



“We will go side-by-side with you.” Labour union engagement with Aboriginal peoples in Canada

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of new groups of workers has been an important component of union renewal efforts. Several unions in Canada have begun to dedicate significant resources to better organize and represent Aboriginal workers. Drawing on interviews with union activists, organizers and representatives from two national public sector unions in Canada, we present an overview of union strategies to engage with Aboriginal peoples. Results suggest that understanding the distinct territorial context of Aboriginal peoples' relationships to work and unions has been necessary to the success of these union strategies. This approach begins by drawing connections between Aboriginal peoples' present-day relationships to work and their prior occupancy of, and dispossession from, lands and resources. Because of the geographical specificity of how the colonial experience affected Aboriginal peoples' relationships to work and unions, unions have had to adopt non-normative approaches to their engagements with Aboriginal peoples. In workplaces where settlers were dominant, addressing racism in the workplace and gaining support for initiatives to hire and train Aboriginal workers were important. Alternatively, in Aboriginal workplaces, organizing was a priority. Here questions of union legitimacy have taken precedence and the focus of unions has been on partnership building. Most importantly, however, engagement with Aboriginal peoples has brought attention to the colonial practices within unions and helped to foster growing Aboriginal voice within the labour movement.

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1. Introduction

On June 29th, 2007, Canadian Auto Workers president Buzz Hargrove marched alongside Phil Fontaine, the chief of the Assembly of First Nations, leading a procession of Aboriginal people and settlers¹ past Canada's parliament in support of Canada's National Day of Action for Aboriginal peoples (Babbage, 2007).² Hargrove's

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¹ We prefer the term settler to non-Aboriginal, since non-Aboriginal marks Aboriginal peoples while leaving non-Aboriginal people's relationships to space invisible and hence neutral. The term settler brings settlers' identity to the forefront by highlighting their more recent history in the territory of Canada.

² The term Aboriginal people is inclusive of individuals of First Nations, Métis and Inuit ancestry. Each group has a distinct history with the Canadian state. We use the plural “Aboriginal peoples” to denote Aboriginal nations. By using Aboriginal we do not wish to imply cultural homogeneity but to recognize the similarity that Aboriginal peoples share as descendants of the original occupants of the territory known as Canada. We use the term First Nations to describe both Status Indians and non-Status Indians, as well as to refer to political entities (Indian bands and First Nation self-governing bodies). Although the term First Nation is often used to denote Aboriginal territories, for clarity we will use the term reserve when referring to First Nation territories with reserve designation.

show of highly visible support for the Assembly of First Nations' march is symbolic of the increasing recognition within the labour movement of the need to build relationships with Aboriginal peoples, both within and outside of their memberships. While some groups such as women, people of colour and lesbian, gay and bisexual people have gained increased recognition and representation within their unions since the 1970s, it is only recently that unions have turned their attention to the distinct concerns of Aboriginal peoples. Since Aboriginal peoples' struggles for political and economic justice in Canada moved to the forefront of many public debates, unions espousing social unionism have come to see improving their relationships with Aboriginal peoples as a critical piece of their social justice agendas. In the mid to late 1990s, several unions in Canada implemented new organizing strategies and underwent internal structural changes in the hopes of improving their relationships with Aboriginal peoples and better representing Aboriginal workers. Unions and labour federations began to dedicate significant resources and staff to: organizing Aboriginal workplaces; dispelling myths about Aboriginal peoples among their members; providing union training for Aboriginal workers; and altering union structures to increase the voice of Aboriginal members in union decision making.

Not discounting the longstanding work of union activists who have pushed for the promotion of marginalized workers' voices within unions to attain social justice goals, union renewal has provided further impetus for diversification. Through the 1990s, scholars and labour leaders alike proposed that unions needed to reach out to unorganized workers more effectively if they were to address declining union densities. Organizing workers in economic sectors that were largely unorganized, however, meant incorporating workers outside of labour's traditional constituencies, since groups such as women and racialized minorities were over represented in 'new' workplaces (Wial, 1993; Kumar and Schenk, 2006). Furthermore, because traditional union practices were designed by, and for, a predominantly white and male workforce, new organizing campaigns needed to adapt to the distinct concerns of a female and racialized workforce (Hunt and Rayside, 2000; Yates, 2004, 2005).

Labour geographers have joined other labour researchers in seeking to explain the evolution of union strategies and tactics to reach out to workers in non-traditional workplaces. Their contribution has been to highlight the strategic importance of space and spatial knowledge to alternative organizing strategies. These authors have shown how an intimate understanding of spatial constraints and relationships open up possibilities for organizing within and outside of unions (Jepson, 2005; Tonkin, 2004; Tufts, 1998). Understanding the spatial context within which workers act, has also involved paying attention to how workers' non-class social identities are constituted through space. Campaigns to organize new groups of workers have often mobilized around shared experiences of discrimination in the workplace while making use of spatial networks based on language, religion and/or ethnicity (Fine, 2005; Walsh, 2000; Wills, 2005). Notwithstanding these and other contributions,³ recent reviews of labour geography have suggested that the sub-discipline would benefit from more holistic and richer accounts of worker experience that unearth the complex and contradictory ways that workers' non-class social identities intersect with workplace struggle (Castree, 2007; Mitchell, 2005). Union engagements with Aboriginal workers shed light on the complexity of how a non-class identity can shape worker perspectives towards work and unions.

Aboriginal peoples' relationships to employment are the outcome, not only of rounds of restructuring and working class struggle, but also of the ways in which a legacy of diverse colonial policies and practices have constrained and shaped Aboriginal labour market participation. Not surprisingly, Aboriginal peoples' desires for socio-economic justice have often been situated within anti-colonial struggle for Aboriginal empowerment and not within trade union movements. Following Loomba (2005), we use the term anti-colonial broadly to include all contestations of colonialism and its legacies both tangible and representational. The legacies of colonialism and contemporary anti-colonial struggle have helped to shape Aboriginal peoples' experiences and perspectives of work and unions and provided distinct spatial relationships for union engagement.

