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Part of the Solution? Indigenous Apprentices and the Unionized Building Trades
The Way of the International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 793

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Résumé de l'article

Il n'y a jamais eu de conditions aussi favorables pour attirer les travailleurs autochtones vers les métiers du bâtiment syndiqués. L'industrie de la construction doit reconstituer et diversifier sa main-d'œuvre majoritairement blanche, masculine et vieillissante pour répondre à la demande de main-d'œuvre qualifiée au cours des prochaines décennies, alors que d'importants développements d'infrastructures civiles, d'exploitation minière et d'énergie verte devraient se produire dans les territoires autochtones du Nord. Ces projets seront mandatés par les ententes sur les répercussions et les avantages pour employer un nombre important de travailleurs autochtones qui devront d'abord être formés. Parallèlement, les peuples autochtones constituent la population qui connaît la croissance la plus rapide au Canada et ont montré une volonté à poursuivre des études dans les métiers. Ces dernières années, les plus grands syndicats du bâtiment de l'Ontario ont pris des mesures importantes pour recruter, former et employer des travailleurs autochtones du Nord, y compris au Nunavut. En collaboration avec diverses parties prenantes, les efforts des syndicats commencent à porter leurs fruits. Mais leurs méthodes et leurs objectifs sont-ils influencés par la décolonisation, la réconciliation et l'indigénisation? Cet article réfléchit à cette question en examinant le cas de la section locale 793 de l'Union internationale des ingénieurs d'exploitation, qui a été chef de file parmi les syndicats du bâtiment lorsqu'il s'agit d'établir des relations avec des partenaires autochtones, de former des travailleurs autochtones et de contribuer à leur autonomie économique.

Part of the Solution? Indigenous Apprentices and the Unionized Building Trades: The Way of the International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 793

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Abstract: There have never been more favourable conditions for drawing Indigenous workers into the unionized building trades. The construction industry needs to replenish and diversify its overwhelmingly white, male, and aging workforce to meet skilled labour demands in the next few decades, when major civil infrastructure, mining, and green energy developments are expected to occur in northern Indigenous territories. These projects will be mandated by impact benefit agreements to employ a significant number of Indigenous workers who will first need to be trained. At the same time, Indigenous peoples are the fastest-growing population in Canada and have shown a propensity for pursuing trades education. In recent years, Ontario's largest building trade unions have taken significant steps to recruit, train, and employ northern Indigenous workers, including in Nunavut. In collaboration with various stakeholders, the unions' efforts are starting to show positive results. But are their methods and goals informed by decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization? This article reflects on this question while examining the case of the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 793, which has been a leader among building trades unions when it comes to establishing relationships with Indigenous partners, training Indigenous workers, and contributing to their economic self-determination.

Keywords: Indigenous, building trades, employment equity, trade unions, skills training, community benefits, apprenticeships, decolonization, reconciliation, Indigenization

Résumé : Il n'y a jamais eu de conditions aussi favorables pour attirer les travailleurs autochtones vers les métiers du bâtiment syndiqués. L'industrie de la construction doit reconstituer et diversifier sa main-d'œuvre majoritairement blanche, masculine et vieillissante pour répondre à la demande de main-d'œuvre qualifiée au cours des prochaines décennies, alors que d'importants développements d'infrastructures civiles, d'exploitation minière et

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d'énergie verte devraient se produire dans les territoires autochtones du Nord. Ces projets seront mandatés par les ententes sur les répercussions et les avantages pour employer un nombre important de travailleurs autochtones qui devront d'abord être formés. Parallèlement, les peuples autochtones constituent la population qui connaît la croissance la plus rapide au Canada et ont montré une volonté à poursuivre des études dans les métiers. Ces dernières années, les plus grands syndicats du bâtiment de l'Ontario ont pris des mesures importantes pour recruter, former et employer des travailleurs autochtones du Nord, y compris au Nunavut. En collaboration avec diverses parties prenantes, les efforts des syndicats commencent à porter leurs fruits. Mais leurs méthodes et leurs objectifs sont-ils influencés par la décolonisation, la réconciliation et l'indigénisation? Cet article réfléchit à cette question en examinant le cas de la section locale 793 de l'Union internationale des ingénieurs d'exploitation, qui a été chef de file parmi les syndicats du bâtiment lorsqu'il s'agit d'établir des relations avec des partenaires autochtones, de former des travailleurs autochtones et de contribuer à leur autonomie économique.

