be made and must be supported until the balance of forces favours the working class. If the trade union officials regard industrial legality as a necessary, but not a permanently necessary compromise; if they deploy all the means at the union's disposal to improve the balance of forces in favour of the working class; and if they carry out all the spiritual and

material preparatory work that will be needed if the working class is to launch at any particular moment a victorious offensive against capital and subject it to its law—then the trade union is a tool of revolution, and union discipline, even when used to make the workers respect industrial legality, is revolutionary discipline.

The contradiction is that unions seek to achieve the best possible material improvements for the working class through collective bargaining, and yet, they do not challenge the capitalist relations of production itself to fundamentally overcome workers' exploitation—they are limited to redressing the negative impacts of capitalism. Only if unionists decide to develop class consciousness and form a "*class for itself*", in Marx's words, will they be revolutionary. Instead, they see the labour relations regime as "a permanent state of affairs" (2000, p. 96) and they struggle to form class consciousness amongst their memberships, so they perceive the capitalist relations of production as the status quo. As Gramsci explains in another writing (1919, para. 3):

All the victories of union action are set on the old basis: the principle of private property remains intact and strong, the order of capitalist production and the exploitation of man by man remain intact and thus are complicated in new forms.

Gramsci reiterates the problem that unions operate under the structures of capitalism, but they do not challenge them. They seek to make improvements for workers' lives in terms of advancing wages and working conditions and they win some victories on that front. But these victories do not inherently change structures of capitalism, it only 'complicates' unions' relationships with capital. Unionists are not encouraged to struggle for anti-capitalist alternatives, like the factory councils in Gramsci's time, which aimed to replace unions and capitalist employers with communalistic relations of production (Annunziato, 1988). Indeed, those kinds of anti-capitalist alternatives are a threat to union officials because it means trying to overcome the labour

relations regime of collective bargaining and unions would have an undefined role.

Gramsci brilliantly points out the reality that unions in themselves are not revolutionary, but he did not insist that unionists (particularly socialists) should abandon these organizations. If unionists can develop the “spiritual and material preparatory work” for a workers’ revolution, then they can be a critical forum for socialist organizing. Unions are an ideal site for political organizing because they engage in material and ideological struggles where workers can try to transform each other’s theoretical ideas. Workplace actions can be very transformative moments when workers realize that they can resist the power of employers to win material improvements. In doing so they can build class consciousness when they are made aware of class antagonisms and they can transform ‘common sense’ ideas, such as that capitalist employers are too powerful to challenge, therefore, workers must accept the status-quo. Mass strikes can make class antagonisms clearer to rank-and-file unionists and the broader working class, create comradery between workers, overcome fears of taking direct actions in the workplace, and raise working class people’s expectations about what they can achieve when they organize collectively (*Ibid.*; Ross *et al.*, 2015). But many union theorists insist that rank-and-file members cannot rely on non-revolutionary union officials to lead socialist organizing. For instance, Gramsci argues that communist parties (such as the Italian Communist Party in his time) must lead socialist organizing and help organize workers because it is the only institution which aims to “... suppress the order of capitalist production... suppress private property, because only thus can the exploitation of man by man be suppressed” (1919, para. 7).

Limitations in the labour relations regime

Canadian unions went through a historic moment through the Rand decision which granted them the right to legal recognition, though it has set limitations for unions in the current Canadian labour relations regime—they are limited to fighting on a terrain of struggle largely dictated by the state and which aims to keep labour peace, instead of building power of workers to fight employers and ultimately aim to overcome labour exploitation.

A massive wave of strikes during WWII aimed to have employers formally recognize unions and negotiate with them, instead of resorting to ‘scab’ labourers and private police to break up strikes (Ross *et al.*, 2015). In 1946 after Ford Motor Company Windsor workers embarked on a 99-day strike with aggressive blockades in protest of their employer’s refusal to grant union security. The upheaval led to Court Justice Ivan Rand’s arbitration decision in the same year to award unions the right to form agency shops and have recognition as bargaining agents for workers—a moment celebrated by unions because it meant that they could collectively bargain with financial security. It enshrined the right to an automatic check-off of union dues and thus the ability to pool together their own financial resources.⁶⁸ However, the Rand decision also intended to establish “labour peace and a harmonious labour relations climate in Canada” (CLC, 2020, para. 3). Therefore, unions were not expected to spontaneously strike as they did prior to the decision. It is still important to recognize that the right to union recognition was strategically fought for by masses of workers who organized on their own accord—this was *their* demand—though the Rand decision should also be viewed as a way that the Canadian government aimed to channel

⁶⁸ Up until that point the Canadian federal government made conciliation voluntary and the introduction of P.C. 1003 in 1944 compelled employers to recognize and bargain with union representatives, though some employers still defied it.

class conflict through state-mediated processes. Now it means that unions operate on a terrain on struggle largely dictated by the state who seeks to integrate unions into the social relations of liberal society (Rupert, 1990).

Furthermore, the legal framework transformed via the Rand decision forged a new organizational structure within unions. It allowed for the formation of full-time union officials to negotiate “the price of labour power” (Camfield, 2013, p. 143). They are guaranteed the flow of union dues by employers and a guarantee to collectively bargain “in exchange for keeping unions ‘responsible’ organizations that do not challenge management’s control of the workplace or capitalism itself” (Camfield, 2011, p. 60). Instead of challenging the system which creates labour exploitation, union leaders aim to negotiate working conditions peacefully as part of their responsibility. They see the advantage of collective bargaining as an ability to meet with employers as equal ‘partners’. As legal scholar Debra Parkes says of the Rand decision and its collective bargaining regime (2010, p. 227), “In this model, capitalism is taken for granted and, in a liberal political democracy, labour and capital are ‘juridical equals’ and partners in a regulated system of collective bargaining”. Therefore, the Rand decision intentionally opposed direct workplace actions (such as wildcat and sympathy strikes) that can be incredibly threatening to capital when they are organized on a mass scale. Instead of resorting to these kinds of direct actions, unions are meant to only engage in the legal processes of collective bargaining. In this sense, the decision has had a ‘chilling’ effect on rank-and-file organizing, specifically with regard to conducting their own strikes.

The Rand decision also evolved the organizational structure of unions from collective

participation and decision-making to a ‘professionalized’ structure directed by the union officialdom. Full-time union leaders and staff are removed from the shop floor, they tend to work on a full-time basis in meetings with each other, government, and employers, and they earn much higher pay on average and enjoy better benefits than average rank-and-file members. Therefore, they have a very different day-to-day experience than their members who face daily exploitation in the workplace and who only participate in negotiations over their working conditions periodically (e.g. voting to ratify a new contract). In some cases, rank-and-file members do not participate in their unions at all or know that they are a member of a union (*Ibid.*). The collective bargaining process is fraught with conflict—while it gives rank-and-file members some ‘voice’ to negotiate what happens in the workplace (whereas non-unionized workers have no say whatsoever), the direction of bargaining is commonly limited to a small group of officials who monopolize information and communication in collective bargaining (Palmer, 1992; Ross *et al.*, 2015; Yates, 2009). Union officials often come to bargaining tables with the aim to ‘collaborate’ with employers, or to agitate them only enough to gain some material improvements while preserving a harmonious labour relations climate, as the Rand decision intended. Many union leaders do not seize bargaining processes as ways to mobilize union members and build working class power.

3.6 Union responses to racism and anti-racism

It is incredibly difficult for unionists to resist working class exploitation and pursue broader goals when they are already divided by the capitalist class based on their gender, ‘race’, sex, (dis)ability, and other social markers of identity. In the following section, I will discuss the historical context of racism in Canada’s labour market, how unions have engaged in racist and

anti-racist actions, and how they are trying to develop an equity-seeking agenda to response to the interests of their racialized members. The Canadian working class grew significantly in the 1850s based on immigration from the United Kingdom, France and Eastern and Southern Europe. The mainstream union movement formed as a result of the actions by these workers who came to benefit from higher paid jobs and unionization. In time, they have come to reflect those sections of the Canadian working class, whereas non-European, racialized and immigrant workers are usually forced to fulfill the most precarious jobs (Cranford *et al.*, 2003).

Unfortunately, these economic disparities within the working class have not dissipated in the present day. The 2016 Census revealed that racialized workers earned 26 to 37 per cent less in total income than non-racialized, Canadian-born citizens (Block & Galabuzi, 2018; Census Profile, 2016). Racialized women in Ontario earn approximately 58 cents for every dollar that a white male worker makes (*Ibid.*). The gap between these groups only improved by five cents between 2006 to 2016 (*Ibid.*). Racialized workers in Ontario are over-represented in the sectors of the economy where precarious work has become most prevalent in accordance with neoliberal ‘flexibility’ where employers have justified cheapening the labour of racialized workers. Grace-Edward Galabuzi (2006, p. 87) explains:

The neoliberal restructuring of Canada’s economy and labour market towards flexible labour markets has increasingly stratified labour markets along racial lines, with the disproportionate representation of racialized group members in low-income sectors and low-end occupations, and under-representation in high-income sectors and occupations. It is these broader labour market processes that are responsible for the emergence of the phenomenon of the racialization of poverty in the late 20th century.

Income disparity is striking when comparing the average earnings of Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers. 2016 Census data shows that Indigenous peoples have lower average incomes compared to workers of European origin—there is a 33 per cent gap between them (Block, 2017). In addition, Krishna Pendakur and Ravi Pendakur (2011) find that registered Status Indians fare the worst of all racialized groups in terms of earned income. Persons with self-reported Indigenous identities earn somewhat better, and persons with Indigenous ancestry (but not identity or registry) earn the highest income of all Indigenous-identifying groups. Economist Sheila Block (2017) claims that the average income of Indigenous women is as little as 55 per cent of non-Indigenous men—a stunning 45 per cent wage gap. Her findings show that even with increased levels of education Indigenous workers still earn less than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Several labour scholars have recommended that unions prioritize employment equity for Indigenous peoples as they will compose a growing share of the labour force (MacKinnon, 2015; Ross *et al.*, 2015).⁶⁹

Canadian unions have the potential to close the wage gap, but they continue to grapple with struggles of racism in the capitalist labour market. By the mid-nineteenth century, early Canadian unionists were influenced by a racially segregated worldview as the British colonial empire exploited the idea of scientific ‘races’ to justify their right to colonial-capitalist expansion over ‘uncivilized’ peoples in Africa and Asia (Backhouse, 1999). As early as the 1850s and 1860s, trade unionists on the West Coast came to engage in blatantly exclusionary strategies to

⁶⁹ Employment equity refers to the broad goal of rectifying historic employer discrimination by identifying and eliminating barriers to the hiring, training, retention, and job advancement of marginalized groups of workers. The four designated groups identified in the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment (led by Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella) who experience employer discrimination are: Indigenous peoples, women, racialized people, and people with disabilities (Abella, 1984). Affirmative action can be a part of an employment equity plan, which sets specific targets to prioritize the hiring of these marginalized workers (Briskin, 2006).

defend their own precarious existence against displacement by Asian miners, lumberers, garment workers, laundry workers, and restaurant workers who also came to escape poor socioeconomic conditions of their home countries (Creese, 1988a; Wynne, 1978). As organizations of self-defence, unionists tried to protect themselves against workers at the bottom of the class structure who were perceived as a ‘threat’ to the dominant labour force; although those perceived as a ‘threat’ consistently changed. For instance, Asian workers were perceived as a “menace” due to their competition with higher-paid white labourers, reflected in the fact that 1870s federal legislation passed to ban Asian workers from joining “white-only” unions (Creese, 1988a; PSAC, 2013). White male unionists not only imposed barriers to constitutional membership for Asian workers, but also to African, and East and West Indian workers, particularly in the railroad industry. For instance, in 1908, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees inserted into its charter that only white men could join their membership and they signed agreements to maintain racially exclusive seniority systems (Carson, 2002; Mathieu, 2001). Black and Asian railroad workers defied white unionists by forming their own independent organizations to fight for legislative changes to discriminatory employment practices (*Ibid.*).⁷⁰

However, there have been moments in Canadian labour history where non-Indigenous, white workers have expressed spontaneous acts of labour solidarity with racialized minorities. Some white trade unionists, mostly in the One Big Union and Workers’ Unity League, actively supported racialized populations. In 1902, ‘unskilled’ workers who formed the Canadian Federation of Labour, allegedly provided “the most vocal opposition” to anti-immigrant attacks

⁷⁰ These included the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Japanese Camp and Mill Workers’ Union, the Chinese Workers’ Union, the Chinese Shingles Workers’ Union, the Chinese Cooks’ Unions, and the Chinese Restaurant Workers’ Unions (Creese, 1988b).

by the Ku Klux Klan at the time (PSAC, 2013). Gillian Creese (1988a) solidarity between racialized and non-Indigenous workers grew during WWI was a reaction to the war labour shortage which strengthened the bargaining power of all workers and made it easier for them to work together, and the growth of socialist labour politics and increased Asian labour militancy calling for workers' solidarity.⁷¹ However, white workers' fear and resentment toward foreign workers persisted after. Major Canadian labour organizations, such as the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC), excluded constitutional membership of "Asiatics" (i.e. Chinese, Japanese and East and South Asians) and the majority of unionists supported the state's restrictive immigration policies until the post-WWII period (Das Gupta, 2008; Hunt & Rayside, 2007).⁷² Therefore, in periods when white unionists feel their jobs are threatened against the arrival of foreign workers, they have turned to racism to try to protect their positions.

Unionists began to develop an equity-seeking agenda in the post-WWII period as the labour market went through significant transformations and their own members demanded that they act against racist discrimination in the labour market. For instance, immediately following WWII, Kalmen Kaplansky, a CCF member, called on the Jewish Labour Committee of Canada (JLC) to extend the fight against anti-Semitism to combat discrimination against all visible minorities (Lamberston, 2001). The JLC organized Joint Labour Committees to Combat Racial Intolerance within the TLC and Canadian Congress of Labour, and later went on, with the collaboration with community organizations and racialized activists, secured the passage of Canada's first *Fair*

⁷¹ Creese (1988a) argues that solidarity practices were mostly organized by the Communist-led Workers' Unity League and unemployed workers' organizations due to their focus on class divisions and need for solidarity amongst all workers.

⁷² Das Gupta (1998, 2007) documents the participation of white unionists in leading groups such as the Anti-Chinese Union, the Asiatic Exclusion League, and the White Canada Association, in addition to lobbying governments to restrict the immigration of non-European workers.

Employment Practices Act, 1951 and the Ontario Human Rights Code in 1962 (*Ibid.*, Walker, 2006). The push for desegregation in the U.S. throughout the 1950s and 60s sparked Canadian labour activists to act against racism in employment, housing and accommodation. Unions began to broaden collective bargaining demands in the 1950s and 60s to address equity-seeking demands as more women, racialized people, and Indigenous peoples entered the workforce (Galabuzi, 2006). With the expansion of social welfare programs in the 1960s and growth of the public sector, more women and racialized workers (including Indigenous workers) became employed in unionized sectors (Coles & Yates, 2012). Throughout the 1970s, bolstered by growing feminist movements, unionized women renegotiated collective agreements to remove forms of gender discrimination and gain access to pensions, seniority, health care benefits, and extended parental leave. For instance, in 1977, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) organized a Women's Committee to support campaigns to fight for gender equality, and in the same year, the CLC established a Women's Bureau to organize training courses and union education on women's issues and coordinate campaigns and research on women's issues for affiliate unions, and conduct research (Briskin, 2002). Soon after, the OFL resolved to encourage bargaining childcare provisions into collective agreements, and in the late 1970s labour activists formed labour-community coalitions to address issues of pay equity and child care. By 1983, the OFL hosted public forums on affirmative action to discuss gender discrimination and they became the first labour federation in Canada to create five affirmative action positions for women on its executive (Briskin, 2002; OFL, 2013).

Women and racialized workers who were targeted for employment in the 'low-skilled' labour market pushed for the 1984 Abella Commission to recommend that federal employers increase

the workforce representation of women, people with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, and racialized workers. The findings of the Commission formed the basis for the *Employment Equity Act* of 1986.⁷³ A labour-community coalition named the Alliance for Employment Equity formed shortly after to generate support for employment equity legislation in Ontario, although as Abigail B. Bakan and Audrey Kobayashi (2007) point out, there was mixed support from unions to the idea of employment equity and its execution through legislation. Equity-seeking groups in the union movement criticized Ontario's legislation for not going far enough because it did not cover all employers and have strong measures to ensure compliance and enforcement. Yet, some unionists in private sector unions, like the Canadian Auto Workers' Union (CAW) (now Unifor), expressed concern over doing little political education in their unions around campaigns for employment equity, unlike public sector unions who promoted human rights and equity issues for decades.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, Canadian cities continued to grow at a rapid rate from new immigration and the newer waves of immigrants outnumbered the established British-Canadian population of urban centres like Toronto and Hamilton. Unions began to focus more on fighting institutional racism in the 1970s and 80s in response to police killings of unarmed Black men and discrimination in housing and education targeted at immigrant Black, Caribbean, and Asian urban populations

⁷³ Employment equity refers to the broad goal of rectifying historic employer discrimination by identifying and eliminating barriers to the hiring, training, retention, and job advancement of marginalized groups of workers. The four designated groups identified in the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment (led by Judge Rosalie Silberman Abella) who experience employer discrimination are: Indigenous peoples, women, racialized people, and people with disabilities (Abella, 1984). Affirmative action can be a part of an employment equity plan, which sets specific targets to prioritize the hiring of these marginalized workers (Briskin, 2006).

⁷⁴ Bakan and Kobayashi (2007) also explain the ideological backlash to employment equity legislation that manifested in Mike Harris's *Job Quotas Repeal Act* in 1995, claiming that employment equity measures created a hiring quota system that prioritized non-white applicants irrespective of their qualifications and thus gave equity-seeking groups unfair advantage.

(Ng, 2010). In 1981, the federal government funded the OFL's *Racism Hurts Everyone* campaign which developed written educational materials and TV advertisements, and trained labour activists as anti-racism workshop facilitators (*Ibid.*). Winnie Ng (2010), a long-time Toronto labour activist, explains that the campaign successfully created a space for Indigenous and racialized workers to voice their experiences, motivated some to run for union elections, and lay the foundation for future reporting on workplace racism. Racialized unionists and their allies tried to keep up pressure on employers and their own unions for equity-seeking seats. For instance, in the late 1980s, the Ontario Coalition of Black Trade Unionists informally gathered outside of unions to develop strategies to demand that Blacks were represented on union executives, equity seats, and union staff (Walker, 2006). Once they made their demands public, they achieved success in advocating for Black members to be elected to the OFL executive and lead major public sector unions (*Ibid.*). Dory Smith of the Carpenters' Union and OCBTU, a Black trade unionist, unsuccessfully ran for the CLC executive in 1990, but his supporters advocated for the CLC to create two vice-presidential seats for visible minorities to its executive (*Ibid.*). Afterward, in 1994, the CLC established an anti-racism task force and held forums to discuss racism in the Canadian labour movement. They tabled their recommendations in 1997 which led to a flurry of activity within the CLC, creating committees to research and advocate for employment equity, a Department of Anti-Racism and Human Rights, integrating anti-racism content into existing CLC educational courses, and the first "National Aboriginal and Workers of Colour Conference" in 1998 (Briskin, 2009).

More recently, Indigenous and racialized unionists and their allies have successfully held union conferences and workshops on anti-racism, made internal policies on anti-discrimination,

implemented equity committees to discuss how to challenge discriminatory employment barriers, amongst other measures (Hunt & Rayside, 2007; PSAC, 2013). Some unionists argue that increasing equity-seeking elected union roles allow for Indigenous and other racialized members to voice their issues and participate in top decision-making. To them, representation in the union officialdom matters because it can create stronger social solidarity by learning from their experiences ‘on the ground’ in the labour market, and beyond. Even so, other long-time trade unionists argue that there has been little progress in the last 30 years to push back against racism in the workplace and they question the goals of this strategy. As CLC Secretary-Treasurer Marie Clarke Walker puts it, “minimal gains and tokenism are the reality even where [union] committees and designated seats exist” (2006, p. 87). Clark and other labour scholars argue that increasing the representation of Indigenous and other racialized workers in unions does not have a strategy to defeat the disproportionate impacts of capitalist power and neoliberal austerity on them (Das Gupta, 2008; Foley & Baker, 2009; Ross, 2018). They suggest that unions should have a renewed focus on anti-racist issues, particularly where it concerns Indigenous and racialized workers, and aim for broader political and social change within their own organizations, which could lead to a sense of union renewal. These recommendations for union renewal focused on anti-racism include, but are not limited to: making unions more accessible to precarious, Indigenous and racialized workers who are looking to unionize; radically reforming collective agreements and bargaining activities to accommodate the needs of Indigenous and racialized workers; providing Indigenous and racialized unionists with the necessary time and resources to do anti-racist political education and organizing; forming anti-racist labour-community coalitions advocating for workplace and community demands of Indigenous and racialized workers, such as higher minimum wages, and anti-poverty measures (Das Gupta,

2008; Ng, 2010; Walker, 2006). If these changes are taken on, unions will certainly have a stronger support for Indigenous and racialized unionists, yet, considering the contradictions of unions outlined by theorists like Marx and Gramsci, it is questionable whether unions can truly defeat the negative impacts of capitalist exploitation on them.

3.7 Conclusion

This theoretical framework brings together strands of Marxist, anti-colonial and historical materialist theories to analyze the complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the labour market and in unions. The broad tensions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people are seen in processes of racialization and the Canadian state's racialized binary based on the construction of differential rights and privileges. Non-Indigenous, white workers (sometimes unionists) have historically consented to elements of racism to meet their immediate and short-term interests, as Gramsci explains. There is a constant challenge for working class people to confront 'common sense' historic prejudices they may hold uncritically, such as historical prejudices against Indigenous peoples. These tensions have historically divided racialized groups in the labour market and unions, dominated by white workers, failed to take on an agenda of anti-racism until more women, racialized workers, and Indigenous workers entered the unionized workforce, and they demanded their unions to address equity-seeking demands. It may be possible for unions to have a renewed focus on anti-racist issues, overcome social fragmentation, and aim for even broader union renewal, although they face immense contradictions which limit them. They do not aim to challenge the capitalist relations of production itself to fundamentally overcome workers' exploitation, which makes it difficult for them to address the problems of racialization, settler-colonial oppression, and so on. I see this as

the main challenge for unions to truly stand in solidarity with their Indigenous members and their communities.

Chapter 4: Analysis - Part One: Union supports and limitations in the workplace –
Experiences of Indigenous workers within organized segments of the labour market and
their unions

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on Indigenous trade unionists' experiences in paid labour and within trade unions according to the key informants I interviewed. Participant responses unearth the daily challenges Indigenous workers face in the workplace (e.g. racism against Indigenous workers) and what they have done with their unions to respond to these conditions. Indigenous participants will speak to their lived experiences in precarious working conditions and occupational segregation, they identify a range of issues related to these circumstances, such as job insecurity, little to no work benefits, and more. Participants also identify the many ways where unions are acting to show support of their Indigenous members, for example, by trying to organize new workers, negotiating collective agreements to support the distinct needs of their Indigenous members, and by having equity-seeking positions to try to raise the voices of Indigenous unionists. Though I discuss where these strategies are falling short to address the immense challenges in the labour market and where unions are constrained by their relationship with the labour relations regime. Furthermore, participants discuss where unions have been absent when it comes to developing a genuine understanding of the impacts of ongoing colonial oppression on Indigenous people's working and living conditions.

The discussion and findings within the chapter respond to the following questions:

- What are the experiences of Indigenous trade unionists in today's labour market and in their unions? What are unions doing to push back against precarious working conditions and occupational segregation which Indigenous workers face?
- What are unions doing to meet the distinct needs of their Indigenous members?

4.2 Union responses to labour precarity

Indigenous participants reveal their lived experiences of precarious wage-work and organizing into unions for higher pay, better benefits, and secure employment. These participants provide a glimpse into how Indigenous workers are engaging in unions to push for better working conditions for Indigenous peoples, but they also show where unions could drastically improve their organizing strategies to unionize unprotected Indigenous workers, and act on discriminatory which keep Indigenous peoples in situations of occupational segregation, such as the targeting of northern reserves for precarious employment in construction. Indigenous participants describe experiences of precarious work in manual labour for municipalities and in fishing and hunting lodges in northern Ontario, manufacturing (e.g. in steel mills and factories), fast food outlets, freelance media, and personal healthcare services provided by community agencies. These stories are illustrative of Indigenous peoples' precarious wage-work in Canada's contemporary capitalist labour market. Indigenous participants observed occupational segregation where Indigenous women are overrepresented in work that is lower paid, casual, and which lacks job benefits. For example, Ellen, an Indigenous woman who is currently employed as an Indigenous workers' representative in Unifor, describes her precarious work experiences in freelance media

and the occupational segregation she faces compared to non-Indigenous workers. She explains: “We’re doing same type of work, similar work. But we were paid less than the other side. So, that was where I learned about equal rights and that there’s no reason why we shouldn’t be all paid the same”. She also explains that she only realized that she could successfully fight for higher wages, better benefits, greater health and safety protections and legalized protections when she entered her second unionized shop and became actively involved in her union. Only when she was aware of what her union could provide in terms of supporting bargaining processes and educating her about workplace rights did she begin to resist her precarious working conditions.