This paper outlines two national public sector unions' strategies related to Aboriginal workers. We argue that successful engagement with Aboriginal peoples requires the adoption of an anti-colonial lens recognizing Aboriginal peoples' distinct relationships to territory. We begin by situating our discussion of union engagements with Aboriginal peoples within labour geography's treatment of union renewal strategies. We propose that Aboriginal peoples provide new ways for labour geographers to think about spatial context. We then introduce our case study of two Canadian national public sector unions and follow this with a brief description of how the heterogeneity of Aboriginal peoples' relationships

to work has created distinct contexts for union engagement. We proceed by showing how Aboriginal peoples' relationships to territory affected union strategies of engagement in two broad categories of workplaces: workplaces that are not located on recognized Aboriginal territory or in the north⁴ and/or are owned and managed by settlers, hereafter termed settler workplaces; and workplaces that are either Aboriginal owned and managed and/or are located on recognized Aboriginal territories or in the north, hereafter termed Aboriginal workplaces. Union activities in settler workplaces have primarily involved drawing connections between a colonial past- and present-day inequalities to address racism in the workplace and labour market. In Aboriginal workplaces which are largely non-unionized, organizing has been the priority. In these contexts, unions have been challenged by a changing jurisdictional landscape founded in Aboriginal struggles for self-determination and economic empowerment. We finish by discussing how union engagement with Aboriginal peoples has been integrally related to internal critiques of colonialism within unions that have prompted the creation of new union structures for Aboriginal voice and control.

2. Labour geography, union renewal and Aboriginal peoples

Labour geographers have contributed to literature on union renewal by deciphering the spatial elements of new union campaigns (Savage, 1998; Wills, 2001; Wills, 2005). Post-World War II models of organizing in Canada and the US evolved in response to a particular set of spatial assumptions characterizing shop floor manufacturing work. Since standard organizing strategies presumed large workplaces and physical distance between supervisors and workers, they have been largely ineffective in the more spatially diverse, mobile and often closely monitored service sector workplaces (Savage, 1998). Here effective organizing strategies have often been those that are specifically tailored to take advantage of the more fragmented and mobile context of work in the industry. For example, Savage and Wills (2004) argued that one of the keys to the Justice for Janitors campaign (Jfj) success was its ability to increase the scale of organizing. Instead of targeting the workers within each subcontracting firm separately Jfj targeted all of the cleaning staff within a defined area of the city and then pressured building owners to accept the union using public campaigns (Savage and Wills, 2004; Savage, 2006). Organizing over a larger geographical area ensured that unionized subcontractors would not simply be outbid by non-unionized firms. The creative use of the city space for protest also increased visibility and garnered community support. A second example of the strategic use of spatial knowledge is the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE)'s campaign to organize predominantly female clerical workers at Yale (Berman, 1998). In this case, organizers prioritized the creation of meeting spaces so that workers who were isolated in their daily jobs could communicate and organize. The drive also challenged the boundaries between the campus and the surrounding community by organizing both within and outside of the university setting.

Because women and racialized minorities are over represented in workplaces that were not traditionally unionized, labour geographers have drawn attention to how new organizing activities have involved integrating elements of workers' non-class identities into new campaigns. Campaigns have often mobilized around workers' shared concerns of racism or sexism in the workplace and made

⁴ We use "the north" to denote Canada's northern territories as well as northern Quebec and Labrador since in addition to being climatically north these regions are also similar in that they are not covered by historical treaties, that they have Aboriginal majorities, and that they are home to large scale resource development projects. These characteristics have provided a distinct environment for Aboriginal employment.

³ See for example Tonkin (2000) and Sadler (2004).

use of networks based on shared language or religion. Community unionism's approach to organizing implicitly involves attention to workers' identities. Organizing workers through their links to non-union community groups has meant transcending boundaries of race, religion, gender and ethnicity to bring unionism into new spaces (Fine, 2005; Tufts, 1998; Wills, 2001). Living wage campaigns, non-union coalitions to increase minimum wages in municipalities and regions, have also often mobilized around common ethnicity or religion (Fine, 2005; Walsh, 2000; Wills, 2005). Knowledge of the spatial organization of 'Latino'⁵ or African American communities has led to the strategic use of churches as organizing spaces and to the distribution of information through community networks.

The design of union strategies that address the needs of new groups of workers has often benefited from the increased presence and voice of these groups within unions. The movement of new constituencies into unions has instigated the re-shaping of union structures and agendas. For example, the feminization of the labour movement in Canada and the United States resulted in both the increased presence of women in leadership positions and in the broadening of collective bargaining (Milkman, 2007; Boris and Klein, 2007). Similarly, the increased involvement of workers of colour, disabled workers and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered workers allowed concerns of racism, ableism and homophobia to gain legitimacy in Canada's labour movement (Hunt and Rayside, 2000). The empowerment of non-traditional worker groups within unions has been critical to the success of some new organizing strategies. Merrifield (2000) attributed the growth and strength of HERE local 11 in Los Angeles, an important local in the living wage campaign, to the work of Maria-Elena Durazo, a union leader, in transforming the local to make it more militant, multilingual, and democratic, thereby enabling the empowerment of its largely immigrant membership.

Union engagement with Aboriginal peoples has similarly involved attention to the different spatial contexts of workplaces and to the incorporation of Aboriginal voice within unions. Where the spatial context for union engagement differs from that of other groups of workers, is in the ways that Aboriginal peoples' perspectives and experiences of work are related to their distinct relationships to territory. Aboriginal peoples' prior occupancy of, and subsequent dispossession from their territories, as well as other colonial state policies and practices have crucially shaped Aboriginal peoples' relationships to work and unions. In the sections that follow, we highlight three spatial considerations for union engagements with Aboriginal peoples that hinge on Aboriginal peoples' distinct relationships to territory. First, the category 'Aboriginal' encompasses members of many geographically and culturally diverse nations who experienced colonialism in distinct ways and who live in areas with markedly different economic opportunities. Acknowledging the heterogeneity of Aboriginal workers' experiences has been paramount to the success of union strategies and is an important area for future geographic inquiry. Second, in developing strategies to engage with Aboriginal peoples in different contexts it has been important for unions to understand Aboriginal peoples' present-day perspectives in light of their colonial histories and/or their anti-colonial struggles. Last, the successful engagement with Aboriginal workers and communities has required that unions challenge the colonialism within their own structures. A key component of this institutional change has been the empowerment of Aboriginal members.

⁵ The use of the term "Latino" exemplifies that categories are often based on common experiences of racialization by white people and not ethnicity since it encompasses workers from many different cultures and countries including Mexico, Colombia, Puerto Rico, and El Salvador.

3. Methodology and context

To discuss the importance of the spatial context of Aboriginal peoples' relationships to work and unions, we draw on examples from two of the largest public sector unions in Canada. We selected the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) after surveying the websites of the 10 largest national unions in Canada⁶ for content related to Aboriginal centered initiatives and after conducting a search of articles related to Aboriginal peoples and labour unions within Canadian newspapers. While interesting, early interviews with two USW staff and an activist from UFCW, helped to solidify our decision to focus on PSAC and CUPE.