Mots clefs : Autochtones, métiers de la construction, équité en emploi, syndicats, formation professionnelle, bénéfices communautaires, apprentissage, décolonisation, réconciliation, autochtonisation

There have never been more favourable conditions for drawing Indigenous workers into the unionized building trades in Ontario. The construction industry in the province will have to train and hire more than 103,000 workers (of 309,000 in Canada) by 2030 to keep up with labour demands.[1] Considering the low population growth rate in recent decades (although it increased significantly between 2016 and 2021) and the decreasing share of new immigrants entering the building trades, a larger portion of entrants into the industry will have to come from historically marginalized groups, including women, racialized people, and Indigenous workers.[2] Prompted by these developments, the industry has recognized the pressing need to close its diversity gap by offering skills training and employment opportunities to underrepresented groups.[3] Its future depends on it – especially the unionized sector, which has been losing ground to the non-unionized sector when it comes to employing racialized and female workers. Furthermore, over the next decade, major investments in civil infrastructure, resource extraction, and green energy developments on Indigenous territories will force construction employers and unions to recruit, train, and employ Indigenous workers as a condition to work on projects ruled by impact benefit agreements (IBAs). These are private contracts between local Indigenous communities and corporations engaged in large-scale development. Having emerged in response to opposition to settler-led projects that disregarded Indigenous sovereignty over their lands, IBAs have since become

1. BuildForce Canada, "Construction and Maintenance Looking Forward: National Summary; Highlights 2021–2030," March 2021, 2.

2. "Canada Tops G7 Growth despite Covid," 9 February 2022, Statistics Canada, url: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220209/dq220209a-eng.htm; BuildForce Canada, *Immigration Trends in the Canadian Construction Sector* (Ottawa, October 2020).

3. Canadian Construction Association, *The Value of Diversity and Inclusion in the Canadian Construction Industry: A Business Case* (Ottawa, 2019).

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a common tool used by northern communities to secure benefits from corporations, including training and employment opportunities for local workers.[4]

In the absence of meaningful and long-term government investment in Indigenous education and workforce development, especially on First Nations reserves, some of the largest building trade unions have stepped in after recognizing an opportunity to expand their membership and jurisdictions. In the process, they have learned about the many intersectional challenges involved in engaging this group of workers. One such union is the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 793. Founded in Toronto in 1919, Local 793 represents more than 18,000 workers, the vast majority being operators of heavy construction equipment, including hoisting, earthmoving, and excavating machines. Now based in Oakville, Local 793 is one of the few construction unions in Ontario with province-wide jurisdiction, which it extended to Nunavut in 2014. For over fifteen years, Local 793 and its training arm, the Operating Engineers Training Institute of Ontario (OETIO), have taken significant steps toward building positive relationships with northern Indigenous communities and developing their workforce. The long-term impact of their combined efforts to "recruit, retain and advance" Indigenous workers is yet to be seen. But we can already reflect on their methods against the light of decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization.

Decolonization is predicated on the fundamental renegotiation of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on the basis of respect and fairness, with both sides working toward dismantling colonial systems and institutional forms of racism that oppress all aspects of Indigenous existence. This requires non-Indigenous Canadians to acknowledge the history and legacy of colonialism, how it has privileged them and produced the ongoing systemic barriers that face Indigenous peoples still, and how they have contributed to the latter's overrepresentation in the criminal justice and child welfare system, high rates of homelessness, mental health issues and addiction, unemployment, poverty, suicide, and other problems. For Indigenous peoples, decolonization involves recovering and relearning their cultures and knowledge systems, healing from intergenerational trauma, and re-establishing their self-determination and self-worth.

Reconciliation is the difficult, and for some unattainable, process of repairing the broken relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples; it involves dealing with individual and collective mistrust, fear, anger, guilt, and shame. While it requires both sides to rebuild trust, and to seek and grant forgiveness, the work of reconciliation falls primarily on non-Indigenous peoples, who must take meaningful actions toward rejecting the colonialist status quo, including the perception that Western ways and views are superior.