Leanne, a Mohawk (Wolf Clan) worker currently based in Toronto, details her experience at the Toronto magazine publication, *Now*, in the 1990’s and how her co-workers convinced her to organize in a union which turned out to be an effective vehicle to expose and act upon occupational segregation. After several months of working at *Now*, Leanne explains:

I started to notice that there was a core of people who got all kinds of great stuff—they got perks, they got great benefits, they got better salaries than the rest of us... “Men were all being paid higher... Coincidentally, there were two Indigenous workers there.

and then we found out we were the lowest paid people of the entire payroll, like usual.

Leanne’s story reflects the historic colonial, racialized, and gendered stereotypes of Indigenous groups of workers. When these workers are confined to the lower tier of the job market, they are simultaneously confirming notions about racialized workers’ roles versus white workers’ roles, and what jobs women and other minorities are supposedly ‘good at’, as Das Gupta (2009) argues. Leanne, as a Mohawk woman, faces the intersection of racialized, gendered, and

sexualized discrimination at her workplace. Her comment that she was the lowest paid worker of her work cohort “like usual” expresses her exasperation of consistently being discriminated against as an Indigenous person and as a woman. Leanne describes the significance of organizing herself and other precariously employed co-workers to join a union while working at *Now*:

One of the guys in the Circulation Department caught me outside having a smoke and he said, “Hey, we’re going to organize this place”. And I said, “Really?” He said, “Yeah, basically, there’s like this two-tier system here and we’re not getting the kind of protection that everybody needs”. Plus, *Now* was starting to become very, very big. They had been on a hiring spree and people’s salaries were starting to get wildly out of control. When I started there, I made \$23,000... Then I started to realize that, you know, the work here is actually hard... and maybe we need to organize.

The “two-tier system” her co-worker speaks of aptly describes how higher-ranked white male workers earn more and are afforded better privileges in the workplace whereas women, Indigenous peoples, and other racialized workers receive far less, even when production is in demand, and it generates high profits. By joining a union and winning a pay equity study, Leanne was able to jump in pay “from \$23K to \$35K in one year”, not only benefitting her material circumstances but also building motivation to fight for “women’s economic power” for Indigenous women like herself. She explains further: “That was another big realization that not only [are unions] good for racialized people, but women who are already behind in terms of getting paid for our work... At the next round of bargaining, we also got an agreement to do a pay equity study”, after which she received another \$10,000 salary increase. She describes how the collective agreement made it transparent that Indigenous women in lower-paid classifications faced the highest disparities in pay. In this case, her union’s bargaining process was successful

enough to bring Leanne's pay in line with everyone else in her job classification.

Indigenous participants reflected on their work experiences tainted by everyday racism from their employers and work colleagues that is distinctly targeted at Indigenous workers—although as they reflected on these experiences, they do not mention turning to their unions to fight workplace racism. In my interviews with participants like Amber, a Cree woman who has worked in long-term care and other healthcare facilities, immediately described her experiences of workplace racism when I asked her to explain how she began to work in her current profession. I believe that demonstrates how much racism deeply affects the lived experiences of Indigenous workers. She tells of a striking moment at work when a co-worker confronted her about her work qualifications:

She said, “So, what qualifications did you have to have to get a job here?” I said, “I don't understand what you're asking”. She said, “Well, I think you got hired because you're an Indian”. And I was kind of taken aback by that... She said, “Oh, everybody had already talked about that you were an Indian. I'm pretty sure that's why you got hired”. I said, “Did it ever cross your mind that I might have the skills and qualifications for the job?” She said, “Well, *do you?*” And I said, “Yes, I probably have *more* skills and qualifications than you have... I have a degree in education. I'm hoping that's why I was hired. Not because I'm an Indian”.

The racism her co-worker expresses illustrates the persistence of false constructions of Indigenous peoples, which derive from historical, colonial depictions of them. Her co-worker's confrontation shows an *affirmation* of preconceived ideological notions about what Indigenous peoples are ‘meant to do’, as Das Gupta (1996) theorizes in her research. These ideological

notions have erased Indigenous peoples from the sphere of paid work and otherwise contributed to immense barriers to job advancement for them. In this case, too, Amber's co-worker suggests that she was hired only because she is an Indigenous person who was targeted by a representative workforce strategy program; therefore, her co-worker questions Amber's capability of being skilled and educated, specifically as an Indigenous person. Like other Indigenous trade unionists, Amber spoke to the power of being in a union and successful bargaining to slowly push back against workplace racism. She mentions the representative workforce strategy that her union, CUPE, pushed for in the early 2000's in Saskatchewan to redress the high unemployment and poverty rates of Indigenous peoples compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.⁷⁵ She appeared proud when explaining her role in bargaining for mandatory orientations for new employees in Saskatchewan's health care sector to learn about these disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working class people, which she says, "has helped a lot with the racism in the workplace", and she argues that the workforce strategy did well to hire Indigenous workers from northern parts of Saskatchewan. Though she admits that the racism of non-Indigenous people is hard to deal with. When I asked her what could be done about it, she replied, "That part is very difficult. It is still very difficult. You know, I've been in healthcare for 15 years and I can tell you that it's my life. It's my everyday life. It's my reality."

⁷⁵ A representative workforce strategy aims to have Indigenous peoples employed in all classifications in proportion to their representation in the working age population within a community or a provincial population. It was introduced by the NDP government in 1995 "in consultation with unions and businesses" (Mills & Clarke, 2009). CUPE Saskatchewan reported a total of 98 "Aboriginal Employment Partnership Agreements" with provincial health authorities and municipalities to hire Indigenous workers, upgrade their job skills, and commit to "Aboriginal awareness training" (CUPE, 2011). By 2009, 4,465 new hires were attributed to these programs and 2,000 Indigenous employees received skills training (CUPE, 2017). However, in March 2010 the provincial government, led by former Premier Brad Wall of the Saskatchewan Party, eliminated the program, and cancelled all of its agreements. CUPE claims the program led to 4,465 hires and almost 2,000 Indigenous employees who received work-based skills training. In some cases, parts of the representative workforce strategy remained where they were negotiated in their collective agreements.

Whereas Amber speaks about the advantages of being in a union to push back against workplace discrimination and to try to find resolutions to advance the hiring of Indigenous peoples, other Indigenous participants describe their struggles of feeling alone in precarious jobs, which suggests that union leaders and staff need to be much more proactive in offering support to Indigenous workers. Jennifer explains of her current job:

I'm a mental health and addiction coordinator and I supervise people on bail. So, these are the most marginalized people in Toronto—they're addicts, and they have serious mental illnesses, schizophrenia. They're homeless, they're disoriented, disillusioned... We're overworked and underpaid. I would love for someone to come in there and evaluate our program and see where we sit. They could make surveys for employees to talk about their managers... There's a term called affirmative action where you have to make that ratio where so many racialized people are hired. I haven't heard that term in a long time!

Jennifer's lived experience demonstrates demanding situations in paid employment, and similar to Amber, she also delivers frontline social services which are often performed by low-paid racialized women. Even though Jennifer is unionized she is unsatisfied with her union's lack of support to assess her working conditions. Jennifer also describes occupational segregation as she explains, "I work in a very patriarchal environment and all management that are hired are white people." Like Leanne, Jennifer experiences a division of labour where female, Indigenous workers are confined to the lower tier of the job market, and white, non-Indigenous managers burden them with heavy workloads. Jennifer also claims that unions are currently underutilizing their opportunities to conduct pay equity studies, job evaluation and employment equity

programs (including affirmative action). Their experiences highly suggest that unions could be more proactive in their support in industries where Indigenous women are overrepresented.

Paul, a Métis participant who used to work in freelance journalism and became a public sector union staff person currently based in Ottawa, also describes challenges to achieve better working conditions. However, instead of facing the occupational segregation and racism in workplaces other participants describe, he notes precarious working conditions when employed by Indigenous-led organizations, such as the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN). He recalls:

Personally, one of the reasons I got out of working for Aboriginal organizations—If you work for them, you work for them for life, there's no pensions. You're siloed into being an Indigenous policy person, or Indigenous journalist... You're working till you drop on your desk. It's short-term, temporary. Retirement security for Indigenous peoples is just horrendous. Many make up for it because there's still a strong family component especially on reserve, like most communities care for elders. Elders come first and that kind of thing. But if you're somebody who lives in a city or no longer lives in the community—you keep on working or work another job or another contract.

Here, Paul observes that Indigenous workers who have broken the expectation of what Indigenous peoples are 'meant to do' because they are in a sector considered to be 'skilled.' Yet, he speaks of being "siloed" in these positions too and he argues that these workers still face precarity due to the temporary conditions attached to their work and the lack of retirement benefits. He explains that some Indigenous families essentially fill in these gaps in social provisioning. Like other Indigenous participants, Paul describes taking the onus to unionize to

fight his precarious working conditions, though he describes meagre results after negotiating his first collective agreement:

When we did our first collective bargaining with APTN the shortfall was it's only a defined contribution program. It's virtually nothing. My mentor, who was my first boss is still there, and he still enjoys it, but I don't think he's ever going to be able to retire. I think Indigenous people depend on CPP [Canada Pension Plan] so much more than other Canadians.

Paul argues that the proportion of Indigenous workers with pensions is lower than it is for non-Indigenous workers, echoing other participants' comments about the occupational segregation that Indigenous workers face. His observation is supported by Block *et al.*'s (2021) analysis of 2016 census data which finds that public pensions account for almost half of Indigenous seniors' income, whereas public pension sources make up 34 per cent of white, non-Indigenous seniors' income and they receive greater income from private sources, such as Registered Pension Plans. Therefore, Indigenous workers have less retirement security compared to their white, non-Indigenous counterparts, and as Paul's experience shows, there needs to be improvement to bargain for better pension plans for unionized Indigenous workers employed by Indigenous-led organizations.

Overall, Indigenous participants explain how they have pushed back against the precarity they face in the labour market, ranging from low pay stemming from occupational segregation to their lack of retirement security. They reveal precarious working conditions when employed in the public sector by non-Indigenous employers but also when working for Indigenous-led organizations. The colonial, racialized, and gendered stereotypes of Indigenous peoples prevail

through generations and the harmful depictions of them as ‘unskilled’ and undeserving of decent employment illustrates the connection between colonial oppression and their present-day experiences in the labour market. When describing their experiences at work, many participants remark on the advantage of union organizing to fight back against precarity and workplace racism; however, in doing so, they often reveal being alone and having had to reach out to unions to help get them organized. Considering the precarious position Indigenous peoples are in the labour market, and their struggles of feeling alone, it would be ideal for union leaders and staff to be much more proactive in offering support to organize Indigenous workers.

4.3 Bargaining to meet the distinct needs of Indigenous workers

As I discuss in the previous section, participants reveal the ways that Indigenous workers face precarious working conditions and some of them took the onus to unionize and push their unions to improve their working conditions. Now I will take a deeper look into unions’ attempts to pursue the collective bargaining process to meet the distinct needs of the Indigenous unionized workforce. Unions such as CUPE, OPSEU, PSAC, and USW, who represent sectors where Indigenous workers are gaining employment the most (such as healthcare, education, government services, and extractive industries) have successfully negotiated collective agreement language to advance the hiring of Indigenous peoples and try to accommodate their needs in the workplace (Moran, 2017). An Algonquin participant, Thomas, provided me USW’s bargaining guide, *United Steelworkers Bargaining Guide for Advancing Indigenous Rights* (revised in 2021), which was released following the TRC’s Final Report to summarize collective

agreement language won by USW and other unions in support of Indigenous workers' needs.⁷⁶ I also came across CUPE's guide entitled, *Truth and Reconciliation: CUPE Taking Action Through Collective Bargaining*, released in March 2022 (CUPE, 2022).

To my surprise, some of the collective agreement language in these bargaining guides date back to the early 1990s, and they focus on the following successes: employment equity plans; targeted training and apprenticeship programs to allow Indigenous workers to advance to higher paid jobs; recognition of Indigenous cultural traditions; time off to allow Indigenous members to engage in hunting, fishing and other spiritual and/or cultural observances; "cultural diversity" training for employees; and accommodations for workers to have elders present for grievance procedures if they so choose. In USW's preface to their bargaining guide, they explain (USW, 2021, p. 1):

The Steelworkers' commitment to represent and support Indigenous members and their communities is part of our commitment to a democratic, inclusive, and diverse union that builds power and creates a bright future for us all.

They imply that the goal of negotiating language to meet the distinct needs of Indigenous unionists is part of being an equitable organization that cares for their interests because they want to build the power of these members. Similarly, CUPE's guide admits that "historically, unions have not always fought for the rights of Indigenous workers. Because of this, unions have not always been places where Indigenous people feel welcomed" (CUPE, 2022, p. 3). Therefore,

⁷⁶ Typically these collective agreements declare that the onus is on a worker to identify as an Indigenous (or First Nations) person because an employer cannot demand to know that information in labour law—they can only gather this information with voluntary and informed consent from workers.

they see that focusing on collective agreement language to meet the distinct needs of Indigenous members will “begin repairing this relationship” and restore trust between Indigenous workers and unions. Both USW and CUPE suggest that this bargaining work is a part of their core purpose as unions but also part of a broader agenda for social justice and union renewal. These collective agreements try to address the needs of their Indigenous workers by having targeted hiring processes for them. For example, an agreement between Community Health Services (Saskatoon) Association Limited and the CUPE local 974 designates “specific permanent positions at the Westside Clinic to aboriginal people” which they outline in the agreement. In another example, USW’s agreement between USW local 9508 and Vale mining corporation outlines an order of preference for Innu and Inuit workers who are members of USW bargaining units, Innu and Inuit external applicants, and then non-Indigenous applicants. USW local 8914’s collective agreement with Cameco states that the employer will “hire residents of Saskatchewan’s north and northern residents of aboriginal ancestry”, but only “when it is necessary for the Company to hire replacement or additional workers” (USW, 2021, p. 12). These agreements show varying commitments to targeted hiring process—while some state a clear preference for particular groups of Indigenous workers when they begin hiring, agreements like USW local 8914’s only commits to hiring Indigenous workers for replacement or surplus workers. When I asked participants of my study about their reactions to their union’s attempts to bargain language to meet their needs, most said they were satisfied, although one participant, Thomas, noted that there remains stigma about identifying to employers as an Indigenous person. He remarks: “You have to say, when you’re hired, I’m a First Nations person. But then there may be not much chance of getting a job”. He implies that Indigenous workers may not want to publicly identify at all, so while it is a positive development for his union to win targeted hiring

processes for Indigenous workers, there are very few workplaces with these agreements. There is still overwhelming racism and hiring discrimination towards Indigenous peoples and many feel ashamed of self-identifying because there is so much stigma around it.

Participants drew my attention to collective agreements which acknowledge that Indigenous workers have a desire to engage in ceremonial practices as part of land-based modes of life—they show where unions can be useful to push negotiating processes to try to accommodate these needs. For instance, USW local 8533’s agreement in 1991-92 with Placer Dome, a Canadian mining corporation, agrees to allow Indigenous workers up to three months in a calendar year to engage in “traditional economic activities such as hunting, wild rice harvesting and trapping” (*Ibid.*, p. 9) without losing seniority status. In addition to these specific leaves, other collective agreements like PSAC’s agreement with the Nishnawbe-Aski Police Service Board provide up to five days of unpaid leave (or banked paid leave) per year to “pursue Aboriginal traditional and/or ceremonial activities” (PSAC, 2021, p. 28). CUPE’s bargaining guide has several paid leaves for Indigenous workers to participate in spiritual and/or cultural observances. For instance, CUPE local 2348 has an agreement with Indigenous Women’s Healing Centre Inc to allow workers four days of paid leave to attend Sundances and healing ceremonies, and CUPE local 2298’s agreement with School District 92 (overseen in partnership with Nisga’a Lisims Government) permits workers to participate in national events like the Nisga’a Lisims Special Assembly (CUPE, 2022). CUPE’s guide also features language for paid bereavement leaves which have an expanded definition of family to include Indigenous kinship structures, rather than limiting this definition to the European, nuclear family structure.

Other bargaining units have tried to win collective agreement language which provide alternatives to ‘traditional’ workplace resolution processes that unions typically pursue, and they try to recognize and promote Indigenous workers for their distinct knowledges and experiences. A common accommodation for Indigenous workers is having access to an elder when they are going through a grievance process or other dispute resolution process. For example, in the collective agreement between Unifor local 7-0-1 and Dilco Anishinaabek Family Care in Fort William First Nation, Indigenous workers can have an elder “provide wisdom, guidance, and assistance in resolving grievances” and meet with union stewards, executive, and the employer in dispute resolution processes (USW, p. 6).⁷⁷ In the Native Child and Family Services of Toronto’s agreement with Unifor local 2488, there is language concerning the retention and promotion of Indigenous workers which recognizes Indigenous peoples’ knowledges. These qualifications include the “cultural and experiential knowledge of native culture, practices, customs, beliefs and way of life based upon the individual’s own culture, upbringing, education or other experience through which they gained or were exposed to native ways of living” (*Ibid.*, p. 23). This language is appropriate considering that the workplace provides off-reserve child protection services for Indigenous children, so it is ideal to have workers from their own nations who may better understand how colonial oppression has impacted these children. In addition to promoting Indigenous workers for their distinct knowledges, there are a few examples of language promising to teach all workers about Indigenous peoples’ experiences under colonial oppression. For instance, CUPE local 2298’s agreement states:

The parties agree to implement educational opportunities for all Employees to deal with misconceptions and dispel myths about Aboriginal People. This will include enhanced

⁷⁷ The agreement says that the union and employer will compensate the elder to ensure that they can fully participate in the grievance meetings.

orientation sessions for new employees to ensure a better understanding of respectful work practices to achieve a harassment free environment (CUPE, 2022, p. 13).

By winning this language, the local is seizing a great opportunity to educate workers (particularly non-Indigenous workers, if there are any in the workplace) about settler-colonialism and reject racist stereotypes of Indigenous peoples. It is ideal to educate new workers, especially if they are non-Indigenous, to dispel stereotypes before they begin to work with Indigenous peoples.

Altogether these collective agreements are critical in terms of pursuing collective bargaining to meet the distinct needs of Indigenous workers. Impressively, some agreements promote the hiring of Indigenous workers based on their knowledges and experiences, and in a few cases, they aim to educate all workers in the hopes of confronting harmful colonial stereotypes about Indigenous peoples.⁷⁸ Despite the success in winning these few unique examples of collective agreement language, however, some issues remain. First, it is difficult to gauge how much workers know of these bargaining provisions and if they are being enacted. If most workers are not actively demanding these provisions to be enacted, then the employer could try to ignore them. Secondly, because some of these provisions are only presented as principles or guidelines for employers, they are not binding, so the employer could try to avoid implementing them. In the case of CUPE local 2298's agreement to educate workers about false stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, there is no commitment of when this education will begin to take place, who

⁷⁸ I would also like to recognize the progress by post-secondary faculty unions proposing employment equity plans to hire Indigenous faculty members. For example, the York University Faculty Association (YUFA) has won demands to require thresholds in an academic unit for hiring members of racialized groups and appoint Indigenous candidates to tenure track positions (CAUT, 2021). The Brock University Faculty Association (BUFA) has also made bold proposals to have diverse forms of Indigenous scholarship qualify towards tenure and promotion (BUFA, 2020).

is going to teach workers and what is going to be taught, and so on. Unions have not publicly committed to assessing these bargaining provisions to make the language stronger (for example, having binding language), or establish strategic plans to have *all* their collective agreements prioritize and address the needs of Indigenous workers in ways determined by them. And, overall, these agreements do not fundamentally recognize ongoing forms of colonial oppression and push back against the exploitation of Indigenous workers. This is where unions are limited in supporting Indigenous workers because collective bargaining can only redress the negative impacts of labour exploitation—they cannot fundamentally change the harsh conditions of the capitalist labour market on Indigenous workers. In all, these agreements are a very good start to recognize and act upon Indigenous workers’ distinct needs in their workplaces, though they are ultimately limited to redressing the negative impacts of the labour market shaped by colonial-capitalism, instead of trying to overcome it.

4.4 Challenges of unionizing Indigenous workers

Another common theme which emerged in my interviews is the need to unionize more Indigenous workers since many of them experience precarious wage-work and are seeking higher pay, better benefits, and secure employment. As I also outline in my literature review, there are historical tensions between unions and First Nations employers, which have made it difficult for their workers to successfully join unions. These tensions remain today, and in this section, I will unearth my participants’ experiences of trying to unionize workers on reserves. They identify numerous opportunities for unions to advance organizing drives, but they point to the many challenges for unions surrounding the jurisdictional complications between band councils, unions, and labour laws, which suggests that unions need to think through how to best

navigate the current labour relations regime.

Considering the very small number of Indigenous workers who are currently in unions, participants suggest that one way to transform practices of solidarity with Indigenous peoples within the labour movement is to unionize more Indigenous workers. As a non-Indigenous participant, Leela, explains:

What I find the roadblock is, and what I hear a lot of is, “We can’t find our Indigenous workers”. And so, then the question is, how are we organizing these workers? Is it an inviting process? Is it an adequate process to invite folks that operate in a different way, that already have a bit of a fragmented relationship with the union and lack of trust with the employer and marginalization in the workplace? These are the underlying issues... I have to say that it is true. It’s hard to organize. But I think we have to change the way we’re reaching out to folks.

Leela insists on strategically planning out the ways unions think about organizing more Indigenous workers because she questions whether it is an “inviting process”. For Leela, there needs to be thought about Indigenous people’s positionality—that their worldviews that are different from non-Indigenous people in unions, they are marginalized in their workplaces, that they sometimes already have “fragmented” relationships with unions (particularly between First Nations band councils and unions), and so on. Thus, her concern is how to approach these relationships and how to appropriately perform outreach to Indigenous workers.

Other participants shared their experiences trying to unionize workers on-reserves and working through some of the challenges Leela identifies. Participants identify barriers they have come

across owing to the fact that the Canadian state has imposed a specific jurisdictional relationship with First Nations band councils—they argue that unions are fearful of thinking through how they could challenge the state in these situations.⁷⁹ Sean, who is a Nipissing high school teacher in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, and a member of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), explains his experience trying to organize teachers and education workers on reserves. After doing several speaking engagements with the Ministry of Education and other unions, OSSTF leadership approached him to be on their First Nations, Métis and Inuit Advisory Council where he has discussed challenges of organizing these on-reserve workers into OSSTF. He first reveals the anxiety of union staff in approaching the question of how to unionize on-reserve workers:

We're trying to organize on-reserve schools. What is difficult essentially—and this is where I'll be critical of the union—there's a mindset of the provincial rulebook, the labour relations boards, and all these types of things that exists that are in the provincial system. But when you're trying to unionize an on-reserve school, you're really taking on a different beast altogether... As much as they want to unionize, getting them outside their comfort zone is saying, well, the *Labour Relations Act* doesn't really apply here, and you can't go to the labour relations board because of these situations. It's scary for them because unions rely heavily on legislative relationships and those don't necessarily exist on reserves.

This jurisdictional circumstance means that a union like OSSTF cannot unionize reserve workers via the provincial education system, as they typically do. Whereas public schools in Ontario are subject to provincial labour law, schools on reserves are not a part of the provincial education

⁷⁹ For example, on-reserve public schools are granted their funding from contribution agreements from the federal government and they have historically received less money than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Vowel, 2016).

system as the *Indian Act* enables the federal government to enter into agreements for school services to children living on reserves. Moreover, instead of having public school boards, band councils are often responsible for hiring teachers and education staff, developing school curriculum, and directing the funds for building maintenance and new infrastructure (Vowel, 2016). Sean's observations note the complexity of organizing workers on reserves, which he believes is "scary" for his union because it falls out of their normal expertise. To unionize these workers, he suggests that his union would have to think beyond "legislative relationships" which they are so accustomed to since the implementation of the Rand decision. Knowing that most unions have not fundamentally challenged the labour relations regime, or at least demanded significant reform of it to unionize on-reserve workers, they are stuck in accepting these "legislative relationships" as Sean explains.