The vanguard position of these unions with regard to their engagement with Aboriginal unionism is congruent with public sector unionism's role as a dynamic force of change in the labour market since the 1960s (Heron, 1996). This has particularly been the case in relation to the representation of the concerns of marginalized groups. In fact, some early examples of union engagement in issues of Aboriginal rights are from public sector unions.⁷ There are many potential reasons for this heightened awareness. In contrast with declining union density in the private sector, the public sector has seen tremendous membership growth over the past 30 years which has helped to maintain overall union density in Canada (Kumar and Schenk, 2006). This growth in public sector unionism has largely been responsible for the feminization of the unionized membership base and the associated push for women's advancement in the labour movement. A propensity towards social unionism has also been a strategic imperative for public sector unions since their memberships are closely tied to government social spending. Last, because of the jurisdictions they represent, public sector unions are more likely to represent Aboriginal members. Relative to settlers, Aboriginal workers are over represented in public sector work (including public administration and health care and social assistance). In addition, public sector unions have had a historical presence in Aboriginal spaces, representing both Aboriginal and settler workers in Aboriginal communities. PSAC has had a particularly long history with Aboriginal peoples by virtue of the jurisdictions that it represents – federal government workers, some categories of workers on reserves, and workers in Canada's territories. PSAC has represented workers for hamlets, (i.e. Inuit communities that operate as municipal governments), since the late 1970s. Equal engagement with Aboriginal peoples has also taken on a heightened importance in CUPE, particularly in Saskatchewan.

We developed a purposive sample of 16 members and staff of CUPE and PSAC who had experience with their union's Aboriginal initiatives. The sample reflected a cross section of rank-and-file Aboriginal activists (5 from CUPE, 4 from PSAC), non-Aboriginal elected officials (1 from PSAC), Aboriginal union staff with Aboriginal and/or education responsibilities (2 from CUPE), and non-Aboriginal staff with Aboriginal organizing responsibilities (1 from CUPE and 3 from PSAC). Where possible, we also attempted to have representation from different regions in Canada. Because of the

⁶ These include: the Canadian Union of Public Employees; the National Union of Public and General Employees; the United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied Industrial and Service Workers International Union (USW); The National Automobile, Aerospace, Transportation and General Workers Union of Canada (CAW Canada); the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW); the Canadian Teachers' Federation; the Public Service Alliance of Canada; the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP); the Canadian Federation of Nurses; Teamsters Canada; Service Employees International Union.

⁷ Two examples include a strike by Québec teachers in 1965 that protested against the colonization of northern Aboriginal communities through the educational system (*Corporation des enseignants du Québec*, 1973) and the provision of funds by the Federation of Ontario Teachers in 1972 to investigate the images of Canadian Indians portrayed in school (McCue, 1994).

exploratory nature of the study, our interviews were semi-structured, using an interview guide but allowing for considerable flexibility so that interviewees could follow themes they felt to be important or go into greater detail in an area of expertise. We asked interviewees questions about their understandings of the impetus and the development of union Aboriginal initiatives, their personal experiences with the initiatives, and what they perceived to be areas where strategies were successful or needed improvement. Interviews were conducted by telephone on all but three occasions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed and transcripts were sent back to the interviewees for review prior to analysis. We analyzed interviews thematically to uncover emergent topics or concerns. Interviews were also analyzed for their empirical content which we supplemented with union flyers, brochures, newsletters and collective agreements to provide a description of union activities.

4. Diversity in Aboriginal employment and workplaces

In our approach to understanding Aboriginal employment we attribute the employment and wage disparities between Aboriginal people and settlers in the last instance to the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from territory (Bourgeault, 1983; Abele, 1996). Settlement and the subsequent dispossession of many Aboriginal people from their lands and resources had the effect of curtailing Aboriginal participation in traditional economies. At the same time colonial policies were introduced that constrained Aboriginal people's equal participation in the market economy. While space does not permit a thorough recounting of this history, some examples of practices that had detrimental effects on Aboriginal employment include: the placement of reserves far from urban areas; employer and co-worker racism; pass laws that limited mobility; and legal barriers to borrowing money, owning commercial enterprise, or engaging in the commercial development of resources⁸ (Tough, 1996; Harris, 2002). Aboriginal people do have a long history of participation in market economies, albeit this participation has often been in seasonal staples, and concentrated in lower paid and less stable forms of employment (High, 1996; Knight, 1978; Lutz, 1992; Mitchell, 1960).

Colonialism affected Aboriginal economic participation directly and indirectly resulting in present-day discrepancies between Aboriginal and settler employment. Aboriginal people are both under-represented in the wage labour force, continuing to have a lower employment rate than settlers, and segregated into types of work that tend to be lower paid and less stable (Table 1). Studies using data spanning over 30 years have shown continuing patterns of occupational segregation between Aboriginal people and settlers in Canada (Lautard, 1982; Luffman and Sussman, 2007; Satzewich and Wotherspoon, 2000). Aboriginal people are under-represented in professional and management occupations, in natural and applied sciences and in clerical work. Aboriginal men and women are over represented in occupations unique to primary industry and in sales and service sector occupations. Although there is little data available on union coverage of Aboriginal workers, data from 2001 indicated that the off-reserve Aboriginal rate of unionization was almost identical to that of settlers, 30.4% and 29.1% respectively (Jackson, 2004).⁹

Statistics on Aboriginal employment as a whole mask its geographic diversity. This diversity has resulted from the dynamic interplay between colonial policies and practices, spatial patterns

of development and the political agency of Aboriginal nations themselves. The present landscape of Aboriginal employment is therefore heterogeneous, contingent on many factors including: the extent of community reliance on traditional economies; the availability of opportunities to participate in the market economy; the extent of local self-government; whether a given nation has ownership over lands and resources; and the availability of education and training opportunities. Despite the numerous dimensions of this heterogeneity, we focus here on two broad categories of workplaces: Aboriginal workplaces and settler workplaces, primarily in the public sector. Aboriginal workplaces include band¹⁰ councils and their agencies such as police and schools, as well as whole or partially Aboriginal owned companies. Settler workplaces in the public sector include government departments, agencies and crown corporations. Aboriginal people are often, but not always the majority of the workforces in Aboriginal workplaces, while settlers form the majority of workforces in settler workplaces. Although there is considerable variability within, and overlap between, these categories, they serve our purpose to provide a rough schematic of different spatial contexts for Aboriginal work.