4. Suzanne Mills and Brendan Sweeney, "Employment Relations in the Neostaples Resource Economy: Impact Benefit Agreements and Aboriginal Governance in Canada's Nickel Mining Industry," *Studies in Political Economy* 91 (Spring 2013): 7–33.

Indigenization is a concept used mainly in the context of post-secondary education to describe the process of challenging the dominance of Western thought and braiding it with Indigenous knowledge systems. The goal is not to replace or merge these worldviews but to present them side by side to all students. While it is essential to provide access to accurate information about Indigenous peoples, Indigenization goes beyond adding Indigenous content to Western curricula; instead, it places Indigenous knowledge ways, perspectives, and relationship-based teaching methods at the centre.[5] In the context of the labour movement, Indigenization means to align Western union structures, systems, organizational methods, and priorities with those of Indigenous peoples. The principles of solidarity, collectivism, mutualism, and reciprocity that are common to both Indigenous worldviews and the labour movement in general are fertile ground for meaningful relationships to grow. The similarities between relationship-based forms of Indigenous knowledge transmission and the master and apprentice systems of early craftspeople are another potential venue for the Indigenization of union-led training programs.

At the centre of this research note is Local 793 and OETIO's efforts to recruit, train, and employ Indigenous workers. The paper asks whether the efforts made by the union are a meaningful form of decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization. Examining this history, the paper argues that the union and its training arm seem to be genuinely committed to a fundamental renegotiation of their relationship with Indigenous peoples on the basis of mutual respect. Their leaders acknowledge the history and legacy of colonialism and seek to learn more about it through Elders and Indigenous awareness training. They recognize Indigenous territorial sovereignty by helping meet IBA hiring targets. They also help mitigate some of the colonialist barriers facing Indigenous (pre-)apprentices by providing the wraparound support necessary to their success. At the same time, Local 793 remains a settler-led and Western-based organization ruled by colonial legislation and traditions. Some see its training of Indigenous workers as a form of assimilation into colonial industries that have contributed to the dispossession and environmental degradation of their lands and livelihoods. As we will discuss, the OETIO's training methods have not been Indigenized and correspond with neoliberal measures of success, with their expectations of individual merit and job readiness. Furthermore, besides the competing priorities of construction unions that champion environmentally damaging projects (e.g. pipelines) and Indigenous communities torn between opposing or benefitting from them, there are also competing forms of Indigenous political representation. In short, the successes of Local 793 and OETIO in addressing Indigenization remain unclear,

5. Shauneen Pete, Bettina Schneider, and Kathleen O'Reilly, "Decolonizing Our Practice – Indigenizing Our Teaching," *First Nations Perspectives* 5, 1 (2013): 99–115; Asma-na-hi Antoine, Rachel Mason, Roberta Mason, Sophia Palahicky, and Carmen Rodriguez de France, *Pulling Together: A Guide for Curriculum Developers* (Victoria: BCcampus, 2018).

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as is to be expected when studying an ongoing process of transformation in Indigenous-settler relations.

The main data source supporting these findings are thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted with research participants between January 2021 and September 2021. Among the participants are five employment and training program providers, three union officials, two contractor representatives, two community benefits organizers, and one civil servant. Three are First Nations, another three are racialized non-Indigenous people, and nine are women. This research was supported by a Mitacs grant and benefitted from financial and logistic help from the IUOE Local 793 and the Toronto Community Benefit Network (TCBN). About half of the research participants were referred by these two partners. The rest were selected using the snowball sampling technique or sought directly.[6] Given the TCBN's geographic scope, the original focus of this research was the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). However, half of the participants operate or can speak about these themes beyond that area. Industry reports, census data, government and non-profit organization websites, news outlets, collective agreements, scholarly literature, and Local 793's archives were also consulted.