For unions to work around this jurisdictional circumstance for reserve workers means that they will need to expand their imagination in the way they provide union representation, such as the way they handle collective agreements. Sean points to the need for unions to take a very thoughtful approach to unionizing workers on reserves:

We're trying to be very precise in who we approach first, we obviously want to approach First Nations that are union friendly and welcoming so that we can build a relationship with them. What's interesting is that people right away think—Oh, we're going to create a contract, it's going to be lengthy in terms of control, managerial rights, and all these other things. We're simply trying to say no, we're actually trying to have 1 page contracts. The idea of unionization isn't about control. It's about security, and that's a different concept... As a whole, the only issue we have is actually the union that's afraid

of it.

Sean argues that it is necessary for unions to form relationships with workers and band councils—this is a suggestion that other Indigenous unionists, such as CUPE’s Don Moran, have argued in favour of due to historical misunderstandings of what unions do (Moran, 2006). Sean alludes to the historic fear on the part of some band councils, and Indigenous peoples uninvolved in band councils, that unions are a colonial institution trying to ‘control’ Indigenous peoples’ lives, so he argues that unions must clarify that they are about providing “security” for workers. His idea to have a shorter collective agreement is intriguing because they are typically very lengthy documents with legal language, so he alludes to the fact that the way bargaining is conducted in the current labour relations regime is not ideal. Sean insists that trying to unionize on-reserve workers means that unions will need to re-imagine the way they provide union representation—he makes it very clear that the onus is on his union (as opposed to band councils) to overcome their fear of approaching this situation. If unions try to make the changes Sean suggests, and if they challenge the labour relations regime, this could potentially push back on the idea that unions are just another colonial institution. However, his earlier point still stands that unions are heavily dependent on the Canadian state’s labour relations regime, and they are not likely to break away from that relationship soon.

Participants argue that band councils hold considerable power insofar as they are employers and they have influence in the work arrangements on reserves, and while some participants are hopeful that unions can approach First Nations band councils and on-reserve workers to work on a harmonious relationship with them, others are not. Sean speaks to the issue of power and how to best approach band councils when he discusses meeting non-Indigenous teachers on reserves

who would like to unionize, but they know that they are not members of reserves and they do not wish to upset band councils with the threat of unionizing. He argues:

Councils have quite a bit of power. There's a certain amount of fear and they don't want to lose their jobs. And if you step on the band council the wrong way here, well, then there's going to be repercussions... So, we're trying to build a strong relationship with management from the start so that we don't have problems when it comes up.

Sean is hopeful that unions can establish mutual principles about how to work together with band councils and their workers. Yet, his comment reveals the complexity of class relations which exist on reserves too: namely that band councils, as employers, hold the balance of power over workers by being able to buy or sell workers' labour power. This fact intensifies the fear of non-unionized workers who struggle more to defend their jobs if they upset the band council since they lack union representation. Sean suggests that unions can try to build relationships with band councils to mutually agree upon dispute resolution processes before workplace conflicts occur.

William, another Indigenous participant, is less hopeful that unions and First Nations band councils can easily resolve workplace issues without the antagonistic pressure of unions. He explains that he tried to unionize various band council employees in Six Nations "maybe 10 years ago" but the workers were too afraid of being terminated or facing other repercussions from their band council if they knew that they were involved in an organizing drive. It is a strange case in this jurisdiction, he argues, because there is a significant number of workers in Six Nations who are ironworkers and have historically belonged to unions as a condition of their employment. William says of band councils:

They don't negotiate. If I was making \$16 an hour and had a union we'd negotiate, we'd

get a two-year agreement. And say [wages] go up by 2 per cent each year for two years. Then you go in and negotiate, “You’re not supplying clothes”. We negotiate that. If we’re cutting trees, we need chainsaw pants. We need all this protection for health and safety. A lot of companies to this day do not have those things as mandatory, even though the *Occupational Health and Safety [Act]* says they are. It’s mandatory but if you can get away with it, nobody reports it... For this reserve up here, funding should not be a problem. The chief just got elected. I bet you he makes over \$100,000 a year. The councillors earn pretty good. If they sit on a committee, they get extra. If they go to represent the band council someplace, they get extra money. They get paid for this and that. But the workers themselves don’t. I just say, “Join a union!”

In contrast to Sean, William immediately suggests that it is too difficult for band councils to mutually agree upon fair conditions of employment, such as providing protective clothing like chainsaw pants. He argues in favour of unionizing and pursuing collective bargaining to place pressure on band councils to protect workers’ rights, as opposed to negotiating with band councils informally before unionizing, like Sean speaks of.

Other Indigenous participants spoke to the complexity of collective bargaining with band councils due to the state’s overarching control over their financial resources, and they raise common concerns about the labour relations regime as a colonial institution they do not want to be a part of. For instance, when I asked Amber if her union has unionized workers on reserves, she replies:

No. We’ve had some chiefs explain to us why they aren’t unionized. It has to do with federal funding from the government for their band and the control of how the money is

used on the reserve for the members. They know because the funds are controlled by the government, that if they have a contract and there's bargaining and they want a wage increase, but the government's not increasing the amount of dollars they get, so there's no way they can increase the wages and those types of things. It's the material conditions on the reserve and according to the funding that which is provided by the federal government. It's part of that but it's also the colonialism. Unions are a white man's thing. It's another institution to them. Another institution that is controlled by Europeans or colonialism. So, it's something they don't want to be involved in... I can understand it from both sides.

Unlike William who suggests that some band councils such as Six Nations have the financial means to negotiate better conditions of employment, Amber argues that they do not, and for her it is important to recognize that reserves across the rest of the country have poor "material conditions" and insufficient funding from the federal government. In addition, Amber echoes feelings of discomfort also felt by band councils who hesitate to participate in another state-sanctioned institution, that is, the labour relations regime.

Other participants like Paul agree that the funding constraints from the federal government greatly impacts how band councils can engage in collective bargaining, though he is conflicted over their role as employers. He stresses that the funding to band councils is also constrained due to the short-term nature of the agreements (emphasis added):

It's not only that they don't have the money, it's that they don't have the *predictability*. Like if you have a two-year contribution agreement from the federal government, you can't possibly negotiate a four-year [collective] agreement. You don't know if you're

going to have even one year, it's like virtually impossible... There's talk about possibly having 10-year contribution agreements, which would be a massive revolution... And it's still just 10 years. That's barely two bargaining cycles.

Paul observes that without control over their financial resources it is difficult for band councils to plan a few years ahead, which is necessary for collective bargaining terms. But while he recognizes the state-imposed constraints band councils face, he also leans toward Pitawanakwat's argument that band councils have some agency in how they deal with their workers, and they aim to maintain their domination over labour relations like any other employer in the capitalist relations of production. He explains,

That hostility from band councils—they're still an employer. So, they're still going to have that mentality. I struggle with that—like my opinions change on a weekly basis about how to navigate that. I understand and I agree with self-government, you should have control over that. But the same time, you can't claim jurisdiction over labour law and institute your own. You can't cherry pick which parts of colonial law you like, and which parts you don't—You can't have an *Indian Act* band that uses provincial statutes, and then decide “No, we don't use provincial labour law”. I think that's what a lot of the cases have been for First Nations or band councils, particularly the casino owners have tried to say that.

Paul suggests that ‘cherry picking’ which Canadian state laws should apply to band councils is a ‘red herring’, as Pitawanakwat argues. Indeed, he points out that the state's overarching control over band councils along with the other provisions in the *Indian Act*, constrains their ability to govern themselves. Yet, he argues that it is contradictory for them to accept some provincial statutes while rejecting labour laws which provide some limited protections for workers against

the arbitrary power of employers. Paul's nuanced perspective also indicates how difficult it is to advise how unions ought to navigate these conflicts.

Despite the challenges of trying to unionize Indigenous workers, Daniel, an Ojibwe participant and union staffperson of a public sector union, speaks about how his union, has had great victories. He remarks,

This is one thing I'm proud about our union—we represent a lot of workers in the North, particularly in Nunavut. So, you have a place like Gjoa Haven, that hamlet, a staff of 20 people. We might collect \$2,000 of dues from them in the course of a year. Just to have a negotiator fly up to bargain with them cost *five times* that. But now those workers have union protection and it's critically important... we represent people at the casino in Regina and at a diamond mine in the Northwest Territories too.

Although he could not speak about the journey to unionizing these groups of workers, his story demonstrates that unions have won small successes in helping Indigenous workers to unionize in very remote areas. He appears immensely proud of the support his union has offered to organize with them, and he explains that the additional funding that is required to support workers in remote areas, like Inuit workers in Gjoa Haven, is worth it to support their bargaining. While he mentions that there are many groups of Indigenous workers, he comes across who do not want to unionize because they say, “We don't need no white man's union from Toronto”, that kind of stuff”, and he believes they are right to be skeptical of unions, he relishes in the small successes his union has had so far.

Overall, participants argue that there is a complex road to advance the unionization of

Indigenous workers. Participants such as Sean caution that unions need to expand their imagination in the way they provide union representation, including the way they approach the current labour relations regime. While others warn of the common misconception that unions are a colonial, state-sanctioned institution trying to ‘control’ Indigenous peoples’ lives, he believes that it is possible for unions to educate First Nations band councils about what they do and try to develop harmonious relationships amongst all parties. Participants noted the funding constraints band councils face and which impact their ability to negotiate with unions; however, some of their criticism echoes Indigenous theorists who argue that First Nations band councils, insofar as they are employers, typically show opposition to unions. Participants did not have a uniform conclusion about what unions ought to do to advance unionizing Indigenous workers, though most indicate that unions should approach band councils in the interest of clarifying what unions do, and they need to confront the complexity of the Canadian labour relations regime—their fears of approaching these situations are preventing them from organizing more workers. Despite these common challenges, some unions have successfully organized with Indigenous workers, and they are offering additional resources when they are in more remote areas, as Daniel explains. Altogether, these situations show where unions are showing support for Indigenous workers by some attempts to help unionize them, though they are limited by complications and inadequacies in the labour relations regime.

4.5 Pushing for Indigenous representation and influence within unions

A common issue that participants reveal is the need for greater representation of Indigenous unionists within the senior ranks of unions so that they can better speak to their distinct needs as Indigenous workers. I note that most of the participants in this study are, or used to be, members

of public sector unions who aim to have equity-seeking representation within their organizations via caucuses for Indigenous, racialized, disabled, LGBTQ2S+ members, and women. Some Indigenous unionists I interviewed explained how they have pushed for Indigenous representative seats and causes to speak up about their lived experiences of everyday discrimination and broader issues within the confines of settler-colonialism. But despite having a union orientation which purports to advance the interests of equity-seeking groups, participants still spoke to their challenges of advancing Indigenous peoples' representation within their unions. Most participants argue that the pursuit of these positions has very limited success to fight against racism both within unions and within workplaces for several reasons I will outline.

William describes his decades-long journey as a member of CUPE to push for equity-seeking representatives in his union's senior leadership. William is very clear that his experience of racism within the labour movement is what motivated him to advocate for such positions. After observing racial slurs directed at Indigenous members at a national union convention in the late 1980s, William advocated for them to run for senior positions on union executive boards. He recalls,

I would ask Aboriginal people at convention to run. Nobody would stand up because they had a fear of being ostracized if they did stand up, by their locals, and they wouldn't get any presidents' positions, or on the board. It wasn't that long ago. But it took CUPE that long to actually get those positions—it took a lot of push!

William speaks to the unfortunate reality that non-Indigenous workers exhibit racism towards their Indigenous counterparts and the need to shift these attitudes toward Indigenous peoples, so they do not feel ashamed of self-identifying, just like Thomas speaks of when it comes to self-

identifying as an Indigenous person in the labour market. However, William describes how joined CUPE's National Rainbow Committee, inspired by Martin Luther King Jr., to advocate for anti-racism and employment equity. He comments, "Our committee was a mixture of women, men and our [Indigenous] identities" although it only had three Indigenous members from across the country. Together they pushed for an Indigenous union representative on CUPE's national executive and Ontario executive. They were successful in attaining those seats, but he warns that that action in itself did not immediately stop explicit racism targeted at Indigenous trade unionists, nor did it clearly raise the confidence of many rank-and-file Indigenous members to run for senior union leadership. One of the reasons why it took a while for a successful vote to approve the equity seats was because of a long-standing tension within trade unions traditionally dominated by white men.

One outcome of creating representative seats and caucuses for Indigenous members that participants identified is forging opportunities to speak out about their lived experiences of everyday racist discrimination. As William moved on from CUPE's National Rainbow Committee to form their national Aboriginal Council in the early 1990s he spoke to mass congregations of trade unionists. He recalls:

Through the OFL and CLC I visited most conventions right across Canada talking about racism. Talking about how it feels to be racialized, how it felt to be sort of criminalized. I'd say because you weren't allowed to get involved in anything if you're Native. It was all white and that's it. It was like—White is right, red is dead.

Indeed, his story points to the overwhelming first-hand experience of colonial oppression towards Indigenous peoples and how he used his union's Aboriginal Council to discuss the

historical experiences of Indigenous peoples to fight racism and discrimination. For example, he once spoke against a CLC convention resolution in the late 2000s to support immigrants, refugees, and Indigenous peoples because he wanted to explain that Indigenous peoples have to clarify that they have had distinct historical experiences. William says he felt compelled to say on the convention floor to a crowd of mostly non-Indigenous trade unionists, “We did not come over on boats. We didn’t have immigration papers. We did not become refugees to come over here. We were here before your people were here”. It shows that there is much to do to educate non-Indigenous unionists about Indigenous peoples’ experiences of settler-colonialism. But even though William and his colleagues sought to amplify the voices of Indigenous peoples, and to have equity-seeking seats specifically for them, he explains how they related to all workers who have endured processes of racialization. William fondly recalls how his Aboriginal Council took inspiration from a Sikh trade unionist, Harwinder Singh. He explains Singh “mentored us in a way that brought out a lot of our frustrations, a lot of our skills in what we have experienced to our lives”. Therefore, it is notable that the Aboriginal Council attracted the solidarity of other racialized unionists.

Equity-seeking seats and caucuses have created some avenues to highlight the perspectives of Indigenous workers within their unions, as William discusses, yet other participants also argue that the pursuit of these groups is very limited in scope. Chris calls this into question by commenting of his union: “The thing I will say to you critically is CUPE has gotten stuck with the equity-seeking seats as the *only* vehicle to deal with racism, discrimination and those issues within the union”. Other participants give very similar criticism. Adrian suggests that the goal of creating such seats and caucuses is an end-in-itself. He explains,

When you get on the [convention] floor, it's very easy to argue that "My group needs for input, we need to be part of this union"—and that's how the debates go on: 'We need a delegate, we need have a seat at the table'.

He goes on to argue how these positions ask for financial resources so that they can attend more union events, but the administrative staff support needed for them is part of what has led his union to become a "bigger bureaucratic organization". Debating financial resources to attend more union conventions and gaining administrative support appears to be very distracting and time-consuming in union conventions. Adrian also expresses frustration that his union colleagues treat him as someone who should be limited to advocate on Indigenous-related issues only:

I find that they come out sometimes and they want you to be sort of pigeonholed and they say, "Oh, why don't you run for this and I'll support you," if it's an Indigenous file or it's an Indigenous role. But the minute you start saying, "Well, you know, what, I think I might want to run for *your* position". That is a completely different thing. I will tell you that I faced some stuff that has been very unfortunate. And this has made me think twice about some of the things I do in my union.

He does not argue against increasing representative seats and caucuses for Indigenous peoples, but like Chris, he expresses frustration that Indigenous unionists feel limited to these positions instead of being encouraged to foster and broaden their political activism within unions.

Additionally, Chris points to a very tough issue in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous unionists when he speaks about running for a mainstream elected union role. He alludes to racism on the part of non-Indigenous unionists to protect their union roles in the same way that white unionists have historically done so to protect their jobs. He certainly does not express acceptance in his union when these tensions come to light.

In addition to these limitations in the pursuit of representative seats and caucuses, some trade unionists have said at conventions that they do not think these groups fulfill the goal of advancing ‘bread and butter’ bargaining issues, in the sense of fighting for better wages, benefits and overall working conditions. Pam explains,

There seems to be a really big division [over] what really is the union’s role? We have a lot of members really don’t buy on to the social justice part. Their union money is for protecting our members. Bargaining and grievances—that is the union’s role. So, how do we engage and broaden people’s minds? What do people say? “It’s not our job. It’s not what my union dollars are for”. Okay, so you have brothers and sisters that are working three hours a day and have three jobs—like you don’t think that we need to improve their lives?

Pam points out that some union members, who are presumably non-racialized and non-Indigenous, do not always see the connection between fighting for the ‘bread and butter’ issues like wages and simultaneously fighting against workplace racism. She explains that they literally say their “union dollars” are not for projects like Indigenous representative seats and caucuses because they are not clearly engaging in collective bargaining and grievance procedures. However, Pam alludes to racialized workers who often fulfill the most precarious jobs and are looking to advance *both* ‘bread and butter’ issues and anti-racism because they are intertwined—employers tend to divide groupings of workers to prevent them from organizing together, undercut their bargaining power and deteriorate their working conditions. Pam’s story demonstrates how this theory is not well explained to rank-and-file union members by equity-seeking groups and union leaders so that they “broaden people’s minds” and unify the work

struggles amongst racialized and non-racialized unionists.

Pam raises an important question: how do we approach everyday trade unionists to expand their consciousness and genuinely support the needs of Indigenous workers, if they do not already do so? Chris suggests that the question should not be approached merely through equity seats and caucuses as the *only* strategy to raise the social influence of Indigenous unionists. Instead, he proposes the following:

I've been a long-time advocate for leadership training within equity-seeking groups.

What I saw made a difference. One of our past national presidents set up a leadership training program for women in our union. The women who attended that session were of all different backgrounds, including Indigenous women, and every single one of those women either went on to an elected position in CUPE, or a staff position. So, it gave them the resources, the support within each other ... The main issue is don't just use one strategy, you need to use a range.

Leadership training could entail many possibilities for educating members on a short-term basis, but Chris argues that they need a network of union organizers in the long-term, who train and support each other as part of a multitude of strategies to advance the needs of Indigenous members, ignite them to confidently run for union leadership positions, and so on.

William, who dedicated years of his union activism to advancing Indigenous representation and equity seats, expresses his frustration with the lack of effort by unions to reach out in solidarity with Indigenous peoples living on reserves in northern Ontario. He argues that unions claim to “have representation” of their Indigenous members but they are still far from understanding their

everyday living conditions. He says (emphasis added):

“Oh yeah, we got representation. We’ve got this...” Yeah, but what have you *really* done? A lot of people don’t know when you go up North how they live. The government built some new houses... But if you got no hydro running to the house, what good is it? If you got a gas stove but you got no gas. If you have plumbing but they’re still using outhouses. A lot of houses have mold. A lot of people are getting sick. Children are dying. They have no place to go... I wish other people out there from committees got involved in reserve traveling, putting recommendations forward. We’ve taken some of our committee members and sent them down to South America to show solidarity with Indigenous peoples. But why don’t you send them north?

His argument hits hard since his comment revealed to me the need for non-Indigenous people to understand why Indigenous peoples living on reserves, in many cases, have been forced into unrelenting poverty due to settler-colonial dispossession. It is as if the poverty on reserves does not exist in Canada, and it only does in countries in the Global South where unions have occasionally sent delegations to meet their union counterparts and activists responding to human rights violations facing Indigenous peoples internationally. Structurally, those ideas result from the aim of the Canadian government to isolate Indigenous peoples and conceal the poverty of the reserve system they created. William’s comment has led to the ignorance of the non-Indigenous population working and living far away from reserves. In effect, the federal government has enacted tremendous power to keep on-reserve Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in siloes as part of their settler-colonial project—non-Indigenous-dominated unions are complicit in this problem.

Participants suggest overall that the pursuit of Indigenous representative seats and caucuses within unions has enabled opportunities for Indigenous unionists to voice their lived experiences of colonial oppression, particularly the harsh daily experiences of racism; however, they express frustrations with the limited scope of these positions. Having these positions has not gone far enough to address racism targeted at Indigenous unionists and advance the fights for better compensation and working conditions. Limiting Indigenous peoples to these positions in these seats and caucuses has also had the unexpected consequence of making some Indigenous unionists feel that they are ‘pigeon-holed’ to them instead of broadening their union activism. In summary, then, the pursuit of these representative seats and caucuses has the effect of giving Indigenous unionists the opportunities to speak about their experiences of colonial oppression to non-Indigenous people—having these positions give space to Indigenous unionists and express solidarity with them. But they fall short of acting upon issues of fighting against racism and pushing for better compensation and working conditions for Indigenous unionists. The participants’ experience shows where unions have agreed to initiatives to express solidarity with their Indigenous members, but the structures are inadequate to address much broader issues involving racist discrimination (both within unions and by employers) and the problems in the labour market shaped by colonial-capitalist power.

4.6 Lack of attention to working conditions on reserves

Indigenous participants reveal major gaps in working conditions in reserves compared to non-reserve jurisdictions, and in doing so, they identify how Indigenous peoples’ labour continues to be deliberately undervalued by Canadian governments and corporations. They reveal the lack of attention of unions to the dire labour market for on-reserve workers. William argues the main issue with the labour market in northern Ontario is the sheer lack of jobs and racist

discrimination that Indigenous peoples face in regions dominated by non-Indigenous people. He says:

You go to Sault Ste. Marie now and you will find a lot of suicides from the northern reserves. A lot of people up there who [find] there are no jobs. So, they come to the city. There are no jobs in the city. So, what do they do? They go to school in Sault Ste. Marie and northern cities and they don't fit in. A lot of them have hung themselves or overdosed... Most unions don't even go there and probably don't even know that.

William describes the process of Indigenous workers basically having little choice but to leave their reserves to try to find employment in more populated areas dominated by non-Indigenous people—a phenomenon that has similarities with the Canadian government's formal program of enfranchisement. Land dispossession and the severe economic marginalization of First Nations reserves means that many leave in the hopes of finding decent employment in non-reserve areas. But, as William observes, they find it immensely difficult to “fit in” cities, and many have taken their lives ultimately due to ongoing colonial oppression and social stigma against Indigenous peoples. Additionally, he notes the complete absence of unions to understand and act on these socioeconomic issues, implying that there is an opportunity for them to enact political action and education to bring attention to it.

Ellen also observes the lack of job opportunities in and around northern Ontario reserves, though she argues that Indigenous peoples are being targeted by corporations and governments for precarious employment. She describes the ways that non-unionized Indigenous workers are exploited with very low compensation. Ellen explains: “A lot of times we have big companies that will come in and take contracts and hire some people on the reserves. [But] they want to pay

you *less* than what they would pay a unionized worker”. She argues that these precarious working conditions have further consequences for non-unionized Indigenous workers:

They also don’t teach you the proper safety when you’re doing a job and people don’t know enough to ask, you know what I mean? Unless you’ve been involved with the union, or some sort of health and safety work, you don’t know enough to ask about these things. You just do it. That part for me I find hard and I hate seeing people taken advantage of.

Ellen explains that there are work issues which go beyond the issues of poor pay and short-term contractual work—when non-unionized workers are not aware of health and safety issues, not only are they “taken advantage of” as Ellen argues, but it could also lead to serious consequences like workplace injuries and deaths. She identifies another opportunity for unions to lead in this regard because if they are there to educate Indigenous workers, and sustain this work through avenues like joint health and safety committees, then they are likely to be better protected at work.

Another Indigenous participant, Thomas, discusses the proliferation of precarious construction work on First Nations reserves, the types of jobs offered to Indigenous youth which limit their mobility in the labour market, and that they receive very low compensation compared to the same jobs in non-reserve jurisdictions. He explains:

Where I come from, the largest employer on the reserve is a company called King Construction in northern Québec. Construction type jobs are the jobs kids get—construction labourers or construction equipment operators—but it should be geared more towards skilled trades. There should be better opportunities for skilled training, so

you could be an electrician, for example. Skilled trade jobs are the jobs that probably would be attainable.