Settler workplaces and Aboriginal workplaces are often located in particular types of socio/political spaces. Settler workplaces in the public sector are found primarily in urban areas. Alternatively, since secure access to territory has been linked to greater self-governing powers, Aboriginal workplaces are primarily located on reserves or in the north (Peters, 1999). This is changing, however, with the creation of new urban reserves and urban Aboriginal enterprises. These different socio/political spaces are home to different groups of Aboriginal peoples. Since the 1950s when First Nations first began to migrate into urban areas from reserves in substantial numbers, many Aboriginal people have made their home in urban areas; the most recent census report shows 54% of Aboriginal people living in urban areas (Statistics Canada, 2008). Non-status First Nations and Métis people are over represented in urban areas, and Status Indians are more likely to live on reserve.¹¹ Inuit are over represented in non-reserve rural areas in the territories. These differing locations of residence offer unequal employment opportunities (see Fig. 1).

Living in an urban area typically offers greater economic opportunities than living on reserve or in the north; in 2001, Aboriginal people living in urban areas had lower unemployment rates and higher labour market participation rates than Aboriginal people living in rural areas or on reserve (Table 2). In urban areas, Aboriginal workers are more evenly distributed across a range of industry categories as a result of the greater diversity of employment opportunities in these spaces. Aboriginal workers living on reserve are also more likely to work in either primary industries (agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting) or in the public sector (education, health care or public administration), than Aboriginal people living in urban areas. In both reserves and non-reserve rural areas in the provincial and territorial norths, traditional economic activities such as hunting and fishing are often equal in importance to wage income (Elias, 1997).

Union strategies to engage with Aboriginal peoples in these workplaces have had to take into account their different spatial contexts. Aboriginal strategies in settler workplaces, have primarily addressed issues of racism in the workplace and unequal representation across job classifications, key concerns of a largely urban Aboriginal workforce. In Aboriginal workplaces, which are primar-

⁸ For specific examples see Bourgeault (1983), Harris (2002), High (1996), Knight (1978), Laliberte and Satzewich (1999), Lutz (1992), and Tough (1996).

⁹ This statistic may be an overestimate since the SLID survey used to calculate this statistic was not a complete survey of the urban Aboriginal population and did not include reserve workforces who are predominantly non-unionized.

¹⁰ A band is a group of Status First Nations designated by the Canadian government and administered according to the Indian Act. Bands have governing councils and have jurisdiction over some activities such as on reserve housing and increasingly, education.

¹¹ There is also considerable circular migration of Status Indians between reserves and urban areas (Norris and Clatworthy, 2003; Peters, 2005a).

Table 1
Selected labour force characteristics for Aboriginal identity population and total population, 2006.^a

	Aboriginal identity		Total population	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
<i>Labour force activity characteristics</i>				
Total population 15 years and over	393,680	430,205	12,470,785	13,193,440
Participation rate	67.3	59.1	72.3	61.6
Employment rate	56.5	51.1	67.6	57.5
Unemployment rate	16.1	13.5	6.5	6.6
<i>Percent of labour force participants in occupation classification</i>				
A Management occupations	6.8	6	11.6	7.5
B Business, finance and administration occupations	6.3	23	9.7	27.1
C Natural and applied sciences and related occupations	4.8	1.7	9.7	3
D Health occupations	1.2	7	2.1	9.5
E Occupations in social science, education, government service and religion	4.7	14.7	5.1	12.1
F Occupations in art, culture, recreation and sport	2.1	2.4	2.5	3.5
G Sales and service occupations	20.9	36.5	19.3	29.1
H Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations	36	3.6	26.7	2.2
I Occupations unique to primary industry	10	2	5.7	1.8
J Occupations unique to processing, manufacturing and utilities	7.2	3.1	7.5	4.1
<i>Earnings in 2005 (Canadian dollars)</i>				
Median earnings	22,386	16,079	32,874	21,543
Median earnings, pop. who worked full year, full time	39,501	30,938	46,778	35,830

^a Data based on a 20% sample data from the Statistics Canada Census, 2006. Aboriginal identity population includes all individuals who stated that they identified with an Aboriginal group in the Canadian census. The employment rate was calculated based on the total population over 15 years. The unemployment rate was calculated based on the total number of labour force participants.

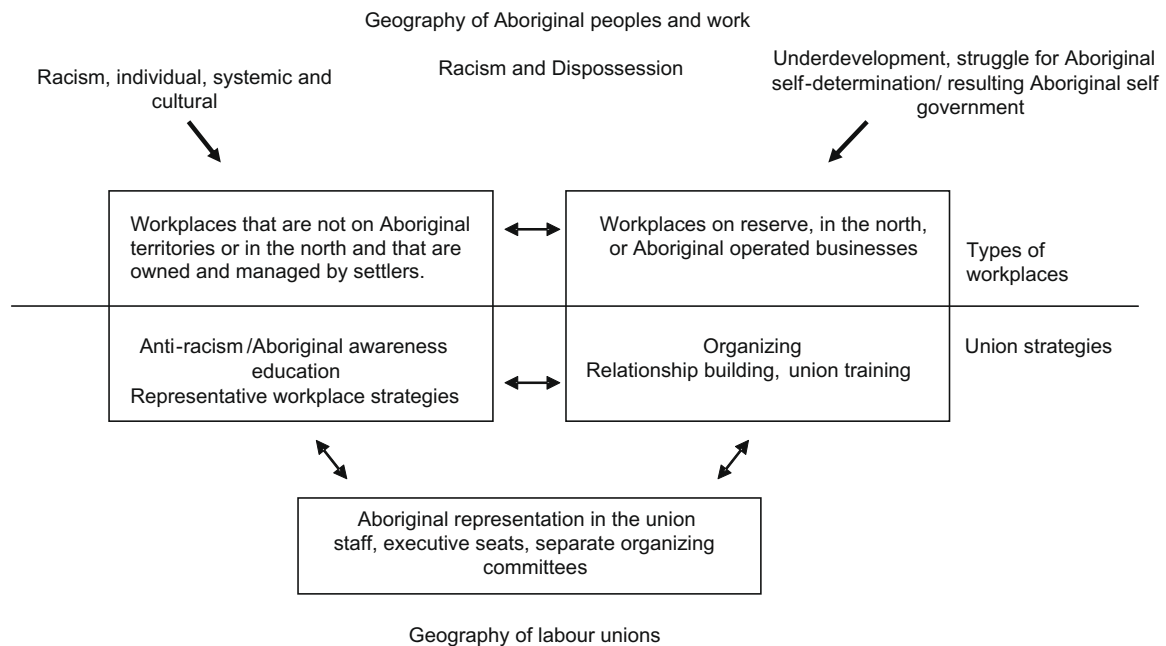


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework for union strategies to better represent, organize and support Aboriginal people in particular types of workplaces with Aboriginal people's relationship to wage employment positioned above and union activities to engage with Aboriginal peoples positioned below. Linkages with other institutions are not represented.

ily located in Aboriginal spaces in less developed regions, unions have focused on organizing and relationship building. Here unions have faced opposition founded in anti-colonial struggles and union mistrust.