Skills Training and Employment Equity

THE LONG-TERM BENEFITS of forging relationships with Indigenous communities go beyond the construction industry's recruitment goals. Equity, diversity, and inclusion are crucial for the well-being of the unionized sector. Over the last decade, various labour, community, and business initiatives have taken important steps toward closing its diversity gap. Their efforts are starting to show positive results in some areas. In 2016, Indigenous peoples (especially Métis) were the most well represented equity-seeking group in Ontario's construction industry relative to their share of the population. Nevertheless, quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the Indigenous share of the construction workforce could be greater if not for the multiple and complex challenges facing this group of workers.

Both the need and opportunities for recruiting more Indigenous people into the unionized building trades are heightened by the fact that this is the fastest-growing population in Canada, whose estimated share employed in the construction industry in 2016 (9.6 per cent) was higher than that of the non-Indigenous population (7.6 per cent). In 2016, the construction industry was the third-largest employer of Indigenous peoples, who made up approximately 4 per cent of Canada's total working-age population and accounted for 4.9 per cent of the industry's workforce.[7] Ontario had the country's largest Indigenous

6. Six other key stakeholders were invited to participate – among them union representatives, contractors, Indigenous employment agencies, and civil servants – but did not reply.

7. BuildForce Canada, "Construction and Maintenance," 9.

population (22 per cent) in 2021, with over 406,000 individuals, which represents a 10 per cent increase since 2016.[8] Ontario had the second-lowest share (3 per cent) of Indigenous employment in construction, which was still slightly higher than the Indigenous share of its total population (2.8 per cent) and overall workforce (2.3 per cent). There was little difference between the share of unionized and non-unionized Indigenous construction workers, with both averaging at around 3 per cent. But this share varied significantly between regions and trades. The largest share of unionized Indigenous construction workers was in the northern regions (around 12 per cent), where most of Ontario's 133 First Nations communities are located.[9] Indigenous workers in Ontario in 2016 were well represented in 21 of 31 building trades. They were most overrepresented as drillers and blasters (13 per cent), structural metal and platework fabricators, and "other trades and labourers" (both at 11 per cent).[10] They were also overrepresented (between 6 and 4 per cent) in eleven other unionized trades, where the average annual earnings in 2016 ($68,000) were $7,000 higher than in the seventeen unionized trades where the Indigenous workforce was 3 per cent or less.[11]

Significant strides have been made in the distribution of Indigenous workers across the building trades since 2006, when this issue was flagged as a case of race-based labour segmentation.[12] Indigenous people have also shown greater inclination to pursue trades certification than their non-Indigenous counterparts. In 2016, 25 per cent of Canada's Indigenous workforce aged 25 to 64 had less than a high school education (55 per cent for First Nations on reserves in Ontario aged 20 to 24) compared with 10 per cent for non-Indigenous people.[13] The situation changes when it comes to college, apprenticeship/trades certificates, or other non-university degrees, where Indigenous people have a slightly higher attainment rate than non-Indigenous people. This is driven primarily by Métis and off-reserve First Nations, whose attainment rates are about 6 and 3 per cent higher, respectively, than those of non-Indigenous people.

Many government-sponsored job-training programs across Canada have aimed at bringing Indigenous and other marginalized workers into the building trades, going back at least to the mid-1980s. Most of these initiatives followed

8. "Indigenous population continues to grow and is much younger than the non-Indigenous population, although the pace of growth has slowed," 21 September 2022, Statistics Canada, url: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220921/dq220921a-eng.htm.

9. Prism Economics and Analysis, *Demographics & Diversity: A Portrait of Ontario's Unionized Construction Industry* (December 2019), 9, 18.

10. Data on the average earnings for these three trades is not available.

11. Prism, *Demographics & Diversity*, 22–57.

12. Konstantin Kilibarda, *Constructing Toronto* (Toronto Workforce Innovation Group, 2015), 54–55.

13. BuildForce Canada, "Representation of Indigenous Canadians and Women in Canada's Construction and Maintenance Workforce," July 2018, 8.