Thomas identifies ‘un-skilled’ construction labour as the most common type of entry-level work for Indigenous peoples living on reserves because they are not afforded resources for job training, upgrading, and higher education for more ‘skilled’ positions. He also mentions that it is difficult for Indigenous youth to secure construction jobs surrounding reserves because they may lack the means of transportation to work sites. Another participant, Ellen, expresses anxiety for her children as young adults who are trying to develop their careers and attain better compensation in the construction sector. She expresses frustration discussing how her son acquired advanced skills certifications and he tried to ‘climb the ranks’ within a construction company under the oversight of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), but he did not receive any significant increases in pay or job rank. She says of her family:

My brother was also told that his income is like paid way less than if he was working off the reserve. And this is according to Indian Affairs or INAC. How bizarre that it’s less than half of what he would be making if he worked off the reserve, but he’s told, “Sorry this is what we pay you” by INAC.

When I asked Ellen if INAC is aware of this wage disparity between off- and on-reserve jurisdictions, she replies:

They have to be. So, for example, they put in some water treatment for reserves to help better the way of life for people living in these communities, and then they train you to be able to take care of this job but then say, “Sorry, we’re not going to pay you what your real value is to do it”? That’s wrong.

The experience of Ellen's family is disturbing—it follows the historical experience of Indigenous workers in the capitalist labour market who are 'ghettoized' into low wage jobs and whose labour is deliberately undervalued by the Canadian government. Furthermore, it is not clear what INAC is doing to address the wage disparity, if anything, and it is not apparent that unions are aware of it because these participants did not speak about union involvement in this issue.

Participants argue that due to the expected growth of Indigenous populations in the coming decades, workers are also being poached for mining projects and other forms of natural resource extraction as an 'untapped' pool of labour which can be easily exploited. Thomas explains this emerging trend:

Companies are getting a little smarter. Now they're going to say, yes, there is a ready, willing labour market there that's not tapped, and they need to tap that labour market to get those workers involved... You're getting young, strong guys who are willing to learn to be electricians, plumbers, and those sorts of things, if given the opportunity. I think that if it's a unionized environment, they would be paid equal to the other employees. But if it's a non-unionized employee, the employer would just take advantage of the situation.

Indeed, the National Aboriginal Economic Development Board claims that the mining industry is the largest employer of Indigenous peoples and they have advocated for the federal government to develop large-scale training programs in natural resource extraction so that corporations can 'tap' into the pool of available Indigenous labourers (NAEDB, 2012).⁸⁰ Provincial governments are beginning to support this trend as well. In 2021, the Ontario government announced \$3.6 million in funding for Indigenous workers to be trained in construction and mining trades in

⁸⁰ In recent years, young unemployed Indigenous peoples have also been targeted to work in mining projects as non-Indigenous workers retire (NRC, 2012).

Greenstone Gold Mines who made an impact benefit agreement with Animbiigoo Zaagi'igan Anishinaabek First Nation, Aroland First Nation and Ginoogaming First Nation (Labour, Training and Skills Development, 2021; Minodahmun Development, 2020). Yet, there is a glaring gap in the treatment of these workers as they earn approximately \$18,000 less per year than their non-Indigenous counterparts in mining (*Ibid.*). And when these workers are non-unionized, as Thomas claims, they are more exposed to the arbitrary power of these employers.

It is complex terrain for Indigenous workers because, on one hand, they are being targeted by extractive corporations simply for the sake of having easy access to labour power, and the most aggressive corporations may try to pay them much less than unionized, non-Indigenous workers, as participants suggest. On the other hand, there do not appear to be many opportunities for decent employment at all and workers are forced into these 'ghettoized' jobs when they lack other ways to support themselves. Thomas claims that Indigenous workers are even more exploited when they lack union membership to focus on fighting for equitable pay and job training and upgrading, which suggests that unions need to be much more present to address these 'ghettoized' working conditions forced upon non-unionized Indigenous workers. However, for workers entering the workplace with union membership already, he remarks that private-sector unions like his own are "pretty good about negotiated terms and collective agreements that make provisions for hiring First Nations, and giving them first cracks at apprenticeship jobs, and first opportunities for training and advancement." He explains that these negotiations are gaining momentum in recent years.

Other reserves, such as Akwesasne Mohawk First Nation, near Cornwall, Ontario, are better able

to provide some job opportunities for on-reserve workers that are not limited to natural resource extraction; however, they still experience disparities as compared to non-reserve areas, similar to what Ellen, Thomas and William describe. Ashley, who is a young Mohawk worker currently based in Toronto's hospital sector, says the wage disparity between Indigenous workers on reserves compared to non-Indigenous workers in non-reserve areas was a leading reason why workers at Tsiionkwanonhso:te, a public long-term care facility in Akwesasne Mohawk First Nation, reached out to OPSEU to unionize with them in 2013. Ashley remarks:

Going into the union, getting a collective agreement is their way of fighting back to get what the workers need because they were paying them less and giving them less benefits. They asked, "Why are we getting paid less? Why aren't we getting treated the same way as our counterparts in Ottawa and in Toronto? Why are we being treated differently?" And so, they reached out to OPSEU because they saw that they have workers that are similar to them.

A press release about the union drive recognized "the needs and interests of a First Nation" by unionizing workers in the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, but that the workers were seeking "the same kind of protections that are afforded under the *Ontario Labour Relations Act* and *Canada Labour Code*" (NUPGE, 2014, para. 2).⁸¹ This story is similar to Leanne's experience where her union's bargaining process exposed notable disparities in pay between Indigenous women and non-Indigenous workers—in this case, workers thought about their gaps in pay compared to presumably non-Indigenous workers in non-reserve areas like Ottawa and Toronto, and surely, having a collective agreement would expose those disparities. However, like other Indigenous participants, workers at Tsiionkwanonhso:te took it upon themselves to alert a

⁸¹ OPSEU further claims to have agreed upon a "unique labour 'code' that recognizes the needs and interests" (*Ibid.*, para. 3) of the Akwesasne Mohawk First Nation, although it is not clear what that means in practice.

union of their unfair working conditions. I also note that since they are employed by a First Nations there are more complications in the funding that they receive from the Canadian government to operate their public services and manage their staff's working conditions—I will return to this issue when I discuss participant interviews regarding the challenges of unionizing Indigenous workers on reserves.

In summary, participants describe the major challenges for Indigenous workers trying to find employment and better working conditions on reserves—unions are clearly falling short to understand and try to address these problems Indigenous workers face. Participants describe unemployment and racist discrimination that Indigenous peoples face in jurisdictions dominated by non-Indigenous people, and they expose disturbing trends in the labour market, like the deliberate targeting of Indigenous youth to exploit for unsafe and precarious jobs in resource extraction. This situation echoes the historical experiences that Satzewich and Wotherspoon (2000) and McCallum (2014) describe where Indigenous workers (particularly youth) have been used as a reserve army of labour for 'unskilled' or 'low-skilled' work. Participants speak of how Indigenous workers are 'ghettoized' into low wage jobs and they would receive much better compensation in the same jobs in non-reserve jurisdictions. Many participants believe that unions have a role to fight for better working conditions for on-reserve Indigenous workers. However, as William put it starkly, unions are unaware and uninvolved in these issues, so there is a need for them to begin to learn and support the needs of these workers.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, Indigenous participants reveal their lived experiences in today's workplaces, and

in doing so, they explain where they have engaged in trade unions and where unions have been absent when it comes to developing a genuine understanding of the impacts of ongoing colonial oppression on Indigenous people's working and living conditions. Participants remark on experiences of precarious work in terms of facing job insecurity and a lack of protective measures for workers, like retirement security. Indigenous women in particular express exasperation with occupational segregation where they are confined to the lower tier of the job market with lower compensation and heavy workloads, while others observe challenges to gain secure, safe, and decent employment in and around reserves. These working conditions are a part of historic and ongoing forms of colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples where they are 'ghettoized' and targeted for low-wage jobs, as is the case for Indigenous youth from reserves who are being exploited as a pool of labour for resource extraction.

This chapter raises concern about union engagement with their Indigenous members and how they are approaching the question of how to support Indigenous workers more broadly. Unions are certainly moving to support the distinct needs of their Indigenous members by negotiating collective agreement language for workplace accommodations. At their best, these agreements to push back against hiring discrimination, racism, occupational segregation, and other forms of discrimination Indigenous workers face. Some agreements even aim to educate non-Indigenous workers to confront harmful colonial stereotypes about Indigenous peoples. Yet, participants raised questions about whether unions truly support them and whether non-Indigenous union leaders are willing to embark in genuine, long-term solidarity with their Indigenous members. Most participants speak about the power of organizing with their unions to better their working conditions and to elevate their voices in union spaces, though they often felt alone in these

journeys. They show how Indigenous workers have taken the onus to organize into unions and push for better working conditions themselves.

While some participants have fought for equity-seeking positions to raise the influence of Indigenous members, they note where these positions and caucuses have fallen short of acting upon issues of fighting for better compensation and working conditions for Indigenous peoples and strategizing to end racism. Participants suggest that there needs to be varied strategies to advance the voices and needs of Indigenous members, to ignite them to confidently run for union leadership positions, and so on. Ultimately, they suggest these union structures are falling short to push back against the harsh conditions in the labour market and meet the needs of Indigenous members.

Some participants remark on how unions are still very ignorant of the conditions of colonial oppression which Indigenous peoples face and they are afraid to unionize more workers in complex jurisdictions like reserves. Participants note that the perception of unions as a colonial institution trying to ‘control’ Indigenous peoples’ affairs persists amongst groups, such as First Nations band councils. They suggest that unions need to reach out to band councils to clarify these misconceptions, expand their imagination in the ways they could provide union representation, and challenge the Canadian labour relations regime in order to unionize more Indigenous workers. These situations demonstrate the ways that unions are limited when it comes to supporting Indigenous workers and, thus, they inhibit expressing their solidarity with them.

Chapter 5: Analysis - Part Two: The struggles beyond the workplace – Union solidarity
and constraints within the confines of settler-colonial capitalism

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes how trade unions express labour solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns and movements for self-determination and it explores their structural limitations within the broad confines of settler-colonial capitalism. I will examine the labour movement's historical approach to understanding colonial oppression and expressions of solidarity to support Indigenous peoples' concerns and struggles for self-determination. Here I will also focus on the activism of OPSEU's Indigenous Mobilization Team (IMT), initiated by rank-and-file Indigenous members of OPSEU, who sought to develop relationships between unions, First Nations band councils, and Indigenous communities, and advocate for the reform of public services through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples. My analysis of participant interviews touches upon the complexity of Indigenous peoples' relationships with land, self-determination, and capitalist production. I probe into the systemic constraints of trade unions that severely limit their actions within the confines of settler-colonial capitalist power, and thus complicate their ability to express labour solidarity in Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination. The conclusions from participants' insights into these circumstances demonstrate where unions are trying to express support for Indigenous peoples' concerns and movements for self-determination and where they face challenges and constraints.

The findings within the chapter explore the following research questions:

- How have trade unions engaged in actions supporting Indigenous peoples' concerns and movements for Indigenous self-determination? How do they understand forms of colonial oppression and what is needed for Indigenous peoples to have self-determining livelihoods?
- What are the challenges to identifying an anti-colonial framework for unions to transform their practices of solidarity with Indigenous peoples?

5.2 Union understandings of colonial oppression and solidarity with anti-colonial actions

During my research interviews, I came across documentation by unions to declare labour solidarity for Indigenous peoples which I believe are important to analyze because they express their understandings of colonial oppression and their solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns and struggles for self-determination. In some cases, though, they reveal that unions still have a far way to go to understanding the structures of settler-colonialism which seek to continuously dispossess Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state's continuous assertion of sovereignty over Indigenous modes of life.

I was surprised to find that in 1963 when CUPE was founded through a merger of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the National Union of Public Service Employees (NUPSE), they passed a general resolution concerning Indigenous peoples' rights. The motion passed at their National Convention reads that they will "petition the federal government to repeal the prohibitive laws against Native Canadians to allow them the same rights as other Canadians" (CUPE, 1993 p. 130). My study participants could not speak to the motivations behind CUPE's early resolution, but it is possible that some trade unionists were moved by the momentum of Indigenous-led movements to repeal the Pass system in 1951, remove the worst

restrictions on Status Indians, and permit legal and political rights to establish new political organizations. In addition, the federal government extended the right to vote in federal elections to Indigenous peoples in 1960, and in the following year, compulsory enfranchisement provisions were removed from the *Indian Act*. Clearly CUPE's declaration expresses some understanding that Indigenous peoples have been historically discriminated from laws that treated them differently than the non-Indigenous population, and they thought the best course of action to help resist this was to petition the Canadian federal government to keep eliminating those laws.

Other events in the 1960's may have prompted unions like CUPE to denounce the differential and discriminatory treatment of Indigenous peoples by the Canadian state. The Hawthorn reports in 1966 and 1967, based on cross-country consultations to document the appalling socioeconomic conditions imposed on Indigenous peoples, recommend the dissolution of the residential school system and argues that Indigenous peoples "should be regarded as 'citizens plus'", meaning that they should "possess certain additional rights as charter members of the Canadian community" (Hawthorn, 1966, p. 13). In 1969, shortly after the Hawthorn reports were released, and the federal government announced the 'White Paper', CUPE produced an article entitled *Canada's native people... Their rights have been denied*. CUPE argues that the Canadian federal government failed provide Indigenous peoples an adequate standard of living and to repeal discriminatory laws and unequal treatment of Indigenous communities compared to the non-Indigenous population. The article states, "...undertakings to the Indians—solemn treaty promises—have been ignored, and have been broken" (CUPE, 1969, p. 5).⁸² In the same year,

⁸² They also recognize where Indigenous peoples' lands have never been ceded.

the CLC declared a goal to become active in socioeconomic issues affecting Indigenous peoples, so they announced a broad goal to support “programs to assist the Indians, Métis and Eskimos” (List, 1969, p. 5). The CLC appointed Patrick Kerwan, social worker from Toronto, to travel to eight reserves around Kenora, Ontario, to report on Ojibwe peoples’ living and working conditions and provide social assistance (CUPE, 1969). Kerwan reported advocating for higher wages, obtaining unpaid wages, negotiating with federal and provincial governments for promised grants, loans, and “rais[ing] funds for a dam to control water levels in an inlet on the Whitedog Reserve where the Indians harvest wild rice” (*Ibid.*, p. 5).⁸³ Overall, the CLC and CUPE’s actions show that they learned that on-reserve populations were being denied adequate living conditions by governments and the CLC decided to offer support through a social worker to try to remedy their living and working circumstances. As CUPE’s article summarizes, “Instead of waiting for government to come through with long-promised moves to help Canada’s Indians, the labor movement has stepped in with action of its own” (*Ibid.*). The CUPE statement demonstrates understanding that Indigenous peoples are being treated differently by the Canadian state, and this situation deeply impacted their living conditions; therefore, they support the CLC’s attempt to provide some reserves with social assistance. However, they do not show understanding of the structural oppression of settler-colonialism and the need to build anti-colonial resistance—they saw it merely as an issue of the Canadian federal government denying human rights and treaty promises.

⁸³ Problematically, he also argues, “Most Indians don’t want to leave the reserve, and many of those who do, return. They can’t cope with city life, and they don’t want to. What’s more, they’re really not accepted, except as cheap labour” (CUPE, 1969, p.5). Kerwan appears to blame Ojibwe peoples he worked with for difficulties of trying to live in nearby cities, although he admits that the non-Indigenous population has not “accepted” them and used them as “cheap labour”.

In the 1970s and onward, organizations like the CLC began to show support of Indigenous peoples' movements to negotiate land claims and forms of self-government, so they began to see that there are forms of oppression which have denied Indigenous peoples' claims to their traditional lands and self-determining political authority. A CLC convention in 1974 endorsed "the position on aboriginal rights and land title put forward by the National Indian Brotherhood" and called on the Canadian labour movement to lobby governments on behalf of the NIB's position and to establish partnerships with "native organizations" at every level (CLC 1993, p. 12). In 1987, the CUPE National Convention passed much more specific resolutions echoing the demand to support Indigenous peoples' desire to negotiate land claims as an act of self-determination. They called on the Canadian federal government to: "Engage in accelerated and comprehensive negotiations on outstanding native land claims... to provide a secure economic base for local self-government and self-development" (CUPE, 1993 p. 130). At the same convention, they also called to entrench the right to Indigenous self-governance in the *Constitution Act*, 1982 (*Ibid.*, p. 130). I believe this resolution was likely in response to the intense lobbying and legal battles by Indigenous-led political organizations at the time to have "aboriginal and treaty rights" explicitly recognized in Section 35 of the *Constitution Act*.^{84 85} Thus, unions like CUPE expanded greatly on their understanding of Indigenous peoples' concerns and struggles for self-determination—instead of simply arguing that their human rights

⁸⁴ I am aware that there are debates concerning the worthiness of pursuing this struggle and its outcome. For instance, Lee Maracle argues that the changes to Section 35 requires Indigenous peoples (2021, p.8-9) "to accept the Canadian Constitution as the 'Supreme Law' through which our rights as Nations should be decided". In addition, she asserts, "A true nation-to-nation relationship would not have resulted in entrenching Aboriginal Rights as a Canadian constitutional right" (*Ibid.*, p. 9).

⁸⁵ It was also becoming more apparent to public sector unions like CUPE that they recognized employer's racist and sexist discrimination against Indigenous peoples. In 1989, the CUPE National Convention endorsed "the Native Council of Canada's call for a federal Commission of Inquiry to investigate and propose action to end the history of racism and under-representation of native persons in the Public Service of Canada" (*Ibid.*). The Native Council of Canada renamed itself as the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples in 1993.

are denied by the Canadian state, they recognized issues of fighting for Indigenous self-governance and economic self-sufficiency. Shortly after, in 1993, they declared a campaign to do the following (*Ibid.*, p. 130):

- Campaign to educate all CUPE members and employers and support First Nation peoples in their just struggle for justice;
- Include in this campaign the following components:
 - a) Education of our membership on the issues of our native brothers and sisters.
 - b) Organizing drive directed at unorganized native social service workers.
 - c) Development of a CUPE policy statement in support of the political demands of status, non-Status, Métis, rural and urban peoples.

This campaign signals a turn to looking *within* unions to show their solidarity through educating members about Indigenous peoples' concerns, supporting the "political demands" of diverse Indigenous communities, and showing commitment to unionizing Indigenous workers. However, they only describe a broad need for unionists to support Indigenous peoples' "just struggle for justice".

At the CLC's 1992 Constitutional Convention, the CLC passed an *Aboriginal Rights Policy Statement* which was much clearer than previous declarations to specify what union leaders conceive as settler-colonialism oppression. The statement reads:

Clearly, the contemporary reality of Aboriginal Peoples is dire and can be understood in terms of the consequences of a process that has involved dispossession from, and physical colonization of, Aboriginal lands and exploitation of their natural resources...

Although these practices began in the age of European colonialism, they have been continued through the actions of successor states structurally indistinguishable from those of the colonial era. (CLC, 1993, p. 19-20).

The CLC's language makes it clear that settler-colonialism entails the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and they also recognize the objective of the Canadian state to force access to their lands for resource extraction. They do not make it clear that dispossession is *ongoing* because they describe that Indigenous peoples' present reality is the result of the "consequences" of dispossession, yet they recognize that there are ongoing colonial practices by "successor states". They insist that the Canadian labour movement must mobilize in solidarity with Indigenous peoples "for an end to the *colonial oppression* which they have had to endure" (*Ibid.*, p. 9, emphasis added). They see that this oppression can be overcome through supporting the "struggle for restoration of their sovereign rights" (*Ibid.*, p. 20) regarding Indigenous self-governance and land claims. They also come to recognize a role for non-Indigenous people to call for the end to colonial oppression, as they state: "As Canadian people, we cannot accept that our state continue its colonial domination of the Aboriginal Peoples" (*Ibid.*, p. 12). Overall, these declarations show a much more nuanced understanding of settler-colonialism because the statement recognizes that there are forms of ongoing colonial oppression and they recognize that as an act of social justice they need to call for the Canadian state to end its assertion of state sovereignty over them.

The year 1993 saw the CLC produce a report entitled *Aboriginal rights and the labour movement*. The CLC made the report as a submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, developed from their 1992 convention following consultations with their member

unions. The report shifts language from earlier statements as the CLC says that they support Indigenous peoples' rights, "including the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-determination and to jurisdiction over land and resources". They explain that "Canada's First Peoples are looking to take back control of their lives and their communities, and to establish a new relationship with non-Aboriginal Canadians and with federal, provincial and territorial governments" (*Ibid.*, p. 7). Here, they also observe that an "agenda for change is being driven by unrest in some native communities—as demonstrated by the Oka crisis three years ago; by the growing confidence and visibility of native organizations and leaders..." (*Ibid.*, p. 7). So, they recognize the actions of anti-colonial resistance which captured national public attention, in the case of the Kanehsatà:ke who defended their sacred lands during the "Oka crisis".⁸⁶ In summary, then, the CLC's statement expresses the understanding that settler-colonialism is an all-encompassing and ongoing structure of oppression. Their argument that Indigenous peoples are "looking to take back control of their lives and their communities" suggests that the Canadian state's ongoing forms of colonial oppression impacts all aspects of their lives. They contend that supporting struggles for Indigenous self-determination is needed although they do not say anything further about what ending colonial oppression means.

In the present day, unions express varying understandings of settler-colonialism and therefore they have different approaches to showing support of Indigenous people's concerns and struggles for self-determination. In my search for declarations and any other documentation of labour solidarity with Indigenous peoples, I found that most unions do not have publicly available

⁸⁶ While it is difficult to find any union expressions of solidarity for the Kanehsatà:ke resistance at the time, the CLC states that, "there was significant union support from outside Québec for Mohawk rights and for people in the Mohawk communities. This included the sending of cash donations and food to the Mohawks involved in the confrontation with the Canadian armed forces at Oka" (CLC, 1993, p. 64).

documents to see, so expressing solidarity with Indigenous peoples is not priority for them.

There are, however, some unions who recognize that settler-colonialism entails ongoing forms of dispossession and colonial oppression. For instance, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UCFW) clearly state: “Canada’s history of colonialism and *ongoing* attempts to sever the connection between Indigenous peoples and the land has had profound and long-lasting impacts on Indigenous communities” (2021, p. 1, emphasis added). In 2012 when the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) endorsed Idle No More⁸⁷, former CUPW National President, Denis Lemelin, wrote a letter where he argues (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014, p. 225):

We recognize the racist and genocidal history of Canada and that the attempts to assimilate and silence Indigenous voices have been rife with failure and abuse. The ongoing theft of Indigenous lands, the refusal to honour agreements made in the British Crown reveal a sadly dishonest and indefensible relationship.⁸⁸

Lemelin explicitly acknowledges how the Canadian state has committed genocide of Indigenous peoples and they continue to impose ongoing forms of dispossession and colonial oppression. Further on in his letter, he says his union will not stand for the denial of Indigenous people’s self-determination, including the state’s continuous rejection of access to their traditional territories. Other statements, such as OPSEU’s *Affirmation of Principles on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights* declares that they support Indigenous peoples’ “full access to all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to preserve and strengthen their own political,

⁸⁷ Idle No More began in November 2012 as a teach-in in Saskatoon against Bill C-45. Proposed by the federal government led by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the bill removed protections for forests and waterways passing through reserve lands. The movement grew to encompass round dances in public places and blockades of roads and rail lines to critique the Canadian federal government’s repression of treaty rights and Indigenous peoples’ self-determination (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014).

⁸⁸ Lemelin made this statement in a letter of support to Chief Theresa Spence during her hunger strike to discuss her concerns about Bill C-45 with the Canadian federal government.

economic, legal and cultural traditions and institutions” in addition to “self-determination, sovereignty and the ability to remain on their ancestral lands” (OPSEU, 2017b, para. 3).

Altogether, these statements by unionists in CUPW, UFCW, and OPSEU show strong understandings of the objectives of the Canadian state to continuously try to dispossess and assimilate Indigenous peoples and also what is needed for Indigenous self-determination to happen, as theorists like Lee Maracle and Howard Adams envision it.

Other unions are less clear in their understandings of the state’s colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples because they deem colonization to be an event of the past, and they believe there is only an issue of systemic discrimination by the Canadian state today. For instance, the CLC explains (2018, p. 3):

First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in Canada have been subject to gross human rights violations throughout history, The legacy of colonialism, the paternalistic *Indian Act*, the forced relation, marginalization and abuse of Inuit communities, and the disgrace around the treatment of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) and their families, are only scratching the surface of the root causes of intergenerational trauma haunting FNMI communities. Canada’s unions have been and continue to be at the forefront of human rights issues and believe that justice for FNMI peoples is long overdue.