5. Settler workplaces

Union strategies to address the needs of Aboriginal peoples in settler workplaces evolved to address the spatial context of work for Aboriginal peoples working in non-Aboriginal spaces. Here,

Aboriginal workers' relationships to employment are structured by the racism that they faced within the workplace and the broader labour market. Because racism towards Aboriginal peoples exists as a legacy of colonialism it has a territorial dimension. We understand racism in the broad sense to include both individual racism, such as discriminatory acts of co-workers and employers, and systemic racism, structures that normalize and perpetuate the unequal allocation of resources and power in society, such as poorer educational systems on reserve.

The structure of individual racism towards Aboriginal peoples is linked to settlers' need to legitimize their dispossession from lands.

Table 2
Selected labour force characteristics for Aboriginal identity population and settler population by category of residence^a.

	On-reserve		Non-reserve rural		Urban	
	Aboriginal	Settler	Aboriginal	Settler	Aboriginal	Settler
Participation rate	52.1	60.2	63.9	66.4	65.4	66.6
Employment rate	37.7	54	52.1	61	55.1	62
Unemployment rate	27.6	10.3	18.5	8.1	15.8	6.9
<i>Percent of labour force participants in each industry classification</i>						
11 Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting	8.3	2.8	9.7	14.3	2.2	1
21 Mining and oil and gas extraction	1.7	1	3.2	1.6	2.2	0.9
22 Utilities	1	1	1.2	0.8	0.7	0.7
23 Construction	9.2	7.2	8.9	7.8	7.5	5.1
31–33 Manufacturing	4.2	7	9.8	14.1	10.4	14.1
41 Wholesale trade	0.6	3.3	1.9	3.6	3.1	4.7
44–45 Retail trade	6.2	11.8	9.5	9.8	10.8	11.7
48–49 Transportation and warehousing	3.5	5.9	6	5.4	5.4	4.9
51 Information and cultural industries	0.6	2	1	1.2	2	3.1
52 Finance and insurance	0.4	2.1	1.2	2.3	2.2	4.6
53 Real estate and rental and leasing	0.5	1.8	1	1	1.5	1.8
54 Professional, scientific and technical services	1.1	4.4	1.8	3.5	3.4	7.1
55 Management of companies and enterprises	0	0.1	0	0.1	0	0.1
56 Administrative and support, waste management and remediation services	3.5	4	3.2	2.9	5.7	4.1
61 Educational services	10.9	11.5	6.6	5.7	5	6.7
62 Health care and social assistance	13.6	10.7	10.3	8.7	10.8	9.9
71 Arts, entertainment and recreation	2.5	2.2	2.2	1.8	2.8	2
72 Accommodation and food services	4.2	7.5	7.7	5.6	10.1	6.9
81 Other services (except public administration)	2.5	4.6	4.4	5	5.2	4.8
91 Public administration	25.4	9	10.4	4.8	9	5.8

^a Data drawn from 20% sample of Statistics Canada Census 2001. Aboriginal population is the identity population and includes all individuals who stated that they identified with an Aboriginal group in the Canadian census. Settler population includes all individuals who did not indicate Aboriginal identity. The employment rate was calculated based on the total population over 15 years. The unemployment rate was calculated based on the total number of labour force participants.

As argued by Roediger (2007) in relation to the United States, settler constructions emphasized that Native Americans were failing to develop the land properly, were not hard workers and hence should not be land owners. More recent racist constructions of Aboriginal peoples reflect this history, since they involve normalizing the Canadian state and the economic system as fair and racially neutral based on an ahistoric belief in meritocracy; that settlers' relative success vis à vis Aboriginal people is a result of their hard work. Economic inequality between Aboriginal people and settlers is then rationalized through constructions of Aboriginal inferiority (Schick and St. Denis, 2005). More often, this is accomplished through cultural racism, a form of racism that "...substitutes the cultural category "European" for the racial category "white.", hence "We no longer have a superior races; we have, instead a superior culture." (Blaut, 1992, p. 290). Portrayals of Aboriginal cultural inferiority consist of positioning traditional cultural activities and norms as incompatible with employment, or conflating the effects of poverty with Aboriginal culture. Cultural racism follows from early settler constructions of Aboriginal culture that positioned Aboriginal culture as incompatible with urban areas and industrial manufacturing work (Peters, 1996).

Every interviewee in the study described having either observed or experienced racism on the basis of Aboriginal identity. And, several Aboriginal activists from urban areas became involved with their union locals to try to address racism in the workplace and/or labour market. When asked how she became involved in her union, one Aboriginal CUPE activist described her experience of cultural racism in the workplace. After moving from her northern community to work in an urban hospital, she found her cultural values disrespected by co-workers who were placing bets on which patients would die through the night shift. She recalled how her concerns were dismissed by her co-workers.

Our people are never left to die alone as it is our Clan members' responsibility to sit with our people so they are not afraid of death and not alone. . . . in the morning. . . . I talked to the

two [other nurses] and I said "In my culture birth and death are the most sacred times of a person's life and I found it really unacceptable there was a bet placed on people's lives." They just laughed and said it was something they had always done on night shift. . .

My mother is our Hereditary Chief and my grandmother was a medicine woman so all my life I was taught respect. I wanted to work in this big city, but I knew that if I continued I had to find a way to educate my co-workers on my cultural values. . . . So I started going to union meetings and realized I could be a shop steward and fight for things that matter.

This description underscores how the perceived cultural neutrality of workplaces can be used to render Aboriginal culture as 'out of place.' Another incident of cultural racism was described by a PSAC settler official who noted that when he started working as a firefighter in the north,

Aboriginal workers did not get the full-time jobs; they got the more physical and difficult jobs and the living conditions . . . were quite appalling. But it was almost expected that people were expected to accept these kinds of living conditions because they came from the bush, right?

In this case, the construction of Aboriginal culture as different and as belonging in nature served to legitimize the discriminatory allocation of work.

To address racism faced by workers in settler workplaces both CUPE and PSAC have been involved in developing Aboriginal awareness education for settler workers. While PSAC is only beginning to develop an Aboriginal awareness component within its anti-harassment programs, CUPE Saskatchewan uses a now well-established course which it helped design through the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) entitled Unionism on Turtle Island.