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the neoliberal paradigm that has dominated Canadian labour market policy, which has been "narrowly focused on short-term supply-side measures aimed at fast-tracking people into employment." As Shauna MacKinnon argues, this mindset "runs counter to the often complex needs of those individuals who are most vulnerable to social and economic exclusion … who need far more than employment training."[14] Although natural opponents of neoliberalism, some union officials hold views that align with the myths of colonialism and its neoliberal "common sense" when it comes to equity, diversity, and inclusion. In the past, the unions' response to employment programs that bypassed or required changes to their traditional dispatching systems was mixed. But when they were mandated by governments to implement job-training programs for equity-seeking workers on public works projects, the unions were able to adapt and deliver.[15]

To be sure, some of that success has been slow. One of the most consistent arguments made by our interviewees outside of the labour movement is that construction unions must first change their ways before they can attract a larger number of Indigenous workers. For one Indigenous employment advocate, whom we will call Catherine, "Part of the problem with the unions is their continued [mindset]: 'But this is the way we have always done it. … If we change that, we're going to make a lot of members really mad.' The way that they keep doing things is the reason why they are losing market share."[16] Another interviewee, Karen Gillam, founder and CEO of the non-profit Indigenous leadership and capacity building organization Workforce Warriors, expressed similar frustration: "On the side of the unions, it's multi-generational benefits tied to specific groups who dominate these spaces. … On the other side, Indigenous students are struggling with multi-generational pain. There, my friend, lies the root of the problem."[17]

As the oldest form of labour organization, craft unionism, whose main strength in North America is the construction industry, has a well-documented history of discriminating against all but white male workers – with the meaning of "white" changing over time.[18] One of the core features of

14. Shauna MacKinnon, *Decolonizing Aboriginal Inclusion in Canada's Labour Market Employment* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 1, 4.

15. Marjorie Cohen and Kate Braid, "Training and Equity Initiatives on the British Columbia Vancouver Island Highway Project: A Model for Large-Scale Construction Projects," *Labour Studies Journalism* 25, 3 (September 2000): 71.

16. Catherine (pseudonym), interview by Amy Barlow, 19 January 2021.

17. Karen Gillam, interview by Amy Barlow, 13 April 2021.

18. Gerald Hunt and David Rayside, "Labour Union Response to Diversity in Canada and the United States," *Industrial Relations* 39, 3 (July 2000): 401–444; David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey, eds., *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2010); Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: Lorimer, 2012), 10.

craft unionism is its gatekeeping effort to control and often limit access to apprenticeships that grant entry to the skilled workforce, so as to reduce the unemployment rates of union members during downward economic cycles and better the unions' bargaining position. High-quality union-led training is also an organizing strategy, since having access to the most productive and safety-conscious workers gives unionized companies an advantage over non-unionized contractors, thus justifying the higher union wages. Originally, the reproduction of the building trades' skilled workforce, including operating engineers, was done informally, relying on willing tradespeople to offer on-the-job training to young apprentices whom they took under their wing. These limited opportunities were typically reserved for the sons and other kin of unionized workers, which led to strong associations between craft, ethnic, and gender identities.[19] Even federal officials sometimes barred Indigenous peoples and other racialized groups, "aliens," and Canadians of non-British descent from accessing vocational training, as was the case during World War II.[20]

As the industry became more complex in the second half of the 20th century, training became more formal, regulated, and expensive, involving classrooms, workshops, paid instructors, and well-equipped training facilities. Given the excessive turnover and highly competitive nature of the construction business, and the fact that the vast majority of contractors (81 per cent in Ontario in 2020) employ fewer than ten workers, individual employers are rarely in a position to voluntarily spend the resources required to train and retain apprentices.[21] In the 1970s and 1980s, the building trade unions began negotiating employer contributions into joint labour-management training trust funds, which in most cases paid for the building and operation of union-led training facilities.[22] These partnerships, which have been supported by federal and provincial governments, helped stabilize labour-management relations and gave rise to the relatively co-operative unionism that has characterized

19. Ian McKay, *The Craft Transformed: An Essay on the Carpenters of Halifax, 1885–1985* (Halifax: Holdfast Press, 1985), 13–16; Garth Mangum and John Walsh, *Union Resilience in Troubled Times: The Story of the Operating Engineers, AFL-CIO, 1960-1993* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 85–89; Robert B. Kristofferson, *Craft Capitalism: Craftworkers and Early Industrialization in Hamilton, Ontario, 1840–1872* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

20. Carmela Patrias, "Race, Employment Discrimination, and State Complicity in Wartime Canada, 1939–1945," in Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster, eds., *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2008), 273–279.

