

Territory Acknowledgement – Environmental Racism

(CBTU Toronto)

Since long before explorers and conquerors from Europe arrived on the shores of Turtle Island, there were several distinct nations of people living on this land with thriving communities and cultures. The original stewards of this land, the Huron – Wendat, the Ojibway, the Anishnaabe and, the Mississauga's of the New Credit were also the first activists, resisters and educators. For tens of thousands of years, Indigenous people throughout Turtle Island have been managing the land, water and wildlife - ensuring that there was enough for all and that you only took from the land, what you would use. The rest was left to be shared amongst all.

Anishnaabe languages were spoken in these trees long before English or French was. For millennia people lived, learned, raised families and co-existed on this land all while respecting the earth as the Mother that sustains us all. We must remember and respect that.

The foundation of those cultures was the leadership of elders and the legacies of the ancestors. Elders played and still play a pivotal role in structuring communities and Elders are the keepers of knowledge and as such they had a responsibility to share and to educate.

Colonialism changed all of that.

There is a long, extensive and sometimes ignored history of the violent effects of colonialism on Indigenous people from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego (the southern-most region of South America). Recently there has been a public and persistent rise of activism and fighting against the ravages of colonialism on those who welcomed the first settlers.

As labour unionists, in particular, Black union leaders and activists we must stand in solidarity with those activists and resisters. We also have a responsibility to provide education to our members, our family and our community to ensure that those traditions of resistance and activism are carried on.

This work includes fighting for the rights of Indigenous people wherever those rights are threatened.

In June of 2015 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued a report with 94 Calls to Action detailing how governments and organizations could begin the long process of repairing the damage to Indigenous people caused by colonialism, and specifically Residential Schools.

Unions are not explicitly mentioned in the report, however we see these Calls to Action as fundamental to the work we do.

Here, we continue that tradition of stewardship, activism, resistance and education. We understand that when we fight for one we fight for all. And when we make gains in one area we fight so that all can benefit from our gains.

We also have a responsibility to protect the environment. When we do this work, we ensure that those traditions of resistance and activism are carried on side by side with Indigenous communities.

We also want to acknowledge the Indigenous children that were forced to attend Residential schools throughout Canada and the United States, Turtle Island. These children were taken by force, tortured, beaten and in some cases murdered. We especially remember the children who didn't come home from those institutions.

Just 100 kilometres south-west of where we are now was the Mohawk Indian Residential School in Brantford Ontario. This school, the first such school in North America, was operated by both the Canadian government and the Anglican church from 1828 to 1970. 142 years.

Alderville ON is located 141 kilometres east of where we are (just north of Cobourg). It is also where the Alnwick Residential school, run by the Methodist church and the Canadian government operated from 1838 to 1966 – 128 years.

South of the border was the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle Pennsylvania. This school, the first such school in the United States, was operated by both the American government and the church from 1879 to 1918. In those 39 years some 10,000 children attended Carlisle. It is reported that only 158 graduated. The grounds of the Carlisle school include the graves of 180 children that attended. More children died there than graduated.

I encourage you to find out where the nearest Residential School was to your own community and learn about its history.

As we spend this day teaching, learning and practicing our activism we play a pivotal role in building the society we want. And we are happy to be doing so alongside the Chiefs, the Elders and the entire community.