Staff and activists in CUPE who had experience with the course, linked its success to its specificity; it was designed to address the particular structures of racism faced by Aboriginal peoples since these are different from those faced by other racialized groups. Unionism on Turtle Island helps to dispel the ahistoric basis of settler racism towards Aboriginal people by emphasizing the history of colonialism and links between this history and present-day Aboriginal experiences. Since individual racism towards Aboriginal peoples, such as claims of unfair privilege, requires the erasure of the colonial past, making this history visible creates conditions where it is difficult to support racist claims. While Unionism on Turtle Island is considered very successful, it has primarily been offered by CUPE and other unions in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

In prairie cities, attention to the unequal allocation of jobs within the labour market and within worksites has been particularly important since Aboriginal people form a higher proportion of the population constituting the dominant racialized “Other” and have lower economic outcomes than Aboriginal people in urban centers elsewhere (Peters, 2005b). A CUPE Aboriginal activist working in an urban settler workplace became involved in the union after noticing that “there seemed to be a difference in the treatment of people and the difference of how people were promoted based on their culture...” Aboriginal workers, he noted were always sitting in the back of the work trucks, and were never in the driver’s seat. He described how this realization cultivated his union activism, stating that it “revitalized a mechanism in me to make me want to talk to people and expand their knowledge base so that they could understand.”

Aboriginal activists working in settler workplaces drove CUPE Saskatchewan’s participation in a novel strategy that aimed to remedy the unequal representation of Aboriginal peoples across job categories. The representative workforce strategy (RWS) was introduced by a New Democratic Party government in Saskatchewan in 1995 in consultation with unions and businesses. The aim was to promote the employment of Aboriginal people in all classifications at all levels in proportion to their representation in the working age population. The program involves creating partnerships between the government, employers and unions that commit the parties to: hiring Aboriginal job coordinators who network with the Aboriginal community, identifying barriers to the hiring, retention and promotion of Aboriginal peoples within human resource practices and collective agreements; and promoting specialized training for Aboriginal people and Aboriginal Awareness training for settlers (Anderson, 2006). The first partnership agreement was signed in 1995, however it took until 2000 for the CUPE Saskatchewan membership to sign on to agreements with both the health care sector and the Province. Changes to the Collective Agreement for health care workers in CUPE included provisions: that the union would support pro-active processes to “ensure that Aboriginal people were present in all occupations in proportion to the provincial working population”(39); to support Aboriginal employees to attend “spiritual or cultural observances required by their faith or culture;” and to allow the presence of an Elder when dealing with issues concerning Aboriginal employees (CUPE and SAHO, 2005). From the inception of the representative workforce programme through to 2007, the percentage of workers in the health care sector who are Aboriginal has increased from 1% to 6%.¹²

Union activists described settler union members’ resistance to the implementation of the strategy as based on the perception that Aboriginal people would be unfairly privileged in proposed hiring or training schemes. Here, Aboriginal awareness education highlighting colonial history was critical to dispelling the myth of mer-

itocracy. Since education has been a key component of the strategy, CUPE Saskatchewan and the government share funding for an Aboriginal educator to conduct the trainer workshops for both unionized and non-unionized workers in the health care sector. By 2007 over 17,000 staff had participated in awareness workshops including 10,500 out of 12,000 CUPE members. Although Aboriginal awareness training and collective agreement changes are mandatory in the Saskatchewan health care sector, in other sectors control over implementation rests with the locals (Moran, 2006). Given that decisions to implement programmes within CUPE often require votes at the local or regional level, however, implementing Aboriginal awareness or anti-racism education in a systematic way is difficult since a majority of settler members must support the resolution. And their support depends, in large part, on anti-racism education about Aboriginal history and issues. This circularity has made it difficult to implement programmes across regions and jurisdictions. In PSAC, Aboriginal activists frustrated that they are the only equity group without an awareness course are working towards the creation of a separate Aboriginal awareness course.

6. Aboriginal workplaces

Union strategies to engage with workers in Aboriginal workplaces have primarily included organizing campaigns and relationship building activities. Organizing in Aboriginal workplaces has challenged unions to not only pay attention to the particular cultural contexts of Aboriginal spaces, but also to adopt an anti-colonial approach that carefully considers how Aboriginal peoples’ struggles for self-determination have shaped their perspectives towards work and unions.

The changing geography of Aboriginal self-governance in combination with economic underdevelopment has created a distinct spatial context for union activities in Aboriginal workplaces. As land claims are settled, jurisdictional authority over many aspects of reserve life has moved from the Federal and provincial governments to First Nations through processes of devolution. Historically the federal government has primary jurisdiction over the northern territories, reserve lands and over Status Indians, the latter following Section 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867, which enables this government to enact laws regarding “Indians and lands reserved for Indians”. Workers on reserve are therefore under federal jurisdiction provided that they are conducting activities that are ‘Indian’ in nature or related to ‘Indian lands.’ Generally this has meant that band workers, teachers and health care workers on reserves in the provinces fall under the federal labour legislation while Aboriginal businesses both on and off reserve often fall under provincial labour legislation. With increasing devolution of self-governing powers to Aboriginal nations, many nations have begun to challenge the applicability of provincial and federal labour legislation to Aboriginal spaces through a frame of anti-colonialism.

This changing geography of Aboriginal governance has often been closely allied with economic development goals. Because many Aboriginal territories are located in areas of underdevelopment, many Aboriginal governments have created development corporations or Aboriginal businesses with the aim of improving the economic well-being of their members. In its ideal conceptualization, Aboriginal economic development entails a reversal of earlier patterns dispossession and assimilation, centering title to lands and resources, self-determination, and respect for traditional beliefs and livelihoods (Anderson, 1997; McCue, 1994; RCAP and Canada, 1996). Contradictions have arisen, however, when constraints necessary for successful capitalist development have conflicted with traditional activities or values, or have created or

¹² In 2006, the Aboriginal identity population in Saskatchewan was 141,890, 14.3% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2006).

perpetuated economic inequality within a community.¹³ Class conflict has emerged within some Aboriginal communities when band leaders, who are also employers, oppose workers' efforts to organize for many of the same reasons that settler employers oppose unionization. Anti-union rhetoric of Aboriginal employers, however, has often incorporated claims that unions are against self-determination and/or Aboriginal traditions (Tourand, 2004).