This statement demonstrates that they perceive colonialism as something which occurred in the past, though there is “intergenerational trauma” and lingering impacts of colonization which continue to ‘haunt’ Indigenous peoples, so the struggle in the present-day is to address the negative impacts of past attempts to colonize them. This understanding is echoed in CUPE

B.C.'s statement about Idle No More (2013) during which time they urged former Prime Minister Stephen Harper to "remember the history of colonial oppression that Parliament has rightly apologized for, and to commit to work with First Nations in a respectful process that moves everyone forward (para. 3)." Moreover, unions such as the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) say that they support a "commitment to First Nations rights" and they acknowledge, "The century-old struggles of the indigenous communities across Canada have for hundreds of years sought to be treated as equal" (LIUNA, 2017). These statements recognize that there is a need for the Canadian state to end their systemic discrimination of Indigenous peoples and build new institutional relationships, although they do not understand settler-colonialism in terms of its ongoing dispossession and the assertion of state sovereignty over Indigenous modes of life.

In conclusion, union declarations reveal that there are varying understandings of settler-colonialism and approaches to showing solidarity with Indigenous people's concerns and struggles for self-determination. Early union declarations of labour solidarity show that unions like CUPE understood the oppression of Indigenous peoples as a matter of differential and discriminatory treatment and a denial of human rights; therefore, they denounced the Canadian state's discriminatory set of laws and practices against them. Over time, unions like CUPE began to express a much more nuanced understanding of the complexities of settler-colonialism as an ongoing structure and they began to show recognition that Indigenous peoples are fighting for self-determination, in forms of self-governance, economic self-sufficiency, and more. Today, some unions express understanding that settler-colonialism entails ongoing forms of dispossession and colonial oppression; yet other unions see that there are only lingering impacts

of colonization which need to be remedied and there needs to be renewed relationships between the Canadian state, First Nations (which does not include the breadth of diverse Indigenous communities), and unions.⁸⁹

5.3 Union campaigns and outreach to support Indigenous people's concerns

The major trade unions that my participants are members of—CUPE, PSAC, OPSEU, Unifor, USW, and OSSTF—are known in the Canadian labour movement for their work on social justice and human rights issues and they are increasingly creating campaigns to address issues concerning their Indigenous members and their communities. This section will their campaigns and how participants responded to some of them. In reviewing these campaigns, participants demonstrate how their unions are trying to express their solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns and anti-colonial struggles. They discuss why some unions and Indigenous communities are aligned in campaigns; however, they also show where unions are limited in their understandings of settler-colonial power and for that reason they do not go further to express solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

One participant, Daniel, showed me dozens of placards and campaign materials by PSAC to support Indigenous peoples before I asked him my interview questions. This clearly showed his immense pride in the activism he has participated in. As he remarks,

I've always believed that unions are best suited for social change because we have access to resources, we have access to our members. We can say whatever we want to government... So, we have a huge advantage and with that comes a responsibility. And I

⁸⁹ Additionally, I note that these union declarations of solidarity are only the expression of union leaders and participants who formed them. As a result, they do not reflect the consciousness of the totality of the membership.

think that's what the labour movement into working on Indigenous issues in the first place.

Daniel suggests that union support for Indigenous peoples' concerns is a part of their responsibility to be a critical oppositional voice to the Canadian state. He explains that his union also has financial resources and a platform to mobilize their members in these struggles. While explaining some of these campaign materials, however, he observes, "Coming to the table for Indigenous rights was really a long time coming". After I asked why, he responded by noting the exclusion of Indigenous workers from the labour movement by not having unionized employment and not having much contact with them at all. He explains, "Here's a whole part of the population that we're not organizing, we're not in contact with, and we're not working with". He also notes the tensions with unionists whose jobs are in resource development:

Initially, not only were we not standing with Indigenous peoples, but we were working directly against them. I come from Manitoba, where there were a lot of hydro development projects going on in the northern part of the province and there were Indigenous lands being flooded out. There were communities being devastated. But none of the Indigenous people were getting the jobs. They were all done through union hiring halls in Winnipeg. We didn't do anything to work with the communities at all. It took a long time for folks to sort of start to recognize that was problematic. Of course, there were lots of Indigenous activists that came before me.

Daniel remarks on the historical constraints of unions to show solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Not only have mega resource projects devastated Indigenous peoples' lands and livelihoods, but their communities were refused any economic 'benefits' or compensation, like having unionized jobs in these projects. Therefore, the positionality of unions in these

circumstances has been very problematic because they have been (and continue to be) complicit in the destruction of Indigenous peoples' lands for resource development. As Daniel puts it simply, "We were working directly against them". He argues that it has taken long for unions "to sort of start to recognize that was problematic," so *some* unions have come to realize that they should have a role in supporting Indigenous peoples in these kinds of struggles. Other Indigenous participants did not comment on why their unions have generally realized that they should support Indigenous peoples, though they say that they feel backed by their unions to show solidarity for them. As Amber explains: "I think it's more or less a promise CUPE has made to help their Indigenous members in any way they can, and you can feel that they want to give you that support... It makes all the difference". Her experience suggests that Indigenous members have brought up their concerns to their unions and over time they have decided to offer support for them. For example, she says she has been supported by her union local with monetary donations for actions to raise awareness about the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

After looking through the campaign materials I collected throughout all my research interviews, I identified that the vast majority of union campaigns in solidarity with Indigenous peoples direct their attention to calling on provincial and federal governments to enact the following:

- Provide safe public drinking water and wastewater services for First Nations reserves;
- Stop the systemic violence against missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG);

- Obtain free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before corporations and governments embark on extractive projects on Indigenous peoples' lands;⁹⁰
- Clean up environmental contamination on Indigenous peoples' land (for example, the effects of mercury poisoning in and around Grassy Narrows First Nation); and,
- Make statutory holidays to celebrate Indigenous peoples (e.g. National Indigenous Peoples Day) and to reflect on the history of residential schools in Canada and to support the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action in their 2015 Final Report.



Figure 3. Union campaign materials from participants. (Photo by author).

⁹⁰ Some unions have supported this issue by expressing endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007. Article 32 of the declaration states, "States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources" (UN, 2020, p. 23).

Some of the campaign work by unions is public in the form of websites with campaign information, though they have also had information distributed at events like union conventions. These campaigns mostly involve asking union members and the public to send messages to elected officials to build political pressure on them to enact their demands. Unions have also pursued political lobbying to provincial and federal governments in support of these issues, and their lobbying appears to be a new approach for unions in showing their solidarity for Indigenous peoples' concerns. On March 31 and April 1, 2019, I participated in the CLC's first National Indigenous Lobby Day on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, where we met with Liberal, Conservative and NDP MPs and Senators. Over 100 Indigenous and non-Indigenous unionists were in attendance, including members from the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC), Unifor, CUPE, PSAC, and more. The CLC's recommendations to the federal government featured four main issues developed by their Indigenous Rights Working Group:

- Provide appropriate funds and resources to support the development of much-needed public water infrastructure on reserves (including to support the training and certification of Indigenous water and wastewater operators);
- Create a national action plan to end violence against MMIWG as part of the National Inquiry into MMIWG's Final Report (which was released after the lobby day on June 3, 2019);
- Provide funding to the National Residential School Student Death Register and fund research for the missing remains of all children who died at residential schools and present the remains to the families who request it;

- Pass Bill C-369 for a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation as a statutory holiday.⁹¹

These issues have some commonality with the campaign issues I outlined above. I had the opportunity to meet Indigenous union leaders, many of whom said that they joined the lobbying event to tell their personal stories to MPs and Senators. They wanted to explain how the campaign issues have deep impacts on them. As one participant recalls of the day:

There was an individual, a lady, that was from the Northwest Territories, and her own sister was murdered and is still missing. Her niece was also murdered and missing. To hear the stories come directly from an individual, it carries more weight behind it... It brought what the issue is home to these MPs so they truly understand what's at stake for Indigenous peoples.

They suggest that centering Indigenous peoples' lived experiences can be powerful in supporting lobbying tactics. Other Indigenous participants say that they appreciate their experiences in these union campaigns. For Pam, lobbying the Ontario government through postcards sent by union members is a tactic she prefers. She remarks,

You know, we're very successful—the Aboriginal council—with a postcard campaign. They tend to work well for us. And we did it on 'truth and reconciliation' for having an appropriate curriculum and starting in the schools. We actually delivered all of those postcards at the time we had Minister Zimmer. So, we literally brought hundreds of them to his office and his staff met with us, we had a meeting all planned up and we told him what our priorities are and give them all the postcards. That was a really great day.⁹²

⁹¹ Bill C-369 was introduced by NDP Member of Parliament Georgina Jolibois (Chipewyan) in 2017 to declare the existing National Indigenous Peoples Day on June 21 as a statutory holiday (House of Commons, 2019).

⁹² MPP David Zimmer was a former Liberal Party Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation in Ontario.

While Pam said she enjoyed the campaign, other participants expressed differing opinions on the efficacy of lobbying campaigns to show solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns. When I asked other participants about their unions' campaigns to lobby government officials, I received much different opinions on such strategies, and some questioned the meaning of these actions. For instance, Sean recalls discussing distributing campaign postcards in his local union meetings: "Yeah that always comes up in my meetings and we always shoot it down—what's that going to give us?" He went on to suggest that this type of lobbying is ineffective because it does little to build relationships with government officials. A non-Indigenous participant, Chris, mentions how his union missed an opportunity to make a much more strategic effort in one campaign to demand a national inquiry into MMIWG. He remarks (emphasis added):

My only beef at one point [was] when the inquiry wasn't coming in for the missing Indigenous women and girls. I thought that this would have been a perfect moment for the union movement, just to put all their money out and for them to do more. It would have made this incredible alliance and would have exposed that the federal government was bankrupt around their politics... It took *eight years* to get that inquiry from the first time it was demanded, and it's still problematic—the results. I think in that case, I think a different strategy could have been done.⁹³

Chris laments this missed opportunity because he explains it would have resulted in an "incredible alliance" between unions and Indigenous-led organizations to criticize the Canadian federal government. Chris alludes to a point of commonality between both groups aiming to

⁹³ The National Inquiry into MMIWG was criticized for its slow pace, high-profile resignations, the lack of time allocated for public hearings, and the failure to collaborate with Indigenous women and provincial, territorial, municipal and First Nations on a national action plan (Macdonald & Campbell, 2017; Palmater, 2016, 2019). Even after the National Inquiry's final report in 2019, critics have said the Canadian federal government has not met the commission's recommendations and they have no statutory duty to even implement the recommendations, so

expose the government's "bankrupt[cy] around their politics". He suggests that there is a way these grievances can come together in a shared struggle against "the inhumanity of the Canadian government", in Howard Adams' words (1999, p. 95). A non-Indigenous participant, Priya, had a completely different perspective than Chris and Sean because she argues that these lobbying campaigns are limited in their ability to address root problems of colonial oppression. She explains of her union:

They developed a postcard campaign for missing and murdered Indigenous women. It was very a confusing project for me because I was like, is it just about giving people something to do? It was really odd... I had raised at the time; shouldn't we take the lead from people like No More Silence right here in Toronto? I know some people are basically like fuck a national inquiry; we don't have faith in this colonial process... So, let's actually take the lead from people who know more about this than us... They are more knowledgeable and have thought about strategy and are connected with democratic discussion within Indigenous communities.⁹⁴

Her story reflects the difficulty of unions to express solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns because there are diverse communities with different opinions on political action. She did not find her union's campaign to be meaningful, as she questions, "is it just about giving people something to do?" She was aware that some Indigenous communities criticized calls for a national inquiry into MMIWG because they did not trust the Canadian state's "colonial process", so she argues that the campaign's demand is limited because it would ask for an inquiry under the control of the state. She is unhappy that her union leaders and staff who went forward on the

⁹⁴ No More Silence is a grassroots community organization which describes themselves as a network "to support the work being done by activists, academics, researchers, agencies and communities to stop the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women" (No More Silence, 2017).

campaign did not take the time to think about these divergent perspectives and show support for groups with an anti-colonial approach as she recommended.

In addition to ‘formal’ campaigns, Indigenous participants discussed their involvement ‘behind the scenes’ providing material support for Indigenous communities and Indigenous-led groups. Adrian shared his experience asking for union donations to cook and serve meals at an Indigenous homeless drop-in shelter and his local friendship centre. Likewise, Pam, discussed how her union conducts fundraising to support the *Helping Our Northern Neighbours* charity which donates food to Indigenous families experiencing food insecurity due to disproportionately high grocery prices. Moreover, Pam and Thomas said they have asked for their unions’ material support to amplify Indigenous-led activism to redress harm to their communities and their lands, such as the Grassy Narrows First Nation’s biennial River Run in downtown Toronto to demand that the provincial government remove mercury dumped in the Wabigoon River system over fifty years ago from a nearby paper mill. Another Indigenous participant, Thomas, recalls many Indigenous-led actions that his union, the United Steelworkers, has supported:

The union actually paid for people who were able to come and testify at the missing and murdered Indigenous women’s inquiry. They paid the hotels and they paid the transportation for them to come. And people from Attawapiskat—when they come to trial and they have their press conferences. They’re friends, like, I know the people, right? When they first started coming to have rallies at Queen’s Park, we would let them use the downstairs [at his union hall], like the kitchen, and they’d stay here for two to four days at a time... And when the treaty walkers, the people who walk from Cochrane all the way

down here—we went to Queen’s Park with them. And one time I helped them meet their MPP.

These examples of offering material support were not part of ‘formal’, public campaigns by unions to support Indigenous peoples but, as Thomas explains, they are actions ‘behind the scenes’ to offer solidarity so that these groups can organize their actions. Providing places for Indigenous activists to stay outside of their communities, securing meals and transportation, and offering other material support are all important ‘building blocks’ for social movements to happen.

Still, for some participants, these union campaigns and actions do not go far enough in terms of engaging non-Indigenous unionists to support Indigenous peoples’ concerns. A non-Indigenous participant, Leela, claims:

What I struggle with is organizing a concerted and really deliberate, critical mass around these issues. So, everyone’s kind of doing their work in their silos. I think that there are campaigns that are really powerful and meaningful. However, I don’t think that we have reached enough members.

She points out that far more unionists could be organizing in these campaigns and political actions to support Indigenous-related issues. A non-Indigenous participant, Priya, agrees with Leela that these campaigns do not go far enough to engage non-Indigenous unionists, but she insists that the problem is unions struggle to understand why and how they should express solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Priya explains:

I’m trying to understand if most union leaders and rank-and-file understand what I Indigenous solidarity means. They don’t—they understand charity-based connections.

For most campaigns, the first thing people ask about is donating money. But that's not what we always need. We need our members involved! I'm like, "No, they need you to do popular education of our members". That's what every movement wants us to do... I think what's needed is that kind of political education of the membership—actually talking to members... We should be talking about uniting the class. It's not about demands for one group but it's about demands for everyone. Like if we don't all have universal public services, we don't all have status—we should join all of those demands, including Indigenous self-determination.

Priya criticizes her union for not reflecting on their actions and she argues that because they struggle to “understand what Indigenous solidarity means” they sort to a ‘charity-based’ approach to engaging with Indigenous communities and social movements. She points out a problem that limiting expressions of solidarity to only donating money does not mobilize rank-and-file members to do other things like political education to understand Indigenous peoples’ concerns. Unions have opportunities to conduct political education with their members so that they understand why solidarity with Indigenous peoples is important—for her, it is about uniting all working class people. As a result, she implies that unions are only engaging with Indigenous peoples’ concerns on a superficial level, and they are limited to expressing genuine solidarity with them.

Participants had mixed responses to union campaigns to advance “reconciliation” in response to the TRC’s Final reports in 2015. While the TRC’s Calls to Action are primarily directed at governments to enact their policy recommendations, they include demands for public service workers which unions could act upon. For instance, Call to Action #1 calls upon social workers

who conduct child-welfare investigations to be “educated and trained about the potential for Aboriginal communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing” (TRC, 2015, p. 1). Unions with members in healthcare could use collective bargaining processes to enact the TRC’s Call to Action #23 to increase representation of Indigenous healthcare workers, ensure the retention of these workers in Indigenous communities, and require “cultural competency training” for all healthcare employees (*Ibid.*, p. 3). In addition, federal public sector unions could put pressure on employers to implement many other TRC Calls to Action which demand annual reporting on demographical information between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (as identified in Call to Action #2 regarding the number of children in the child welfare system, and Calls to Action #9 and #19 regarding educational and income attainment and identifying and closing gaps in health outcomes). The TRC lists fewer demands for the private sector, but there is clearly a role for private sector unions to use collective bargaining processes and IBAs to achieve Call to Action #92 which insists on ensuring that Indigenous peoples have “equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector” and that Indigenous communities “gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects” (*Ibid.*, p. 10).

As mentioned in Chapter 4, some unions say they have pursued actions to support their Indigenous members in response to the TRC’s demands and they claim that they have a role in the process of “reconciliation” with Indigenous peoples. For example, in the years following the TRC’s Final reports, the United Steelworkers created their bargaining guide with collective agreement language to meet the distinct needs of Indigenous workers. As one participant, Ashley, recalls, “Because of ‘truth and reconciliation’, it really brought Indigenous issues to the

forefront” and she explains that unions have paid more attention to Indigenous peoples’ concerns and otherwise thought more about what they can do to show solidarity for their Indigenous members and their communities. Since 2015, it has been common for unions to have events discussing the TRC’s Final reports, for example CUPE (2021) hosted an event entitled, *Truth and reconciliation: Conversations for CUPE members*, and unions with members in diverse industries, such as LiUNA (2017), the Canadian Media Guild (CMG, 2021), the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists (ACTRA, 2021), and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW, 2021) have all expressed that they support the TRC’s Calls to Action. A statement by Unifor argues that their union “takes its lead from the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (2021, para. 2) which is a “guide for all levels of government to implement policies that will help address the injustices of colonialism and cultural genocide in Canada” (*Ibid.*). They say that they would like union members to support the TRC’s Calls to Action and “engage in active reconciliation with Indigenous people” (*Ibid.*, para. 17).

Statements by unions indicate their responses to the TRC’s work and how they understand processes of “reconciliation”. USW explains in a statement passed by members at a national conference in 2016 (USW, 2016, para. 3):

The United Steelworkers recognize Canada’s shameful history in dealing with Aboriginal peoples and the abuse suffered by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. As a union we must and will be part of processes of reconciliation and healing. At all levels of our union we renew our commitment to building relationship of mutual support and respect with Aboriginal leaders, activists, organizations and communities.

USW’s statement emphasizes a perceived need for unions to be a part of “processes of

reconciliation and healing” to respond to Canada’s “shameful” treatment of Indigenous peoples. They see a role for unionists to express “mutual support and respect” with diverse Indigenous communities. Similarly, CUPE’s bargaining guide explains that “Indigenous CUPE members are carrying the weight of colonial trauma” (CUPE, 2022, p. 3), and it is “the duty of all unions, including CUPE, to begin repairing this relationship” (*Ibid.*). CUPE argues that they need to support their Indigenous members and their communities who have been forced to endure past colonial traumas, such as the impacts of the Canadian government’s residential school system, which they argue has resulted in intergenerational trauma today. CUPE further argues that they need to “begin restoring the trust of Indigenous workers and communities” and “show a commitment to reconciliation” (*Ibid.*). Altogether, these statements demonstrate that unions understand that have been past events of intense colonial oppression against Indigenous peoples and they desire to be a part of the processes of healing from those colonial traumas. In addition, they see a role for unions to build relationships of support, respect and trust between themselves and Indigenous communities.

Participants express that the role for unions in ‘reconciliation’, as defined by the TRC, has limited understanding and unions need to understand much more about the histories of Indigenous peoples before discussing processes of reconciliation. Some participants argue that the release of the TRC’s final reports and the popular attention to it was a ‘watershed’ moment for unions because there was a broad change in societal attitudes towards Indigenous peoples which affected them too. As an Indigenous participant, Pam, explains:

I think the residential schools stuff came out and people were just in shock. I think we all were. They wanted information but they knew there was nothing they could do about it.

But they felt angry. They felt, how come we were never told this story?

Pam points out how the TRC's final reports shocked most non-Indigenous people who did not know about the history of residential schools. She points out their anger with the Canadian government and the sense of helplessness because "there was nothing they could do about it". A non-Indigenous participant, Leela, expresses some of the difficulties in having discussions within her union about the TRC's final reports and figuring out what they should do in response to it. She explains that non-Indigenous people commonly say, "I had no idea that was the history". These experiences have prompted her to think that unions need to make much more effort to educate members about the histories of colonial oppression before deciding what should be done about their relationships with their Indigenous members and their communities. She remarks:

What we're seeing now is a real, deep sense of urgency to acknowledge Canada's history, and not just the knowledge, but really interact with it in a way that is truthful... I think that we really need a broader labour campaign. We really need to engage more with 'truth' *before* we talk about reconciliation. How do we engage, first and foremost, more with the component of truth before we can do the action, which is to reconcile these wrongs?... I think that we need focus because we really want to 'do'. We're 'do-ers'. The labour movement just wants to 'do'. We really want to get boots on the ground by getting out there and 'doing it'. I don't think that's the approach for this issue—it's like sit down and make yourself far more aware of the issues.

Her reflection suggests that unions need to understand much more about the histories of Indigenous peoples and their experiences before they rush to do a campaign about these issues. Her comment suggests that unions want to show solidarity and engage in critical moments, like the public reckoning with the histories of residential schools and the impacts of colonial

oppression on Indigenous peoples. Yet, she insists, “The labour movement just wants to ‘do’”, so she warns that unions have not thought about how they should respond to these issues in a meaningful way. Another participant, Priya, echoes the sentiment that her union has not clarified their understanding and response to the TRC Final reports, as she explains:

My union does a land acknowledgement that specifically meant mentions our commitment to ‘truth and reconciliation’. ‘Truth and reconciliation’ is the focus I would say... It’s also contested but they don’t deal with that.

She also raises the problem that unions have not thought about how they should respond to these issues in a meaningful way, and she even points to known disagreements about the popular discourses of ‘truth and reconciliation’, yet union leaders have decided to go ahead with supporting it anyway.

Other participants express frustration with ongoing forms of colonial oppression that are not being addressed by the discourses of ‘reconciliation’ because they do not argue that the Canadian state is committing ongoing acts of settler-colonial dispossession and colonial oppression. As an Indigenous participant, Jennifer, says: “The government doesn’t listen—they want what they want. The agenda has always been to take land from Indigenous peoples... And you know what I was told? No reconciliation when you’re under siege”. For Jennifer, the Canadian state is not truly engaging with Indigenous peoples because they continue to take their lands as part of their continuous drive for settler-colonial power. Therefore, the idea of ‘reconciliation’ is fraudulent when Indigenous peoples must keep enduring ongoing forms of dispossession and colonial oppression. Leanne also comments on her frustration with popular discourses of ‘reconciliation’. She reflects:

In Canada, we look at the pipeline fights, the fracking fights in the east, here in Ontario where they want to develop the Ring of Fire.... Every step forward we take, Canada reverts two back. They're like OK you guys got to this point—fuck off now. This is one of the reasons why I've always believed 'reconciliation' is premature in this country. Canada is not ready to face not only the residential school system, but the realities of its ongoing colonization, and the massive land theft that has happened... Canada has not lived up to its promises. So, this is part and parcel of why I consider Canada as an ongoing settler colonial project. The more we can educate people around that issue, the better—and unions are actually very useful!

Similar to Jennifer, Leanne points out the many ongoing attempts of Canadian governments to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their lands and exploit them for extractive projects. She refers to the state's support of extractive projects on Indigenous peoples' lands (e.g. oil and gas development and mining). She argues that not the Canadian state has failed to address issues of "massive land theft" and the traumas of residential schools, but also, they do not wish to confront the "realities of...ongoing colonization". Thus, she argues that "'reconciliation' is premature". When it comes to how unions can understand and involve themselves in these issues, she suggests that they should educate their members (and potentially broader communities) about the realities of ongoing manifestations of settler-colonial oppression, and therefore, she does not appear to support union campaigns about 'reconciliation'. Jennifer and Leanne's criticism mirrors Coulthard's critique that the Canadian state's implementation of 'reconciliation' operates at the level of affirmative recognition, and it acts as a way for them to relegate settler-colonialism to the past, rather than implement structural changes that would rectify ongoing colonial harm. In this way, the state refuses to concede their power (Coulthard, 2016).