Negative perceptions of unions within Aboriginal communities are not only the result of employer anti-unionism. There is also the question of whether, in their aims to organize Aboriginal workers, predominantly white unions function as any other colonial institution, aiming to assimilate and profit from Aboriginal peoples. This debate has become most pronounced in relation to union efforts to organize the workers for Aboriginal governments and firms. Although some First Nations and Aboriginal businesses pride themselves in working with unions,¹⁴ several attempts to organize people working for First Nations councils or businesses have been met by resistance from First Nation leaders beginning with PSAC's attempts to organize the St. Regis Island Band (now Akwesasne) in the 1970s. Through the 1990s, several First Nations challenged the applicability of federal laws governing labour on reserve and the Assembly of First Nations passed a resolution (Assembly of First Nations, 1999; Burton, 1999) stating that "... First Nations have the right to conduct their labour relations without interference by other governments or their laws." The Supreme Court of Canada upheld the applicability of the Trade Union Act in each case.

When asked about the potential conflict between worker rights to organize and the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-determination two Aboriginal activists stated that they felt that Aboriginal governments' opposition to unions was often contradictory in light of the uneven application of different bodies of Canadian and provincial legislation on Aboriginal territories. A CUPE activist pointed out that the Six Nations government followed the Ontario labour code yet would not allow workers on their territory to unionize. Others officials and activists emphasized the practical need for all workers to be entitled to have collective representation. As described by a settler elected officer in PSAC:

...we know that the workers themselves are unhappy with their working conditions and that they would like to organize as a union, and we know that the Canada Labour Code... [is] a creation of the state of Canada... we understand First Nations not wanting to deal with it, but the fact is for the workers themselves there needs to be a set of rules when they get organized

This valuing of the individual worker rights of workers over the collective rights of First Nations can be read as a colonial extension of western law. Alternatively, Aboriginal activists cited the similarity of the underlying cultural orientations of the union and Aboriginal peoples. One Aboriginal woman described returning to her reserve to find a woman who was 69 still working because she did not have a pension. Not seeing any disconnect between her traditional beliefs and those of the union, she felt morally compelled to help organize the workers on her reserve so that she could ensure that members of her community would be looked after in their old age. Another Aboriginal with PSAC activist stated:

... everything you do is for the community. If you go back 100 years or so that's what it was... So that is the solidarity idea of unions. It's a noble idea and if you stick to that ideal every-

¹³ For further discussion of whether traditional values are compatible with capitalism in Newhouse (1993).

¹⁴ All three of Kitsaki Enterprises businesses, owned by the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, are unionized.

thing is gravy [so easy that it is an extra] and when you break it down to common levels as to how you get that concept of going from the ideal to process to mechanism, then you run into problems.

This quotation suggests that some Aboriginal peoples' reluctance to engage with unions may not be related to an ideological standpoint against unions, but rather to the ways that unions operate. One PSAC organizer in the north emphasized that unions should not simply fly in, set up a table, hand out the union cards, and then fly out. Another Aboriginal activist questioned whether Aboriginal organizing initiatives would truly address community needs and empower Aboriginal workers "... Will it (the collective agreement) respect the Cree people, does it have Cree values, is it negotiated for Crees by Crees?"

Both CUPE and PSAC have taken a broad approach to Aboriginal organizing, investing resources in building relationships in ways that are not directly related to organizing. CUPE, in particular has taken a step back from organizing Aboriginal government workers directly, recognizing that organizing in Aboriginal workplaces often requires support from the whole community and not just a particular workplace.

We haven't run certifications but we have targeted increasing our profile ... this doesn't give us more members, but this is not a relationship that can be rushed. It is a relationship that requires broader community support than other communities.

Both CUPE and PSAC have attended Aboriginal conferences, cultural events, and career fairs to build relationships with Aboriginal communities and leadership. Aboriginal staff and activists within both unions emphasized the importance of having Aboriginal organizers who are knowledgeable of protocols and cultural norms and who could facilitate the inclusion of Elders and cultural protocols when requested. One Aboriginal activist within CUPE who had worked in Aboriginal organizing stressed,

... never send somebody in that knows nothing about that culture because you have to meet the protocol on each reserve or you might as well not even go on there because it shows disrespect.

While neither CUPE nor PSAC have a full time Aboriginal organizer on staff, both unions draw on Aboriginal staff and members when organizing in Aboriginal communities.

PSAC's Aboriginal organizing efforts have evolved over time. Initial organizing campaigns with Inuit workers in hamlets often involved informal changes to standard organizing practices. Decisions to unionize were made collectively; the organizer would provide a presentation for all of the workers, then leave the room while the workers decided by consensus whether or not they wanted to unionize. In 1997 and 2000, resolutions at the tri-annual convention dedicated increased funds to organizing and PSAC began pursuing the organization of First Nations council workers. They were successful in organizing a half dozen First Nations and Aboriginal organizations. In these campaigns, PSAC re-shaped its organizing strategies so that they were more in line with Aboriginal cultures. Union materials are now translated into Inuktitut and the inclusion of Elders and other cultural practices such as smudging¹⁵ are becoming more frequent. In the north where participation in traditional economies is equally if not more important than wage economies, collective agreements often include clauses that provide leaves to accommodate hunting, fishing, clamming and berry picking activities, or more generally to spend time "on the land." Other clauses negotiated into collective agreements in Aboriginal

¹⁵ Smudging is a cleansing ceremony that is practiced by Cree and Anishinabe peoples involving the burning of four sacred medicines.

workplaces in the north and elsewhere have included more flexible bereavement leaves, and Aboriginal Day and Nunavut Day as paid holidays.

Over and above considerations of cultural difference, however, staff and activists within both unions emphasized how listening to Aboriginal voices was critical to understanding the local context for organizing and to gaining legitimacy with Aboriginal communities. Within PSAC, organizing initiatives targeting Aboriginal workers provided motivation for PSAC look at its own membership and structure. As stated by one staff member:

... this was something that was recognized, ... [that] in order to deal with the Aboriginal community they had to have a group of experts from the community voicing their concerns, it's almost paternalistic to drop into a community spend two hours make all these announcements...

Another staff member cited the need to change the visibility of Aboriginal peoples in the union stating: “there is already a union that is an Aboriginal union; the PSAC. But what is missing is that we haven't formally made that clear.”

7. Representation

The strategies of Aboriginal activists within CUPE and PSAC have resembled those of other marginalized social groups that have used constituency building as a tool to transform union structures and cultures (Briskin and McDermott, 1993). Yet in the case of Aboriginal peoples, the internal transformation of unions is particularly important because of their historical experiences with white colonial institutions. One CUPE Aboriginal staff stated:

I come from a background that I didn't trust unions. ... I got involved in the union because they weren't really doing anything for people who looked like me. At first we worked on advocacy. ... Now we are developing Aboriginal structures within our union with a message that says “We will go side-by-side with you”.