Overall, participants describe their experiences with union campaigns which indicates how their unions are trying to express their solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns, and where they are limited because they are not thinking about meaningful engagement with issues impacting Indigenous peoples. As one participant remarks, it has taken a long time for unions to even show solidarity with Indigenous peoples at all because their jobs are complicit in the destruction of Indigenous peoples' lands. Now unions are embarking on campaigns to express solidarity with issues impacting Indigenous peoples' livelihoods, and a few unions are supporting important work 'behind the scenes' for grassroots actions led by Indigenous communities. Some participants say they appreciate these union campaigns because they center Indigenous peoples' lived experiences, while others argue that there have been missed opportunities to create stronger alliances against the Canadian federal government, and these campaigns (which mostly lobby governments) are limited in their ability to address root problems of colonial oppression. A great number of unions have recently conducted specific campaigns about their support for 'truth and reconciliation' in response to the TRC's final reports about residential schools. They express a desire to be a part of the processes of healing from colonial traumas and some participants argue that the release of the final reports was a defining moment to make non-Indigenous people aware of these histories. However, other participants warn that unions are not thinking about how they should respond to these issues in a meaningful way and some Indigenous participants reject discourses of 'reconciliation' because the Canadian state does not want to concede their power. These reflections demonstrate that there are conflicted positions on how to engage in meaningful solidarity with Indigenous peoples and there needs to be reflection on union understandings of

settler-colonial power. However, as Leanne claims, unions could have a role in educating their members about the ongoing realities of settler-colonialism.

5.4 Organizing breakthrough: OPSEU's Indigenous Mobilization Team

During my field work process, I wanted to know if there were any examples of unionists who have organized outreach to Indigenous communities and I unexpectedly came across two members and one staffperson in OPSEU who spoke highly of their participation in OPSEU's Indigenous Mobilization Team (IMT) formed in 2016 by rank-and-file Indigenous members who wanted to host events to discuss Indigenous peoples' concerns and develop their unions' relationships with Indigenous-led organizations. This section will focus on the activism of the IMT which sought to educate union members about the TRC Calls to Action, develop relationships between unions and First Nations band councils, advocate for the reform of public services through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, and confront harmful colonial discrimination in public services. Their activism demonstrates how unions are moving to support the interests of their Indigenous members to do advocacy about Indigenous people's concerns, but participants feel they have not committed to practices of long-term, meaningful solidarity.

Members of the IMT came up with the idea of the group after participating in OPSEU's first Indigenous Conference in 2016 to discuss the TRC's final reports and to express support for Indigenous peoples' concerns. IMT organizers said they formed their group so that they could push unionists to address Indigenous peoples' concerns as identified by the TRC. They received funding from OPSEU to travel to locals and nearby Indigenous communities to discuss the TRC's Calls to Action and Indigenous peoples' concerns identified in the report. In an interview

for *Our Times* magazine, IMT organizers explain that they wanted to educate OPSEU members about the TRC's Calls to Action in a union context (Keith, 2018). Kaboni explains (OPSEU, 2016):

I'd like to see within collective agreements that it's mandated for these organizations, agencies or government buildings, education, social services sectors, that they educate their members, staff, and managers... That they need to be more respectful, that they need to collaborate with Indigenous peoples.

She refers to the TRC's Call to Action #57 which demands that all levels of government "provide education to public servants 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" (TRC, 2015, p. 7). Not only did IMT organizers want to educate OPSEU locals and Indigenous communities about this Call to Action, but they saw a political opening for unionists to express support for Indigenous peoples' concerns in other ways than simply writing letters in support of them. One organizer, Grace, remarks (emphasis added):

Unions have always said we support and endorse Indigenous peoples, we believe in their self-governance and their identity. So why not negotiate them in your contracts? Why wait for Justin Trudeau or any government in power to say, "Yes, we're going to implement this directive". Why wait for that? Because that may never come. The next government could wipe them clean... But if you negotiate them right into the collective agreements, what better way to support Indigenous peoples by implementing them that way? Unions say, "Oh yeah we support, we support". That's why I don't believe in letters of support. *Show me* your support.

Therefore, instead of waiting on government and public sector employers to take initiative to educate workers about the histories of Indigenous peoples, she believes that unionists should demand it via collective bargaining. Her comment suggests that unions are only showing solidarity with Indigenous peoples on a very superficial level because they have not yet negotiated collective agreement language to implement initiatives like the TRC's Call to Action #57. She explains that public sector unions like OPSEU are ideal to act on this Call to Action because their members are frontline workers who work closely with Indigenous peoples in children's aid, in healthcare, education, social services, and so on.

In time IMT organizers realized that they wanted to broaden their activism to go beyond the TRC's Calls to Action. They decided to focus on building relationships between their union and Indigenous peoples, and to ensure that they "put a cultural lens on organizing with First Nations communities", in Jock's words (Keith, 2018, p. 23). IMT organizers and OPSEU staff supporters argue that part of their goal to unite their unions and Indigenous communities in their advocacy was to do outreach in ways unions have not done before. A non-Indigenous staff person, Ed, whose work involved supporting the IMT, explains how they thought about developing labour-community alliances with Indigenous communities. He remarks,

How do we work to build community partnerships, in this particular case, with Indigenous communities? We're going to go to the chiefs and to the elders in the communities. We're not going to go find university activists—that's the easy route. And we're going to get into the messiness of representation of traditional leadership and those elected under the *Indian Act*. It's messy but we had the right people.

IMT organizers did not speak more about the relationships between state-sanctioned band

councils and traditional forms of governance, yet Ed shows how the IMT was willing to navigate the complexity of these situations. In time, they decided to pursue more ‘formal’ agreements with band councils to support broad goals related to the TRC, Indigenous peoples’ self-determination, and targeted hiring of Indigenous workers. For instance, they made a public written agreement in July 2017 with Chief R. Stacey LaForme of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation (MNCFN) to declare a “Labour-First Nations Relationship”, the first of its kind in Ontario (OPSEU, 2017c, p.1).



Figure 4. Members of the Indigenous Mobilization Team, OPSEU and MNCFN upon signing the “Labour-First Nations Relationship” agreement (OPSEU, 2017c).

The agreement is very direct in stating that “OPSEU wishes to rectify harms to First Nations caused by colonialism” (*Ibid.*, p. 3), although the agreement *specifically* calls on OPSEU and

MNCFN to “collaborat[e] on a truth and reconciliation strategy” (*Ibid.*) via supporting the implementation of the TRC’s Calls to Action. The agreement also lists goals for OPSEU in the context of employment issues, such as continuing to offer two courses about Indigenous peoples’ histories to all union members, and for OPSEU and MNCFN to promote employment equity and targeted hiring of Indigenous workers in their collective agreements. Another part of the agreement was to declare an understanding with the MNCFN that OPSEU could organize unionizing drives for workplaces on the reserve without opposition from the MNCFN band council. As Ashley explains: “The agreement says OPSEU can come and organize on their reserve and they’re not going to push back on us. They said that they would agree to it, but they had terms obviously. It’s like we want to come in and help, but we don’t want to take over”. In addition to their alliance with MNCFN, participants said that the IMT formed an agreement with the Chiefs of Ontario, a coordinating body for 133 First Nations, to “build partnerships based on common ground to establish and/or retain public services under threat of privatization” (*Ibid.*, p. 2) as OPSEU focuses heavily on defending public services against privatization by governments. Participants did not speak to whether the IMT or other OPSEU members achieved their goals in these agreements, but IMT organizers told me that they went a long way to develop relationships between their union and band councils. IMT organizers like Jennifer said that the group also enabled her opportunities to educate unionists and First Nations communities on broader issues facing Indigenous peoples, such as the need to protect their water from privatization and corporate monopolization. They held events, such as their *Water is Life* symposium in March 2017, to bring together elders from Indigenous communities under water advisories, water protectors in the Toronto region, and Indigenous activists to address the impact of privatization on potable water systems. She insists that organizing these events was

empowering for her and began to establish a sense of community between herself, her union members, and First Nations communities. As Jennifer elaborates,

I got to use my activism and creativity and have events that I know financially I didn't have the resources for. Once people came to the events, they really liked them... We were building a community, we were able to host events and symposiums and able to get resources to do it... We had events on First Nations.

Thus, overall, IMT organizers saw their activism as very novel because unions have not reached out in these ways, and they enjoyed their relationship-building with First Nations band councils and their communities.

Russ Jock, a former organizer of the IMT, says he used the project to try to reform the ways Indigenous peoples are treated in public services. Jock, who works as a probation and parole officer in Cornwall, ON, has used his employment to change the way they are treated in criminal courts (Keith, 2018). The Supreme Court of Canada made the Gladue decision in 1999 which instructed criminal courts to “ensure that charges against Indigenous individuals are heard in a way that would give sufficient consideration to the unique circumstances of Indigenous accused and offenders in a culturally appropriate environment” (Department of Justice, 2018, para. 4). Jock claims that the courts did not know how to implement the principles in this decision. Therefore, in his job he interpreted the Gladue decision on his own and began to write pre-sentence court reports prepared for judges where he included background information of Indigenous offenders and recommendations for alternative sentencing with options for Indigenous healing practices. After doing these reports many times, he was asked to train other officers across Ontario, and he developed a writing manual to assist new probation officers to

apply the Gladue principles. Then, with the support and resources of the IMT, Jock brought together representatives from a local justice department, judges, and crown attorneys, to discuss and decide upon bail hearing processes and forms of alternative sentencing for Indigenous peoples based on the Gladue principles. In a magazine interview, Jock remarks on the IMT's work on criminal courts (Keith, 2018, p. 23):

We feel it wasn't really a job. It was a real passion for us, very personal to us, because we're talking to people in our own communities and really sharing, trying to bring those people and resources as part of the journey, so it became very personal and spiritual.

Very rewarding. It's probably the most rewarding job I've ever been a part of.

Jock reveals the potential for Indigenous unionists to use their unique positionality as workers in the criminal justice system, and as unionists, to ignite discussions about reforming the ways Indigenous peoples are treated in the public sector. Though he argues that reforming the criminal justice system informed by Indigenous peoples' perspectives would not only require changes in accordance with the Gladue principles, but there needs to be much broader reform, such as developing restorative justice-based alternatives to incarceration (*Ibid.*).⁹⁵ But he insists that what the IMT organizers began is a very good start to bringing awareness to the changes needed in the criminal justice system and it was a meaningful "personal and spiritual" experience for him.

In addition to the IMT's focus on trying to reform the ways Indigenous peoples are treated in criminal courts, they analyzed harmful practices against Indigenous peoples in other public services, like children's aid. In 2017, the IMT partnered with the National Indigenous Survivors

⁹⁵ I also note that what is considered to be 'just' in the criminal justice system may vary greatly.

of Child Welfare Network to create a video about the Sixties Scoop, called *Coming Home: Sixties Scoop Survivors Reclaim Their Culture*, which exposes past and present-day colonial discrimination in children's aid.^{96 97} They brought together Sixties Scoop survivors and frontline children's aid workers who are OPSEU members for a sharing circle to listen to "the experiences of survivors and the pain caused by the child welfare system" (OPSEU, 2017a). They also discuss the importance of the *Brown v. Canada* class action lawsuit filed in 2009 by Marcia Brown Martel of Beaverhouse First Nation, which claims that the federal government failed to prevent Indigenous children from losing their cultural identities (OPSEU, 2017a). The video features Sixties Scoop survivors who explain how they were forcibly taken from their families and placed with non-Indigenous families. "It was a direct attempt to take the Indian out of the Indian", one survivor says. The survivors explain how the colonial practices of children's aid, and frequent psychological and physical abuse they faced in foster care, led them to develop intense feelings of isolation, anxiety, and pain, which still affects them in their daily lives. The video's text explains that the federal government's Sixties Scoop policy "demanded the workers to simply do their jobs without cultural sensitivity and without questioning the impact of their decision on the lives of others" (*Ibid.*). Thus, the video strongly argues that the children's aid system was designed in a way that was discriminatory against Indigenous families and

⁹⁶ The Sixties Scoop refers to the systemic removal of more than 16,000 Indigenous children from their families without their consent and their adoption into non-Indigenous foster families in the mid-1960s to 80s. After the federal government began phasing out mandatory residential school education and amended the Indian Act to give provinces jurisdiction over Indigenous child welfare, provincial governments moved to apprehend Indigenous children on reserves (Sinclair, 2007). Critics claim that these governments intended to forcibly assimilate them into white, Euro-Canadian society. Some children were also sent to foster families abroad. The process left the affected children with intense feelings of trauma and emotional and spiritual loss and there are reports of overt racism, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse in foster homes. (*Ibid.*).

⁹⁷ The National Indigenous Survivors of Child Welfare Network formed in 2014 and describe themselves as "a local group of Indigenous adoptees that recognized the need to create a forum for adoptees and those that experienced foster care due to forced child welfare removal policy practices during the era known as Sixties Scoop" (OPSEU, 2017d, par. 8).

discouraged workers from thinking about how the apprehension of Indigenous children would impact them and their families. As one current children's aid worker and OPSEU member, Marika Sylvain, put it succinctly, "That era and that trauma was something our sector was directly involved in creating and keeping going for those twenty years". In this way, Sylvain recognizes the direct impact of her labour as a children's aid worker in actively inflicting colonial trauma upon Indigenous families.

Later in the video, there are interviews of several current OPSEU members who reflect on the harm of their work practices on Indigenous children, and they explain why they feel there needs to be change in children's aid. Other children's aid workers reveal how they have only recently realized their complicity in harm against Indigenous children after becoming much older and being educated about the Sixties Scoop. One former worker, Theresa O'Connor, thoughtfully explains (*Ibid.*, emphasis added),

I have difficulty at my age remembering people's names... But the name of the child that I apprehended the very first time, and the name of that mother, I remember. And it lives with me every day... Many of those children still live in my heart. I carry with me the choices and decisions I had to make as a result of my role as a children's aid worker. And one of the things I learned when I had children of my own is that I knew nothing in those days when I walked into and judged people and tried to help people—or *thought* I was helping people.

O'Connor's story expresses the emotional pain not only experienced by the children she apprehended (and the trauma she inflicted on that families), but also the pain she experienced as a non-Indigenous worker who carried out the apprehensions. These workers believed that they

were “helping people” by providing child protection services, though they uncritically supported a ‘common sense’ idea that Indigenous families could not properly care for their children, and they should be taken into the foster system. O’Connor’s experience demonstrates that these moments of colonial trauma also have an emotional impact on workers involved too. Although these unionists did not name how their work is directly complicit in colonial state power, it is clear they are grappling with the problematic nature of their employment. As Sylvain argues,

As a child welfare worker you carry with you a lot of power, but it doesn’t become real for you until you realize how that can be misused. I think when we educate workers effectively about the Sixties Scoop... It reminds you to be different and to do different work (*Ibid.*).



Figure 5. A former CAS worker shares her story in OPSEU’s video *Coming Home: Sixties Scoop Survivors Reclaim Their Culture* (OPSEU, 2017a).

She explains that only upon education about the Sixties Scoop and by hearing direct testimonies from the survivors impacted did she realize the problematic discrimination of the children's aid system. Furthermore, multiple workers come to realize that there is still *ongoing* colonial oppression of Indigenous families because "Children are being removed from their homes. They're not having the supports that they need", and they continue to be overrepresented in foster homes with non-Indigenous families (*Ibid.*). The video does not identify specific policies or reforms within children's aid that they think need to be changed, though it is a critical intervention to reflect on the colonial trauma in which workers in the Sixties Scoop were complicit, and it signals a willingness to evaluate and potentially reform the children's welfare system. Yet, as one participant, Ed, comments, confronting all workers about their complicity in the problematic practices in children's aid is not an easy process. Although OPSEU had some members volunteer to appear in this video, other rank-and-file members and union leaders did not want to participate in the video or to support the IMT at all. As Ed explains:

Some of the CAS workers were pretty hostile to some of the things we were doing because they thought they were being blamed as child welfare workers. We had some OPSEU members who supported us, but we never could get the division leaders to support us. I guess if we did it again, we would take the time.

Ed's comment demonstrates the constraints that these unionists are in—they believe that their employment is caring and they rely on their jobs for their livelihoods, so they do not want to discuss how their work is harmful to Indigenous peoples. It also shows that without a clear analysis of the structures of settler-colonial power, which has put these workers in the position to apprehend Indigenous children, they feel that they are being blamed for the problematic colonial oppression of Indigenous families.

In 2018 the IMT experienced an abrupt cancellation by union leaders, and it left IMT organizers with doubt toward their union's practices of solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Their funding concluded as the OPSEU executive decided to cancel the project just over a year after it began. The ending of the IMT left bitter feelings for participants, as Jennifer remarks:

There was politics happening like in any organization. There was jealousy for sure...

Because sometimes I would hear comments from other members, why did they get to do that? I understand that from someone who's not educated in Indigenous issues. This is something we always say, whenever we get ahead a little bit, people get mad and they want to stop us.

Jennifer describes tensions with non-Indigenous union members over funding for community activist projects like IMT. The cancellation of the IMT was very hard on her and her co-organizers because the OPSEU executive did not provide an explanation of their decision to IMT organizers. When I asked IMT organizers how they learned of the OPSEU executive's decision, Grace explains:

We didn't even have a meeting. We didn't have any information. It was very discouraging... They should've sat and had a meeting with us. They didn't have the respect to tell us that it's done. I think they have to learn how to relate with Indigenous peoples.

Grace's story is incredibly disheartening and disappointing because it shows a lack of commitment of non-Indigenous union leaders to support their Indigenous members. IMT organizers explain how they made a very thoughtful approach to building relationships with their

union, First Nations band councils, and Indigenous communities, so the OPSEU executive's decision to end the IMT demonstrates that they do not support this relationship-building.

Ed, a non-Indigenous staffperson whose work involved supporting the IMT, also commented on the lack of any discussion amongst OPSEU staff like himself. He reflects,

That was very, very painful moment because none of us were advised—including myself—in advance... What we were doing was going really well... [The union president] admitted that he probably listened to the wrong people. He was hearing people saying things and there was backlash about what we were doing from some non-Indigenous white people. [A chief] said “You had a good thing going... If you were having problems dealing with backlash and racist white people, why didn't you come to me? Don't you think we have a lot of experience dealing with this?

Ed's comments demonstrate that the decision of union leaders to cancel the project undermined their solidarity with IMT organizers and also the First Nations band councils and Indigenous communities they worked with, such as the MNCFN band council. While he mentions support offered from a band council chief, he insists of a need to deal with internal tensions within his union to better support Indigenous peoples' concerns and to engage in meaningful acts of solidarity. He explains:

We're all activists. We're all very driven. We took every opportunity we had. But we didn't spend enough time internally in the union... I'm not sure if we did it the right way because we were so strong willed... We should've explained more about accountability to Indigenous communities.

The quick ending to the IMT also gave its organizers the impression that the union leadership would like to go back to focusing on other priorities that are more important than Indigenous issues. Jennifer theorizes that when the media attention about the TRC and the idea of ‘truth and reconciliation’ began to die down a couple years after the TRC’s final reports in 2015 then OPSEU leaders lost interest in the IMT. She explains (emphasis added):

That’s why the IMT was hopeful at one point—because it seemed like we got the ear, and we did. But you don’t drop something because you think it’s not popular anymore. When you make a commitment to Indigenous issues, *you got to make a commitment for the long haul...* I was an Idle No More activist so I would go and speak to different unions who invited me to talk. The desire in unions is there but the whole process can be tedious about how things are worked out... So that's one of my concerns to say to unions is how committed are you when it comes to Indigenous issues? Like we can always stand up and speak and talk to you, but you know, we need you to go further.

Jennifer points out how union leaders in OPSEU were caught in the height of public attention on ‘truth of reconciliation’ and that is a part of why she thinks they supported funding for the IMT, like it was the “flavour of the moment”, in her words. But she insists that union leaders must look beyond the short-term ‘hype’ of these moments and commit to long-term relationships with their Indigenous members and Indigenous communities. She expresses appreciation of being invited to speak with unions in the past about Indigenous-led movements like Idle No More, though she clearly does not see the genuine, long-term commitment from union leaders to show meaningful solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Ed echoes some of her concerns, as he explains:

What unions need to do is they got to think beyond the election cycles. If we’re going to work with Indigenous communities, we have to build relationships that are sustainable,

that are long term. It took us hundreds of years to get to this mess. We can't sound like Justin Trudeau and just say pretty words... You really have to build a relationship and walk with the community.

Like Jennifer, Ed places emphasis on building sustained, long-term relationships with their Indigenous members and Indigenous communities, so he is frustrated with his union leaders' lack of commitment to this vision. He believes that union leaders are distracted with their politics, such as union elections, and they need to reflect on how to genuinely express solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

Despite the abrupt end of the IMT that was outside of the organizers' control, the group demonstrated that unions could go much further in their relationship-building with Indigenous groups, as led by Indigenous unionists. Although they initially envisioned using the IMT to educate union locals of the TRC's Calls to Action, they branched out beyond that goal to develop agreements with First Nations band councils on diverse goals related to the TRC's Calls to Action, employment equity, and privatization. IMT organizers explained that they tried to try to reform the ways Indigenous peoples are treated in the public sector, such as advocating for reforms in the criminal justice system informed by Indigenous peoples' perspectives. Their activism grappled with workers' complicity in the harmful employment practices against Indigenous families, as evident in their video featuring Sixties Scoop survivors and children's aid workers. Participants explain that the IMT's projects were meaningful to them because they were able to connect with other unions and First Nations band councils. Yet, the way that the OPSEU executive ended the project, without open deliberation with IMT organizers, signaled to them that they are not committed to supporting the activism of their Indigenous members and they are

caught in the ‘hype’ of popular discourses, like the attention to ‘truth and reconciliation’.

Participants express the need for union leaders to genuinely engage with their Indigenous members on a sustained basis and make a long-term commitment to supporting their concerns and activism.

Although it was temporary, OPSEU leaders’ support for the IMT demonstrated a move toward expressing solidarity with Indigenous peoples’ concerns. However, it is critical to note that the IMT’s project was limited in its ability to make the changes they wanted. For instance, as unionists and workers in public services, they brought attention to the need to reform these services through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples, though they cannot end ongoing forms of colonial discrimination themselves because they do not control the delivery of public services. As workers they can advocate for change and call for workplace action to try to put pressure on public sector governments to enact reforms in public services. I note that there are many remaining questions I have about the IMT’s project, such as how they planned to navigate the relationships between state-sanctioned band councils and traditional forms of governance and how they might have envisioned building relationships between OPSEU and community members of First Nations (since they only spoke of making ‘Labour-First Nations partnerships’ with First Nations chiefs).

5.5 Navigating capitalist production and Indigenous self-determination

A few participants from private sector unions with members in construction, oil and gas extraction, and related industries, raised concern about how unions navigate the complexity of Indigenous peoples’ relationships with land, self-determination, and capitalist production where

unionists rely on jobs. Indigenous participants reveal how their distinct relationships with land and struggles for self-determination come into conflict with colonial-capitalist production. These situations demonstrate how unions are either absent to support Indigenous communities, or they are otherwise very limited in expressing solidarity with Indigenous communities within the confines of settler-colonial capitalist power.

An Indigenous participant, Thomas, explains how his unionized job at a plant making steel for the James Bay Project, a hydroelectric-power project developed on the east coast of James Bay in the 1970s, directly conflicted with his desire to express solidarity with the Cree and Inuit peoples affected by it. He describes his experience protesting at his steel plant:

I worked at a steel plant. As a worker there, we were building the James Bay Power Project buildings. And one day I came and I had a t-shirt that said, “*Save the people, Stop James Bay!*”... So, the plant manager came to me and he said, “Either take that shirt off, put a shirt over it, or go home”. I said, “Well, see ya. I’ll go home”. I felt strong enough that that was the wrong thing to do—to flood all that land and build a great big, huge power dam... Even though I lost my livelihood, I still protested it.

Thomas’s remarkable action exemplifies the direct conflicts between workers in resource development, extractive corporations, and Indigenous peoples’ prior and ongoing dispossession from their lands. It shows the predicament that some Indigenous workers find themselves in within today’s labour market: having been dispossessed from their traditional lands they have little choice but to turn to the paid labour market to support themselves. Yet, even while being in this position, as Thomas was, Indigenous workers like himself have opposed their complicity in extractive projects that destroys Indigenous peoples’ livelihoods. Thomas’s story also is a

powerful example of workplace resistance to support struggles for Indigenous self-determination, in this case, resistance to the James Bay Project. The way he shared his story to me, with excitement and enthusiasm, indicated that this act of workplace resistance was a proud and defining moment for himself. However, Thomas did not speak about any other workers at the steel plant, like other union members, being there to stand in solidarity with him—he was very much alone, and he decided to risk his income for it, as he says, “Even though I lost my livelihood, I still protested it”. Thomas’ story demonstrates that unions have been very absent in supporting Indigenous workers when they take action in the workplace to assert Indigenous self-determination and try to confront workers’ complicity in extractive projects.

Another Indigenous participant, Ellen, who works in a private sector union representing workers in industries ranging from manufacturing to forestry, also remarks on the complexity of Indigenous peoples’ relationships with land, self-determination, and the power of extractive corporations. She explains:

The oil industry is a tough one because we have oil workers. Even within Indigenous communities, people are split on it. So, everybody’s trying to find that balance of how do we work together, respect one another, and find the jobs. I think that’s something we all have in common... It’s really tough because [on one hand] you’re fighting for a better economy; you want a better way of life. On the other hand, you’re trying to find that balance of, how do we protect our way of living? For instance, in Manitoba, the hydro company moved in and ended up flooding out the First Nations in some of the northern communities, killing their fishing industry. For them, their way of life. Whether it was intentional or not, maybe it’s like one of those things, when a company goes well, what is

the benefit versus the loss? They've seen when a pipeline goes bad and contaminates their water. You're going to have damage for how many years... And then you've got the people that really want a better life—they want the jobs. But are the jobs going to be temporary? Long enough just to build the pipeline, and then nothing?

Ellen's reflection captures the fundamental conflicts for First Nations communities over resource extraction. In her example about hydro development, she describes factions of communities who "really want a better life" due to the damage of settler-colonial oppression and systemic economic marginalization, so they are in favour of having employment from resource development. Yet, these projects have had serious ecological consequences that have destroyed Indigenous modes of life and corporations do not care for the harm they have done. She suggests that it is difficult to assert Indigenous self-determination when confronted by these situations. She also expresses that having job access is important for non-Indigenous workers (and likely Indigenous workers too), though the short-term nature of contract jobs in the oil industry are not ideal for workers, and she alludes to the need to have a better economy with dignified, long-term job protection.

Thomas, who is also in a private sector union, explains that within his union there are tensions between those who support resource extraction for the employment benefits, and those who support Indigenous peoples fighting for self-determination. He explains, "We're the people who make the steel for that pipe and we're the people who places the pipe in the ground", so his union, USW, are very reliant on the array of jobs needed for pipeline construction. And yet, there is one faction of his union which supports pipeline projects for the sake of having jobs, and "one that says, you shouldn't be going across Indigenous lands without informed consent of the

people”. It shows where unions struggle with these internal tensions, and they have not yet figured out a path forward. However, LiUNA, a union with members whose jobs rely on constructing pipelines and infrastructure for other extractive projects claims to be in support of Indigenous peoples’ right to free, prior and informed consent, and they say they support stopping extractive projects when First Nations band councils are in opposition, even if that costs their members’ jobs (Hunter, 2017). Joseph Mancinelli, international vice president of LiUNA argues, “The bottom line is, we’re just going to have to accept that in certain situations, we’re not going to be successful in pushing projects forward” (*Ibid.*, para. 4). It remains to be seen if LiUNA will commit to this position in practice and if it will create tensions with other LiUNA members who may not support Mancinelli’s position.

While Indigenous communities grapple with tensions over whether or not to go forward with extractive projects, unions have been involved in negotiating work contracts with First Nations band councils to try to advocate for ‘sustainable’ development while generating jobs for Indigenous workers. For example, in February 2021, USW Local 1-1937 signed a memorandum of understanding with the Huu-ay-aht First Nations to gain rights to sustainably harvest timber in and around their lands on Vancouver Island (USW, 2021). Through the agreement, USW and the Huu-ay-aht First Nations will lobby together to the B.C. provincial government for Huumiis Ventures corporation (owned by the Huu-ay-aht First Nations and Western Forest Products Inc.) to acquire a tree farm licence for the area.⁹⁸ If they are awarded the licence, they plan to create over 50 long-term unionized jobs for Huu-ay-aht members and other workers of nearby reserves (*Ibid.*). It is an unprecedented agreement for a First Nations band council to partner with a union

⁹⁸ Western Forest Products Inc. (2022) is a lumber corporation based in Vancouver, B.C.

to advocate for Indigenous-led ‘sustainable’ resource development and unionized jobs for their own workers. This plan does not provide an alternative to capitalist production; however, they claim to be committed to Indigenous peoples’ economic self-sufficiency and exercise some degree of Indigenous self-determination. As Huu-ay-aht First Nations Chief Councillor Robert J. Dennis remarks of the agreement with USW: “[It] honours our sacred principles of hereditary chiefs and recognizes our treaty rights... Those are important reconciliation issues” (Watson, 2021, para. 12).

Yet, participants point to the need for unions to help find other alternatives to the problem of having First Nations communities rely on extractive projects for employment and to pursue ‘sustainable’ development in a way that is premised on an anti-colonial vision of Indigenous self-determination. Thomas alludes to the need of unions to partner with grassroots Indigenous-led organizations and environmental groups to work towards these goals. Some participants noted their unions’ partnerships with the BlueGreen Alliance, a non-government organization, and grassroots coalitions calling for a ‘Just Transition’, to promote a vision of ‘transitioning’ to renewable energy industries and an economy that is premised on Indigenous self-determination.⁹⁹ Indigenous-led grassroots organizations are also making small but impactful strides by starting up their own renewable energy projects. For instance, the Piitapan Solar Project, an 80-panel solar power station in Lubicon Cree territory, was established in 2015 in response to decades of detrimental ecological impact from the Albertan Tar Sands, which included a massive oil spill on their lands (Sacred Earth Solar, 2019). As organizer Melina

⁹⁹ There is little information about what groups within the Canadian labour movement are actively advocating for a ‘Just Transition’; however, the CLC announced their interest in lobbying for a “worker-centred *Just Transition Act* in 2022” (CLC, 2022, para. 6).

Laboucan-Massimo (2015, para. 7) explains: “Even in the heart of the tar sands we can build a different kind of economy with clean energy and green jobs without compromising our families and communities”. The Piitapan Solar Project falls into the vision of Lubicon Cree activists who argue for a vision of Indigenous self-determination without the dominance of extractive corporations and the Canadian state. Sacred Earth Solar, who operates the project, aims to empower other Indigenous activists asserting their right to self-determination, by donating solar panels to help them generate renewable energy. For instance, in 2018, they donated solar panels to the Tiny House Warriors from the Secwépemc Nation who powered tiny houses along the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain pipeline route that runs through their territory; ultimately aiming to resist oil and gas extraction that would harm their lands (Laboucan-Massimo, 2018). Although it is a small-scale action, it shows potential to create jobs in a renewable energy project premised on Indigenous self-determination. Unions have yet to publicly declare their interest and support in these kinds of projects.

Participant discussion about the multi-layered conflicts between extractive corporations, First Nations, and unions demonstrate that these situations are not easy to navigate. They describe how their support for Indigenous self-determination has come into conflict with their employment, such as Thomas’s experience working at a steel plant which conflicted with his support for struggles for Indigenous self-determination. Whereas he decided to oppose his complicity for extractive projects that have destroyed Indigenous peoples’ lands, his experience also illustrates that unions are commonly torn between supporting Indigenous movements for self-determination or supporting resource development projects that their members rely on. Other participants reveal tensions within First Nations grappling with decisions over whether to go

forward with extractive projects, revealing how their distinct relationships with land and struggles for self-determination come into conflict with colonial-capitalist production. Unions have been involved in thinking through some alternatives to these situations, as evident in USW and the Huu-ay-aht First Nations' agreement to lobby for 'sustainable' development while generating jobs for Indigenous workers. But, overall, these situations demonstrate how unions are otherwise very limited in expressing solidarity with Indigenous communities within the confines of settler-colonial capitalist power.

5.6 Challenges and opportunities to transforming practices of labour solidarity

Participants had varying thoughts about how their unions could move toward an anti-colonial perspective in the labour movement to transform their practices of solidarity with Indigenous members and their communities. I ask participants about their main challenges for Indigenous and non-Indigenous members to work together in their unions and what they would like their unions to do to act on issues related to Indigenous peoples' concerns and support for anti-colonial movements. Most participants point to several challenges around their realization that non-Indigenous unionists' have a low level of understanding Indigenous peoples' histories and the structures of settler-colonialism, and they struggle to navigate the complexity of Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination. As a result, participants suggest that there are fundamental issues of Indigenous self-determination that unions need to understand and contemplate to express their solidarity. Other participants point out opportunities for unions to join in a shared, solidaristic struggle with First Nations communities.

When I explained the concept of my study and asked participants about the main challenges for

Indigenous and non-Indigenous unionists to work together, one participant replied by interrogating my conception of unions ‘engaging’ with Indigenous peoples in meaningful ways.

The participant, Lucy, remarks:

What do you mean by engaging? Right now, there’s still not very much engaging... The push of racialized workers—there was a formation back in the mid ‘80s—The OFL began with an anti-racism campaign. There was always the presence of one or two Indigenous workers... My focus has been on Toronto and urban centres. [In] B.C. with the Woodworkers’ Union, there’s a larger presence of Indigenous workers who are unionized. And in northern Ontario there’s fewer. Without trying to generalize I think one of the key challenges has always been it comes down to the issue of numbers. For the labour movement, if you don’t have the numbers, you continue to be invisible. Even if we’re ‘*visible*’ in terms of our skin colour, they still render us invisible.

Here, Lucy reflects on the fact that it is much more difficult for Indigenous workers to have a strong presence in unions simply because there are fewer of them relative to non-Indigenous, white unionists. They “continue to be invisible” to union leaders; however, she does not argue that this is their fault. As a racialized woman she claims that most unionists like her are also rendered “invisible” by union leaders who are predominately white. Her point that Indigenous unionists make up a very small fraction of union membership is reflected in recent membership surveys by some unions. For instance, a CUPE national survey conducted in 2014 with responses from over 3,000 members found that only 3.4 per cent of them identified as an “Aboriginal” person (CUPE, 2015, p. 3). Thus, for Lucy, the fact that Indigenous workers are such a minority within unions means that their concerns and worldviews are marginalized, therefore, union

leaders are not influenced to act on their issues.

Participants explain that there is great potential for unions to educate their members about Indigenous peoples' histories, struggles for self-determination, and building meaningful, long-term relationships between unionists and Indigenous communities—in fact, some of this work is already happening, though there are challenges in this process. An Indigenous participant, Daniel, describes how he worked to create the first union education course in the early 2000s about these issues. He reflects on his experience developing a voluntary course for unionists called *Unionism on Turtle Island*:

I was one of the few Indigenous activists in the CLC. And so, I got questions periodically from people [about Indigenous peoples], I had some answers and some I didn't, so I had to do the research, and then I started to build a bank of knowledge. And then those questions became easier to answer. Then somebody asked me if I would write a course about Indigenous issues—so this is the birth of *Unionism on Turtle Island*. I worked with someone from the B.C. Government Employees Union... We sat down for a couple of weeks and put together a course. The beauty of it was that other unions, starting with the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, they took it on, and over the years its evolved.

Individual unions are taking it and adapted it to their regions or their members' interests.

So, it's taken on a life of its own.

Daniel's story shows that there has been a burgeoning interest on the part of non-Indigenous unionists to learn about the histories of Indigenous peoples, like him, and in time his course has “taken on a life of its own” because of its great reception by many unionists in the labour movement. As Suzanne Mills and Louise Clark (2009) describe it, the course “helps to dispel the

ahistoric basis of non-Indigenous racism towards Indigenous people by emphasizing the history of colonialism and links between this history and present-day Indigenous experiences” (*Ibid.*, p. 997). Thus, this course has potential to educate non-Indigenous unionists and bring them to better understand the history of settler-colonialism and the ongoing manifestations of settler colonial power, while also deconstructing non-Indigenous peoples’ racism targeted at Indigenous peoples. Other participants explain that they are implementing *Unionism on Turtle Island* on a mandatory basis to reach a wider audience. Pam and Paul, who discuss CUPE’s Steward Learning Series, explain how their union voted to make this program mandatory for steward certifications. Likewise, Amber explains that in her union’s collective agreement, it is mandatory for all new employees to attend a course which brings awareness to racism targeted at Indigenous peoples, as part of a representative workforce program in her healthcare authority. She remarks,

That has helped a lot with the racism in the workplace... It never wipes out all the traces of racism. Never does... I could be in my home community and the awareness about Indigenous peoples is no better than it was 30 years ago. But if I’m in my CUPE family, or my CUPE community, or speaking with people that are attending those conferences and stuff, then yes, they have more awareness and they’re more empathetic about the issues and what Aboriginal people face.

Amber notices a qualitative difference in the awareness of her colleagues who have participated in this union education, particularly with pushing back against anti-Indigenous racism in the workplace.

Amber also explains that her union division, CUPE Saskatchewan, has experimented with

different cultural experiences to learn about Indigenous peoples' histories. For instance, they have organized canoe trips down the Saskatchewan River to Batoche to learn the history of the Métis in present-day Saskatchewan. The group canoes down the Saskatchewan River to Batoche and they learn about Métis modes of life by engaging in traditions such as sweat lodges. She explains:

It's appreciated by both our non-Aboriginal members. Because that's their first time experiencing some of the culture and the tradition. It gives you the warm feeling. I get it all the time. Especially when I can help somebody else enjoy those things and learn about those things. And when they come to you and say, "I appreciated what you said" or "I love listening to your story" or "I learned something that I didn't know before".

Amber suggests that by bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to learn about Indigenous peoples' histories and worldviews, they can better appreciate them and form a relationship of mutual understanding and solidarity. Altogether, participants explain that these courses and educational experiences help bring awareness of Indigenous peoples' concerns and worldviews to non-Indigenous unionists which is critical to transforming the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

While participants express how these educational experiences are transforming relationships within unions, others explain that educating non-Indigenous union members about the structures of settler-colonialism is daunting for them. Paul, who has also taught union courses about Indigenous peoples, replies:

I do presentations specifically to leadership and committees... Some of the most basic issues like "What's the difference between Métis, First Nations and Inuit? What's Status

and what's non-Status? What's the *Indian Act*? And I didn't realize just how low the literacy was on this with non-Indigenous people. CUPE was the first time I've ever worked in a non-Indigenous work environment. So, it was kind of shocking how little is known... This isn't ancient history. When I talk to CUPE members and explain that they really get it. It's encouraging. It's just a bit daunting, because it seems to have to do this almost on a one-to-one basis.

Paul is disappointed that non-Indigenous people he teaches have such little understanding of Indigenous people's histories and the structures of settler-colonial oppression, though he is motivated that CUPE members "really get it" when they discuss these issues. However, he expresses exasperation that this education requires teaching non-Indigenous people on a one-on-one basis. Adrian, an Indigenous participant, who also teaches similar courses in his union, PSAC, says that he wrestles with the struggle to teach non-Indigenous peoples about the all-encompassing nature of settler-colonialism. He explains,

This is the biggest and the hardest thing for people to understand. They say, "Well, you know what, you've been talking about this forever. You know, what's the solution?" Indigenous people have talked about this forever because nobody's ever done anything about it. So, it's kind of weird how you completely ignore these problems and then you blame the person who's complaining about them, who's feeling the ill effects of these issues... If you take over 100 years and break a people, because that's exactly what they were doing—they created laws, the school system, and the laws and policies that were specifically meant to stop the growth of our culture, our languages, our education, our social and family structures. Well, they succeeded, for the most part, over 100 years. You spend that time breaking a people, the pieces aren't going to put themselves back

together quickly, it's going to take a while.

Adrian expresses frustration that it is immensely difficult to try to educate non-Indigenous people about the complexities of settler-colonialism, especially when non-Indigenous people come with historic prejudices and misunderstandings. Jennifer, an Indigenous participant, echoes this frustration, as she argues (emphasis added):

There's racism in every union. But the people who have those rants towards Indigenous peoples don't understand that we are the most underfunded, and our rights are always denied and degraded. We are still the poorest on our lands, our resources are always taken off Indigenous lands and we're left with a destroyed environment... For an Indigenous person we face these issues *every day*. So, you gotta struggle with your union and your workplace to make people understand that. We always have to educate settlers—and I'm sorry—it's not that I don't want to, but they're not listening.

She suggests that racism derives from non-Indigenous peoples' lack of knowledge about issues of ongoing dispossession and colonial oppression, and she expresses irritation that some of them do not want to listen, and so they deliberately ignore these realities. Daniel describes his frustration too when he explains the tough challenge of interrupting historic prejudices against Indigenous peoples. He remarks:

One of the things that became apparent very early on is that successive federal governments have been able to do what they've done to Indigenous peoples because they can. Because most Canadians buy into all the myths and misconceptions surrounding the stereotypes.

Here, he describes the overwhelming power of the Canadian state and difficulty of confronting 'common sense' historic prejudices that non-Indigenous people uncritically, such as racist

mythologies that have existed for a long time. However, Adrian argues that trying to change people's minds also gives him some sense of satisfaction. He explains: "For me, I ask, why do you think that? Or, how do you know that? Or where did you read it? That's why I like doing that course". Adrian describes the patient work of interrupting people's 'common sense' ideas by taking the time to ask them questions. But of course, as Paul recognizes, these conversations which try to broaden non-Indigenous people's consciousness about settler-colonialism are "daunting" because it must be done on an individualized basis.

Participants point out that their unions' struggle to navigate the complexity of Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination impedes a clear position for unions on how to support anti-colonial actions, such as when Indigenous peoples defend their lands from colonial-capitalist development. In one example, Priya describes how her union, CUPE, declared support for the Wet'suwet'en land defenders' opposition to the Coastal GasLink pipeline construction on their lands in 2019. Yet, she explains how union leaders understood their actions against police and Canadian governments to be about a protest, rather than defending their land. She explains (emphasis added):

People kept insisting on calling it the right to protest. Me and some others were like, no but let's actually listen to what people are saying. They're saying that they're land defenders. This is *their* land. This is *their* home. It's very different from a protest. We have to understand that, and I don't think that people understood that.

She suggests that unions have yet to understand that the Wet'suwet'en were defending their lands which has deep meaning because it is about defending their modes of life, rather than simply protesting a pipeline. Whereas CUPE leaders understood their actions about being the

right to protest pipeline development and they deserved to be ‘meaningfully’ consulted about it, she understood it to be about the right to protect their lands and their being. Another non-Indigenous participant, Adam, comments on the magnitude of the challenges for unions to approach the complexity of Indigenous peoples’ struggles for self-determination (emphasis added):

[It’s] a fight against prejudice and it’s quite another to recognize that this is something bigger, this has to do with nations and national communities that should have sovereignty. What does that mean? How do you wrestle with that? I don’t know... Land is such a critical part of so much of this. How do you have intelligent conversations about this? There are people who say, “What does this matter?” Well, it *does* matter. Even if it concerns a tiny percentage of the population. Other than a question of social justice, it’s also about what kind of society you want.

Adam argues there is a massive challenge to broaden non-Indigenous unionists’ consciousness of Indigenous nationalisms and there is no clear way for them to navigate the issues pertaining to Indigenous peoples’ struggles for self-determination, including reclaiming their lands and self-determining political autonomy. He suggests that unionists need to think about these questions, but he is not sure how to overcome these challenges. Indeed, the experiences of Priya and Adam demonstrate that there are fundamental issues of Indigenous self-determination that unions need to understand and contemplate to express their solidarity.

While participants grapple with the challenges of understanding and navigating their support for Indigenous peoples’ struggles for self-determination, other participants explain where unions can strategically intervene to show support of Indigenous peoples, in this case, First Nations

communities. For example, Paul points to the need to support investment in public services for them along with resisting the potential privatization of public infrastructure on First Nations reserves. He criticizes the Conservative and Liberal federal governments for failing to adequately fund the development and operation of public infrastructure for First Nations reserves, and even worse, they have expanded privatization as a way to supposedly resolve the infrastructure crisis they created. He explains:

The problem is that the issues that caused the water crisis, and the water advisories, are repeated over and over again, in education, in housing, as well. During the Harper years, the Conservative government really opened it up to privatization, like any new infrastructure projects in a First Nation was going to be a P3 [i.e. public-private partnership]. When the Liberals took over, they didn't back away from it. I find it offensive that the only solution to these infrastructure issues in Indigenous communities, the only way they'll be solved from the Liberal-Conservative perspective is if somebody gets a profit off of it.

Paul describes how the Conservative's push for private sector investment to address public infrastructure issues comes in the context of cyclical failure by consecutive federal governments to fix the crisis. His observation is similar to what Shiri Pasternak calls "an indefinite limbo of permanent austerity" (2017, para. 14), or the chronic underfunding of federal transfers to band councils which barely covers the costs of basic public services, let alone keep up with population growth.¹⁰⁰ Instead of working with First Nations band councils and other Indigenous community

¹⁰⁰ Jean Chrétien's two per cent annual cap on federal transfer payments in 1997 is a clear example of the government's austere fiscal policy towards Indigenous peoples on reserves. Pasternak claims that such policies are "an object of colonialism" (2017, para. 10) designed to keep reserves economically disenfranchised, and in a very cruel way, their daily suffering continues to benefits state wealth by cutting federal expenditure deficits and depriving them of their rights to land.

organizations to permanently fix the infrastructure crisis in a way that advances Indigenous self-determination, the state has recently turned to the ‘free’ market to try to fill in the gap. As Paul remarks, their plan is to ensure the private sector profits from reserve development. He points to the introduction of public-private partnerships, which involve an unprecedented degree of private investment in the direct financing of public infrastructure (Loxley & Loxley, 2020).¹⁰¹ The advent of public-private partnerships on First Nations reserves could result in corporations profiting off reserve infrastructure on a long-term basis and it could also mean that corporations exploit Indigenous workers to operate water systems in very precarious working conditions. Paul says that his union, CUPE, is already raising awareness about the need to end long-term water advisories though they could also speak out about the working conditions of First Nations water-treatment operators and form a shared struggle against privatization. He argues that unions could work with First Nations communities to advocate against the federal government’s pursuit of public-private partnerships on reserves and support Indigenous peoples’ desire to decide upon, own, operate and maintain their own public infrastructure, with the federal monies necessary. It would be a great opportunity for public sector unions to join in a shared, solidaristic struggle with First Nations communities because these unions are fighting against the privatization of public utilities in their own communities too.

In summary, participants identified the many challenges and opportunities of moving unions toward an anti-colonial perspective in the labour movement to transform their practices of solidarity with Indigenous members and their communities. Most participants point to several

¹⁰¹ These arrangements guarantee long-term profits for corporations from government payments for financing, operating and maintaining infrastructure. Public-private partnerships can be incredibly harmful when they cut corners on the quality of service, legitimize cheap labour practices, and deteriorate working conditions across an entire sector. (Loxley & Loxley, 2020).

challenges around non-Indigenous unionists' unfamiliarity with Indigenous peoples' histories and worldviews, and their incomplete understanding of the structures of settler-colonialism. Several participants say that they are pursuing educational experiences to bring non-Indigenous unionists to better understand these issues, which is helping to defeat tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (such as deconstructing anti-Indigenous racism), and they believe these experiences help form relationships of mutual understanding and solidarity. However, other participants express frustration that doing this education because it is daunting to change the minds of so many non-Indigenous unionists, there are challenges to disrupting historic prejudices against Indigenous peoples, and there is even resistance from non-Indigenous people who choose to ignore the realities of settler-colonial oppression. Participants point out that their unions truly struggle to understand the complexity of Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination. These challenges impede a clear position for unions on how to support anti-colonial actions, such as when Indigenous peoples defend their lands. Yet, other participants suggest where unions can strategically intervene to show support of Indigenous peoples. According to Paul, for instance, there is an opportunity for unions to join in a shared, solidaristic struggle with First Nations communities against the privatization of their infrastructure.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has articulated examples of union engagement with Indigenous peoples' concerns and movements for self-determination, and in doing so, participants reveal where unions are moving to express labour solidarity with Indigenous members and communities, and where they face immense challenges due to their structural limitations. It is evident that many unions have evolved their understandings of colonial oppression and in the present day some unions

comprehend that settler-colonialism is an ongoing phenomenon. However, other unions have very limited understandings of settler-colonialism, deeming it to be an event of the past. These conflicting understandings are also seen in union campaigns and participant responses to them. While some participants suggest that these campaigns are useful for centering Indigenous peoples' lived experiences, others criticize their unions for responding to Indigenous peoples' issues in problematic ways. For example, some participants express that the popular discourses of 'reconciliation', which several unions backed in their campaigns, do not confront the realities of ongoing colonization.