Another Aboriginal activist in PSAC described how a distrust of unions made it difficult to solicit participation in an Aboriginal union committee “. . . it was hard because the perception of the union was “its another white-man's tool. . . . why should we get involved with that?”

Aboriginal staff and activists were central to the initiation of CUPE's Aboriginal organizing, education and workforce representation initiatives. Yet their ability to implement these initiatives and translate them over space and time was dependent on the increased representation of Aboriginal people at all levels of the union. Aboriginal Councils began at the provincial level, first in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, followed by British Columbia and Ontario. At the national level, the creation of an informal Aboriginal council was followed by the designation of an Aboriginal seat on the national executive, and then the formalization of the National Aboriginal Council in 2006. A key goal of the National Aboriginal Council is to facilitate the sharing of information and support among provinces. Representatives chosen by Aboriginal councils in each province then form the National Aboriginal Council. In 2008 members of the National Aboriginal Council were successful in obtaining resources to hire their own dedicated Aboriginal staff.

Within PSAC, a focus on Aboriginal organizing in combination with the union's large Aboriginal membership led to a realization that structures were needed to foster better representation by Aboriginal peoples within the union. One elected official within PSAC noted the exclusion of Aboriginal people from participation in the union convention of 1994:

.. when you go to convention there are the delegates and the observers right? The observers sit behind a rope and they

have no voice and they have no vote. . . . I remember vividly that a lot of Aboriginal people sat behind the rope. And I remember some of them approaching me and asking me to read a statement on their behalf. And I did, and it was in regards to . . . sitting behind the rope. That was '94 in Montreal and we adopted a resolution calling for the creation of the network.

Two changes were made at this 1994 convention: the union began the practice of opening all conventions with an Elder and by acknowledging the First Nation on whose land the convention was held; and a resolution was passed calling for the creation of a representative body for Aboriginal members.

While the initial impetus for a representative body came from the grassroots, it was not until 9 years later in 2003 that a resolution was passed to create the National Aboriginal, Inuit and Métis (NAIM) network, with dedicated resources. Like CUPE's NAC, the NAIM Network has a broad mandate which includes communicating with Aboriginal members and facilitating their participation and representation in the union; educating PSAC members and society at large about the needs and rights of Aboriginal peoples; and mobilizing members to take action on workplace and broad political issues of importance to Aboriginal peoples. To provide focus for such a large group, an inner NAIM Circle was created comprising two members from each of PSAC's seven regions, two members who are elected to serve on the union's Equal Opportunities Committee, and the two PSAC officers who are responsible for the Network; gender balance is required in all appointments. The circle operates by consensus and meets four times a year. Resolutions to create an Aboriginal seat on the national executive were submitted several times but voted down with the requirement of two thirds majority to pass. Two regions have Aboriginal committees, the National Capital Region and the Northern Region. PSAC's first Aboriginal Peoples' Conference was held in September 2008 and was attended by over 100 delegates from every province and territory. At this conference, the inherent challenge of trying to represent many diverse Aboriginal nations within one group was exemplified by a continuing debate over the name of the group, which had been a problem since its establishment in 2003. One of the regional representatives described that process:

... we knew that one name was not going to satisfy everybody. . . . for instance, Inuit people don't consider themselves Aboriginal people, so first of all we had to change the definition. . . . now we call ourselves the National Aboriginal Peoples' Circle/Network. . . . there is a vast difference of cultures and when we meet in Ottawa it comes out a lot, even the logo has been a big hassle because we want to be inclusive of everything.

Despite the challenges within both CUPE and PSAC to develop structures that address the needs and concerns of Aboriginal peoples in their diverse regions, increasing the involvement of Aboriginal peoples through representative structures and staff positions has been central to helping to forge links with Aboriginal communities, organizations and businesses. As stated by an Aboriginal staff in CUPE:

We are dealing with more Aboriginal employers now. The relationship is often confrontational, but that changes when we can demonstrate that we're out to help Aboriginal people. . . . it really helps to sell the union to people that Aboriginal people have a voice within the union. . . . we need more resources, more Aboriginal people on staff as the ones we have are we are overloaded.

8. Conclusion

Addressing the concerns and needs of Aboriginal workers required that CUPE and PSAC adapt their strategies to meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples in different types of workplaces, and that they address the internal colonialism within their own structures. Our results suggest that meeting the needs of Aboriginal peoples in different types of workplaces requires that unions pay attention to the complexities of how Aboriginal peoples' distinct relationships to territory have underpinned their perspectives towards work and unions in different contexts. Incorporating the concerns of Aboriginal workers within union strategies required that both unions to draw connections between the present and the colonial past to address racism and to re-evaluate their own perspectives towards territory.

The above examples attest to how non-class aspects of workers' identities help to shape the spatial context for worker organization. Recognizing the importance of identity in structuring the spatial context of work and, ultimately, union engagement, is particularly important in the case of Aboriginal peoples, where their identity is predicated on their distinct relationship to territory. While attention to Aboriginal peoples calls attention to how historical colonial geographies structure the contemporary landscape for union activities, it is important to remember that settlers' relationships to work are also structured by histories of colonialism. As such, future work in labour geography would benefit from a greater dialogue with post-colonial and anti-colonial geographies.

Unions are well positioned to address the concerns of Aboriginal workers whether they are a need for access to collective bargaining, under representation in better paid forms of employment, or employer and co-worker racism in the workplace. These results suggest that accomplishing this goal requires the indigenizing of labour unions. Hunter has argued that "indigenizing the Canadian state and society through the substantive increase of Aboriginal representation within the multiple sites of power and decision making" (2006, 25) is necessary to amend a history of Aboriginal exclusion from and marginalization within Canadian institutions. Indigenizing labour unions does not imply a merging of unions with Aboriginal organizations, but rather that unions make space within their collective identities and structures for Aboriginal workers, while forming alliances in areas of common concern with Aboriginal peoples.

Strategies used to increase the representation of Aboriginal peoples within CUPE and PSAC have mimicked those of other marginalized groups, such as the creation of separate organizing committees and the creation of representative seats on executives. There are questions as to whether these newly formed committees will serve as ghettos for Aboriginal peoples or whether they will foster a transfer of power to Aboriginal members. A true transfer of power would involve changes in the distribution of financial resources and control within unions through the hiring of Aboriginal staff, the funding of Aboriginal controlled representative bodies with direct lines to union decision making, and Aboriginal representation in key decision making seats. Future research is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies. This is an important project since deepening union engagement with Aboriginal peoples has the potential to redress the historical exclusion of Aboriginal peoples within working-class politics.

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