This chapter looks at a unique case of union engagement with Indigenous peoples' concerns by analyzing the activism of OPSEU's Indigenous Mobilization Team (IMT). The IMT sought to develop relationships between unions, First Nations band councils, and other Indigenous communities on diverse issues, at times involving in the workplace (e.g. organizing on-reserve workers), but also beyond it (e.g. addressing the impact of privatization on potable water systems). Their initial backing by OPSEU leaders shows that they are providing space for Indigenous unionists to bring attention to their concerns and IMT organizers used their union resources to interrogate the ways Indigenous peoples are treated in public services. Their activism grappled with ongoing colonial harms against Indigenous families, as described in their video of children's aid workers who confronted their sector's complicity in harmful work practices. The IMT's work in this regard is a distinct example of where public sector unions can demand reform in public services through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples. Yet, the abrupt cancellation of the IMT signalled to IMT organizers that union leaders do not genuinely engage with their Indigenous members on a sustained basis, and they need to make a long-term

commitment to supporting their activism.

Additionally, this chapter outlines some of the challenges for unions in navigating the complexities of the relations between extractive corporations, First Nations communities, and unions. Most participants describe tensions within First Nations communities torn over whether to go forward with extractive projects, and unions are also caught between supporting resource development projects that their members rely on or supporting Indigenous communities who reject these projects. Unions have been active in some attempts to assert ‘sustainable’ development led by First Nations and which supports unionized jobs for Indigenous workers. They have also shown some interest in supporting visions of a ‘just transition’ based on Indigenous self-determination. As it stands now, however, unions are very limited in their ability to navigate these situations—ultimately, they do not have the power to provide systemic alternatives within the confines of settler-colonial capitalist power.

Participants identify the many challenges and opportunities of union engagement with Indigenous peoples’ concerns and movements for self-determination. Some participants are pursuing educational experiences for non-Indigenous unionists to learn about Indigenous peoples’ histories and worldviews, and they argue that these experiences are helping unionists to build relationships based on respect and mutual support. Yet, other participants express challenges in trying to educate all non-Indigenous unionists—it is an immense task to try to teach them on a one-on-one basis and transform their historic prejudices. One participant, Jennifer, says in her lived experience that some non-Indigenous people are simply not listening. Where unions are trying to practically show support for Indigenous peoples’ anti-colonial

actions, like defending their lands, participants point out that their unions have not laid out a way to navigate the complexity of Indigenous peoples' struggles for self-determination. These challenges impede a clear position for unions on how to express solidarity. Despite these concerns, however, participants identify some opportunities for unions to engage in solidaristic struggles with Indigenous peoples, such as joining First Nations communities in shared fights against the privatization of public infrastructure.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Discussion and implications of the findings

This study analyzes the spaces of trade union solidarity and engagement with Indigenous workers and their communities amongst the challenges presented by the reality of ongoing colonial oppression in Canada. I examine participants' experiences as it pertains to the workplace within unionized segments of the labour market. Participants describe their lived experiences in today's workplaces, why they engaged with unions and what they have done together, other union initiatives to support improvements to their Indigenous members' employment conditions, and where unions are falling short of understanding and supporting Indigenous peoples' working conditions. In addition, I analyze the ways unionists understand and approach Indigenous peoples' concerns beyond the workplace. Participants identify where unions are increasingly supporting Indigenous peoples' concerns and anti-colonial struggles, including through Indigenous unionists' own activism within unions, and they describe where unions are struggling to express labour solidarity. I conclude that unions are increasingly turning their attention to the needs of Indigenous members and showing solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns and their movements, but they are limited due to the structural limitations of settler-colonial capitalism.

Chapter 4 identifies what initiatives unions have taken on to show solidarity with their Indigenous members within the workplace and in their unions. Indigenous participants' experiences of labour precarity and union activism show that there have been some initiatives to support Indigenous workers' needs, though these efforts are often led by Indigenous unionists themselves. In many cases, unions are advancing important bargaining demands to meet the

distinct needs of Indigenous workers. Unions have negotiated agreements to push back against hiring discrimination, racism, occupational segregation, and other forms of discrimination. In some cases, unions have successfully negotiated employment equity and representative workforce plans which go further to aim for more hiring of Indigenous workers. Participants also suggest overall that the pursuit of Indigenous representative seats and caucuses within unions have enabled some platforms for Indigenous unionists to voice their lived experiences of colonial oppression, particularly to draw attention to the harsh daily experiences of anti-Indigenous racism and colonial oppression. Altogether, these initiatives show where unions are acting to engage in solidarity with their Indigenous members.

At the same time, participants express how much further their unions need to go to meet the needs of Indigenous unionists. Several Indigenous women workers express feeling alone in precarious jobs and I note that where they have unionized themselves and bargained for material improvements, they pushed for these initiatives on their own accord—they have not waited for union leaders to reach out to them to initiate that work. Other participants say that unions are not paying attention to situations in the labour market concerning Indigenous workers, such as where Indigenous workers are being poached as an ‘untapped’ pool of labour and ‘ghettoized’ into low wage jobs. They suggest that union leaders and staff need to be much more proactive in offering their support to these workers. Other participants say that unions are currently underutilizing their opportunities to conduct equity-seeking measures (i.e., pay equity studies, job evaluation, employment equity and representative workforce strategies) which would go further to hire more Indigenous workers and potentially make life-changing improvements for them. Participants observe the fear of unions to challenge limitations of the labour relations regime that would

enable them to unionize on-reserve workers. In addition, when it comes to providing platforms for Indigenous members to voice their concerns within their unions, some participants find that union leaders are listening to demands for equity-seeking representative seats and caucuses for Indigenous members, though others pointed out that the goal of creating these positions is very limited in scope. Ultimately, these situations suggest union structures are trying to meet the needs of Indigenous members, but they have a hard time fully meeting their needs because of their own structural limitations.

Chapter 5 explores where unions have approached engagement with Indigenous peoples beyond the workplace by looking at how they approach Indigenous peoples' concerns and anti-colonial struggles. Union declarations reveal that there are varying understandings of settler-colonialism. Since the 1960s, unions like CUPE have expressed a much more nuanced understanding of settler-colonialism and they have begun to show recognition that Indigenous peoples are fighting for self-determination, in forms of self-governance, economic self-sufficiency, and more. Now unions are embarking on campaigns largely to build political pressure on the Canadian federal government to enact the demands of diverse Indigenous organizations. The Indigenous Mobilization Team (IMT) in OPSEU embarked on a unique type of union activism—as Indigenous workers, they acted on their own concerns regarding a range of issues, from advocating to First Nations band councils to accept unionizing drives, to demanding reform in public services to end ongoing colonial harms. This chapter also explores where unions have been involved in approaching other issues that touch upon a broad range of Indigenous peoples' concerns, such as USW's agreement with the Huu-ay-aht First Nations for 'sustainable' development on their terms and to hire their own workers. Other unions are slowly trying to

navigate their approach to conflicts, such as showing solidarity for Indigenous land defenders who oppose colonial-capitalist development on their lands, and they are identifying opportunities for unions and First Nations communities to work together (e.g., to oppose privatization of First Nations' infrastructure).

For many participants, however, these actions do not go far enough in terms of meaningfully engaging in Indigenous peoples' concerns and movements for self-determination. Participants argue that unions struggle to understand the complexities of settler-colonialism as an ongoing structure and their varied understandings of settler-colonialism impedes the way they approach Indigenous peoples' issues. For example, although unions are increasingly paying attention to Indigenous peoples' concerns in reaction to the TRC's final reports in 2015, some participants express that the discourses of 'reconciliation' do not confront the realities of ongoing colonization. They suggest that the ongoing forms of dispossession and colonial oppression need to be overcome for genuine Indigenous self-determination to happen. Other participants, particularly in the IMT, express the need for union leaders to genuinely engage with their Indigenous members on a sustained basis and make a long-term commitment to supporting their concerns and activism. Altogether, participants identify the many immense challenges to unions to express solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns and anti-colonial movements due to these structural limitations.

These research findings implicate that unions are coming to support their Indigenous members and their communities largely because of the actions taken by Indigenous peoples themselves. Unions are reacting to Indigenous workers' demands for better employment and working

conditions to fight back against precarity and occupational segregation and to unionize more Indigenous workers—these objectives are a core part of what unions do. Even though Indigenous workers continue to be very marginalized within the capitalist labour market, they are increasingly becoming unionized, and they are organizing in their unions to better their working lives. When workers gather in unions, they not only discuss their working lives, but also how they are a part of broader collective identities—for many Indigenous peoples, it is critical to address the ongoing manifestations of settler-colonial power which deeply impacts their lives. They are raising this issue to their unions and in time unions have become more aware of Indigenous movements to land claims, political participation, and more. Although there are divergent perspectives about how to overcome settler colonial power and to achieve Indigenous self-determination, unions are now becoming more aware of the problem of settler-colonial power.

However, unions are still limited in their expressions of labour solidarity with Indigenous peoples' concerns and anti-colonial movements. As Gramsci insists, unions do not challenge the capitalist relations of production to fundamentally overcome workers' exploitation. I believe his argument also implies that they do not challenge forms of settler-colonial oppression premised on capitalist relations of production. Unions do not recognize that the systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples is part of a broader structure of colonial-capitalism, as theorists such as Lee Maracle, Howard Adams, and others explain. This means that they lack a critical understanding of the ways that colonial-capitalist structures not only affect Indigenous peoples but also themselves as part of an exploited class. They also do not have the means to fundamentally change these structures unless they decide to devise a working class strategy to try to overcome

them. Yet, this does not mean that unionists cannot do what Gramsci calls, “the spiritual and material preparatory work” (2000, p. 93) required for the working class to fight against colonial-capitalist structures. Unions are critical spaces because the material and ideological struggles that workers participate in has the potential to transform their theoretical ideas. I believe that they can still move towards an anti-colonial perspective to express labour solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

Based on my reflection of the participant interviews, I outline several issues unions should prioritize and which helps contribute to an anti-colonial framework for the labour movement:

Recommendations to strengthen practices of solidarity with Indigenous trade unionists and their communities

- Teach unionists about the structures of settler-colonialism and capitalism in Canada. Host critical discussions at union conventions and membership meetings to teach how settler-colonialism *continues* to shape the lives of Indigenous peoples, and why unions need to show solidarity with Indigenous peoples who are organizing anti-colonial struggles for self-determination. While there are currently some opportunities in many unions to learn about Indigenous peoples’ concerns (e.g., information on the *Indian Act*, historic forms of colonial oppression, etc.) there could be radical education about anti-capitalist and anti-colonial theory and organizing. In addition, there should be greater attempts to have the full breadth of the union leadership and rank-and-file involved in this education since few members of unions currently participate in educational opportunities.

- Lead anti-privatization campaigns and efforts to overhaul public service delivery in ways that are informed by Indigenous peoples' perspectives. Public sector unions should work to advise First Nations communities of new threats of privatization and act alongside community members who are looking for resources and collaborative act to oppose privatization projects targeted at them. Public sector unions should also advocate for the nationalization of core public services such as hydroelectricity (and other forms of energy), transportation, banking, internet, and telecom services, etc., informed by Indigenous communities who have been historically excluded from equitable access to these services and whose lands have been damaged from building infrastructure for some of them. Unions should call for free and equitable access to all public services for everyone and pressure the Canadian government to immediately close gaps in public services between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.
- Ensure some Indigenous members have opportunities to join bargaining committees and they can put forth bargaining proposals to meet their distinct needs in the workplace and beyond work. These decisions should be made through democratic decision-making processes with Indigenous rank-and-file workers to maximize their participation (rather than limiting their participation to bargaining surveys and votes for strike mandates and agreement ratification).
- At a minimum, ensure all bargaining units are working toward employment equity and representative workforce strategy plans which would aim to increase the employment of Indigenous peoples in all areas of the workplace. These plans could also reflect and respond to the weight of ongoing colonial trauma which impacts access to education, job training, and hiring, promotions, and more, for Indigenous peoples.

- Embark on pilot projects to map out and organize Indigenous workers delivering services that are specifically targeted for Indigenous peoples on reserves and off reserves (e.g., public services and administration).¹⁰² Develop these projects in consultation with Indigenous staff and members. As the OPSEU Indigenous Mobilization Team had done, actively reach out to First Nations to teach them about what unions do and ask how they can help in meaningful ways.
- Support calls for solidarity by joining Indigenous land defenders aiming to protect their lands as a means of reclaiming their lands and self-determining political autonomy. In addition, use these opportunities to learn the histories of treaty agreements between Indigenous and settler peoples and with the land. Private sector unions should host critical discussions with Indigenous-led organizations struggling against carbon-intensive resource extraction on their lands—in situations where these workers who rely on these jobs are pitted against Indigenous land defenders, they should both explore actions to call for a ‘Just Transition’ (e.g. conduct work stoppages, strikes, stronger community campaigns, etc.).

I believe the above recommendations are ones I think that unions can feasibly work on and think about in the coming years.

¹⁰² Examples of where unions have unionized services for Indigenous peoples off reserves include Friendship Centres, the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, and the Fort Qu’Appelle Indian Hospital (Moran, 2006).

6.2 Contributions of the research

This research weaves together the sparse literature regarding Indigenous peoples' paid labour and union participation and it contributes to a better understanding of Indigenous peoples' relationships to paid labour and unions, relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous working people, and the challenges for unions to build united struggles with Indigenous peoples. The field of Canadian labour history has neglected attention to Indigenous peoples' paid labour, so there is little understood about the historical roots of their labour exploitation. In fact, because Indigenous peoples make up a minority of the Canadian workforce, there is very little scholarly attention to their experiences in paid labour and in unions. I believe it is useful to pull together the literatures concerning the capitalist labour market shaped by land dispossession, the manifestations of settler-colonial oppression, and the systemic economic marginalization of Indigenous peoples, which has led to their current positionality in the labour market.

Aside from scholarly research by Suzanne Mills and Louise Clarke (2009), Mills and Tyler McCreary (2012), and non-academic research by Lynne Fernandez and Jim Silver of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (2018), there is a gap in existing literature which analyzes spaces of union engagement with Indigenous workers and their communities and looks at their relationships in the context of ongoing colonial and capitalist oppression in Canada. I believe my research makes a strong contribution to understanding the novel ways in which Indigenous unionists are active in their unions—from organizing in unions to overcome their precarity in the labour market, to bargaining for collective agreement language that meets their distinct needs as Indigenous peoples in the workplace, to calling for reforms in public services

through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples. These are all very novel examples of union activism by Indigenous workers that are rarely discussed in Canadian labour studies. My research is the first study on unionist activist collectives led by Indigenous peoples. There are no other studies to identify groups such as the Indigenous Mobilization Team. Their activist work is a very distinct example of where Indigenous unionists have tried to build relationships between their unions, First Nations, and other Indigenous communities, and where they have called for reform in public services through the perspectives of Indigenous peoples.

As most of my research participants were in southern Ontario, I believe my research study contributes greatly to the gap in the literature about Indigenous workers' activism and union engagement in this region. There is little understood about the trajectory of Indigenous peoples' experiences from their early positions in the paid labour market to the present day in this region, so my study contributes to the lack of attention to Indigenous peoples' labour precarity and what they are doing within their unions to fight for better wages, working conditions, and to build relationships between their unions and Indigenous communities in this region.

I believe my study provides some more understanding into what an anti-colonial framework for unions may look like, although I will admit that it needs even more thought. I agree with Mills and Clarke's argument that "successful engagement with Aboriginal peoples requires the adoption of an anti-colonial lens recognizing Aboriginal peoples' distinct relationships to territory" (Mills & Clarke, 2009, p. 992). Participants of my study reveal that some non-Indigenous unionists are beginning to understand Indigenous peoples' relationships to land and some participants understand that the Canadian state has, and continues to, dispossess Indigenous

peoples. These knowledges are very important to forming an anti-colonial perspective and to express solidarity with Indigenous peoples since their distinct relationships to land are a fundamental part of their modes of life. Although, generally, my study shows that unions have varied understandings of settler-colonialism due to several structural limitations. I think that future studies need to better articulate these structural limitations which complicate the ability of unions to adopt and act on an “anti-colonial lens”. I argue that it requires having an analysis of the structures of colonial-capitalism and to articulate the potential roles of unionists to try to overcome these systems.

6.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

My study was designed to be exploratory so I realize that there are many gaps in this research and I would like to offer ideas to explore further. First, I know my research study is a qualitative one and I do not wish to argue that the participants’ lived experiences and their perspectives are generalizable for all Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers throughout the Canadian labour movement—there is incredible diversity of unionists across the country. I believe that my participants provide a good diversity of perspectives in different unions; however, they are only a select sample of thousands of unionists in the labour movement. Conducting other methodologies, such as a large-scale survey with unionists to ask about their understandings of colonial oppression and challenges to building solidarity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, would be ideal to compare with the results of my study and build on them. Furthermore, there could be exploratory research in other areas of the labour movement (e.g. non-unionized workers’ organizations and informal groups).

Secondly, I acknowledge that many of my participants were, or are currently, members of public sector trade unions. Knowing that Indigenous workers are overrepresented in ‘unskilled’ and manual jobs in construction and resource-based sectors, it is crucial to assess union activities and political organizing in those private sectors. At the beginning of my research, I reached out to private sector unions who represent workers in construction to see if they have Indigenous and non-Indigenous members who would like to participate in my study, but I did not receive any declarations of interest from them to do so. I think this may have happened because they have a different approach to relationship building between labour organizations and First Nations. As opposed to having Indigenous caucuses and equity positions I have noticed that construction unions are involved in setting up work contracts for their Indigenous members. This may mean that they are supportive of extractive corporations and governments who are targeting Indigenous youth to labour in construction and mining trades. It would be interesting to speak with those unionists to see how these unions do outreach to them and if they see the potential to build relationships between their unions and communities. It would also be instructive to interview experienced Indigenous and non-Indigenous workers in these sectors to ask them about the politics of the labour movement and capitalist economic development in and around reserve areas. There could be valuable case studies about the relationship of unions to ongoing social and ecological controversies involving pipeline construction, mining and its environmental harms, and over extraction of natural resources, and so on, and union responses to Indigenous peoples’ claims to land and self-determination.

I note that while a few of my participants discussed the broad disparities between employment access in reserve and non-reserve areas, they can only provide a small glimpse into Indigenous

peoples' perspectives about their challenges in accessing employment in rural and remote reserves. Further research into employment access and union engagement (if any) in northern regions would help to discuss Indigenous peoples' employment in these areas (specifically in and around reserves) and determine how unions can respond effectively. Sparse research has been conducted to see where Indigenous workers have tried to form unions (or other labour organizations) in northern regions, let alone where Indigenous peoples access paid employment, and their experiences with non-Indigenous working class communities and employers. It would be ideal to deeply explore how Indigenous labour activists have historically been active in unions and workers' struggles while simultaneously leading anti-colonial political struggles. How have these activists perceived their identities as paid labourers fighting against labour exploitation, and as peoples seeking to defend Indigenous modes of life? What lessons can they offer to the non-Indigenous-dominated labour movement in terms of organizing grassroots acts of resistance, militancy, and anti-racist practices of solidarity?

I think archival research is needed to unveil all the earliest public declarations and statements by unions to express support for Indigenous peoples' anti-colonial movements. Any other documentation and correspondence between unions, other labour organizations, and Indigenous-led movements and actions in the 1960s (specifically during the Red Power era) would be very useful to analyze the transformation in unions' understandings of colonial oppression and their roles in supporting anti-colonial movements. There also needs to be archival research of unionists' understandings of and participation (if there have been any) in radical Indigenous movements for self-determination, from the Red Power movement, to historic, small-scale resistance actions, like Stoney Point Ojibway band's occupation of Ipperwash Provincial Park in

1995. Unfortunately, the participants in my study could not speak to union responses to these movements.

There are other immediate questions relating to union engagement and the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, including: How can unions better frame the issue of non-Indigenous peoples' positionality in settler-colonialism and show how non-Indigenous workers are impacted by it? How can Indigenous and non-Indigenous unionists work to address harm and the racist treatment of Indigenous peoples in all public and private services? How can union act now to overcome non-Indigenous workers' racism and address ideological opposition to Indigenous peoples' anti-colonial demands? And how can unions learn from the political strategies and tactics of anti-colonial movements—their victories and their limitations?

And there are broader questions relating to the need to overcome colonial-capitalist oppression, such as: In what ways can unions develop the consciousness and capacities of workers via existing opportunities to challenge the colonial-capitalist model? How can they educate their members about colonial and capitalist oppression—and how can they best involve members and non-members in this education? How can Indigenous and non-Indigenous socialists act upon the visions of theorists like Lee Maracle and Howard Adams to organize social pressure 'from below' to break through conservative leadership and fight for people's self-determination?

6.4 Concluding thoughts

Many participants express hope that unions can step up as stronger supporters with their Indigenous members and with anti-colonial struggles—the challenge is to determine the paths to

strengthening solidarity as much as possible. The strength of Indigenous unionists and Indigenous movements for self-determination has garnered the attention of unions to look within themselves to explore what they can do to support Indigenous members and their communities. There have been moments in the last decade alone that have impacted the collective consciousness of union activists. As my participants discussed, non-Indigenous unionists experienced shock learning about residential school abuse and genocide, which was a watershed moment in terms of raising awareness about colonial oppression. The TRC report challenged non-Indigenous peoples' 'common sense' ideas about Indigenous peoples in some way—it not only exposed the horrors of how state institutions treated Indigenous children and their families that were not well known to most non-Indigenous people, but it made some non-Indigenous people question why they did not know of these histories before the TRC report was summoned. Only a few years later, in 2021, the horrific revelations surrounding unmarked graves of Indigenous children at the sites of former residential schools was another wake-up call for non-Indigenous peoples. I know that moments like these, along with the rise of anti-colonial movements, are moving non-Indigenous workers in the labour movement to express their solidarity. While many of them haven't reached the conclusion that we need to fight the structures of settler-colonial-capitalist oppression, I have hope that they may be on their way there.

The labour movement itself is an educational process—it takes time to challenge 'common sense' ideas and learn that working class and oppressed people are stronger when they work together, rather than against one another. Not everyone can challenge their old prejudices, even when you patiently explain that, but it's worth it to try. I have hope in unions because many

labour activists have historically recognized that social oppression, like racial discrimination, has the effect of hurting labour solidarity—when a group of workers is divided based on racial tensions then they will be less effective in building their power against their employers and the ruling class. I think non-Indigenous union members are coming to realize the impacts of ongoing colonial oppression on Indigenous peoples, but they do not understand the totality of the systems we are fighting against. They need to realize that all working class and oppressed people live unfulfilled lives under these systems. All our livelihoods are exploited for profit. As one participant of my study, Priya, remarks, “we need a broad enough, strong enough, class-based resistance project”. We need to develop the consciousness of workers and all oppressed peoples to invigorate our power to fight for anti-colonial and anti-capitalist alternative modes of life. Getting there will not be easy but we have to be politically ambitious enough to form anti-colonial and anti-capitalist strategies.

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Appendix A: Interview questions

Introductory questions

Please share your story of how you began working in your current profession and when you first became involved in your union.

Why did you become active in your union and what issues have you worked on?

Questions regarding union engagement with Indigenous peoples

Does your union act on issues involving Indigenous peoples? What are some of the discussions or campaigns you've had, if any?

Do you know how many Indigenous members there are in your union, what workplaces they're in, and how they're involved in your union (for example, through a caucus or other spaces for Indigenous members, as elected representatives, etc..)

What are the main issues that Indigenous members speak about? Do you think your union prioritizes these issues?

Do you think the Canadian labour movement excludes Indigenous peoples?

Has your union participated in movements or events to support Indigenous peoples? If you have been involved in these movements or events, what did you learn? Were you satisfied with your union's participation, or do you wish that your union did things differently?

Questions regarding settler-colonial perspectives

Do you think that governments treat Indigenous peoples fairly? Why or why not?

Has your union been involved in conflicts with Indigenous communities having to do with issues such as land claims, oil/gas extraction, or development that a community did not consent to, etc.? How did your union respond to the conflict?

Has your union been involved with Indigenous employers and/or Indigenous workers on reserves?

Have you ever struggled to make your organization act upon Indigenous-related issues?

Have you observed racism toward Indigenous peoples in your workplace and/or union?

Do you think your union has done enough to challenge racism against Indigenous peoples? Have you seen non-Indigenous members change their minds about issues such as racism and myths about Indigenous peoples?

Questions regarding challenges to identifying and building an anti-colonial framework for unions to transform their practices of solidarity with Indigenous peoples

What are the main challenges for Indigenous and non-Indigenous members to work together in your union? What do you think that non-Indigenous people need to work on?

What would you like your organization do to act on Indigenous-related issues?

Do you think your union supports Indigenous peoples out of charity (e.g. giving donations)?

Do you think Indigenous and non-Indigenous members struggle for the same things, in terms of working conditions, pay, benefits, and/or social justice struggles more broadly?