21. Statistics Canada, Table 33-10-0267-01 Canadian Business Counts, with employees, June 2020.

22. Mangum and Walsh, *Union Resilience*, 91–93, 96–98; John O'Grady, *Training Trust Funds: A Review of Their History, Legal Foundations, and Implications for Trade Union Training Strategy* (Prism Economic and Analysis, August 2005).

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this industry since the late 20th century.[23] Today, many employers consider it a smart business decision to sign with unions that can take care of their training and recruitment needs.

Compared with other craft unions, the IUOE was "notably reluctant" to modernize its training methods for several reasons.[24] The amount of fieldwork required for operating engineer apprentices is arguably higher than in any other building trade, since the bulk of their skills cannot be taught in a shop setting, unlike carpentry or plumbing, for instance. On-the-job training for operators is arguably the costliest, given that heavy equipment is very expensive, easy to break, critical to production, and highly dangerous. Operator engineer training, especially on earthmoving equipment, also requires that a sizable amount of land be secured and facilities be built where instruction can take place for several weeks, until apprentices are autonomous enough that they will not need expensive one-on-one instruction on the job site.[25] Like any journeyperson, operator apprentices are also subjected to the limited and irregular timing of construction employment, as well as the scattered geography of projects, which makes training difficult to coordinate. Because land is cheaper and more readily available on the fringes or outside of metropolitan centres, trainees sometimes have to travel considerable distances to access the larger union training centres. This adds to the capital and operating costs of training programs, since they have to provide accommodations on-site or in nearby hotels.

Changes in US labour legislation that downgraded heavy equipment operation to a semi-skilled "service trade" prompted the IUOE to launch its first labour-management apprenticeship program in 1959.[26] In the mid-1960s, the International introduced a new membership category for "registered apprentices" and developed a "continuous total training" approach, which offered (pre-)apprenticeship and skills upgrading courses. Technical innovations in the 1970s also contributed to the modernization of operator training and apprenticeship systems. The introduction of hydraulics, which required more technical knowledge than the previous drum and cable mechanisms, introduced the need for classroom education; self-lubricating machines eliminated the need for "oilers," the traditional starting job for apprentices.[27] Another factor that prompted the IUOE to try to control skills training were the affirmative action policies that followed the civil rights and Black Power movements

23. Joseph Rose, "Reforming the Structure of Collective Bargaining: Lessons from the Construction Industry," *Canadian Labour and Employment Law Journal* 17, 2 (2013): 403–411.

24. Mangum and Walsh, *Union Resilience*, 85.

25. Francesca Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance of the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 21–37.

26. Mangum and Walsh, *Union Resilience*, 89.

27. Mangum and Walsh, *Union Resilience*, 89–91, 97–98, 105.

in the United States. In the past, craftsmen who resisted the deskilling and cheapening of their skilled labour via technological innovation and the hiring of "unskilled" female, immigrant, and racialized workers saw these as a threat to their "breadwinning" male and "superior" white identity. Intersecting ideas about class, gender, and race turned many craft unions into bulwarks of white working-class masculinity.[28] In the 1960s, African American activists working toward the economic development of their inner-city communities turned their attention to the building trades unions. This was because most trades did not require a high school diploma, offered some of the highest-paying blue-collar jobs with good fringe benefits, provided plenty of local employment in "urban renewal" projects, and were overwhelmingly white – except for the lower-skilled "trowel trades," like bricklaying, plastering, and cement finishing. After years of Black Power–inspired protests that shut down federal construction projects in multiple American cities, starting in Philadelphia in 1963, the US government introduced "minority" hiring quotas on taxpayer-funded projects. Many trade unions opposed what became known as the Philadelphia Plan, which called on contractors to estimate the number of non-white workers they planned to hire as part of their tenders. According to the IUOE general president, Hunter Wharton, the Philadelphia Plan was doomed to fail because it did not make provisions for training "minority workers." The IUOE introduced its own Affirmative Action Plan in 1968, which involved outreach efforts that substantially increased the number of "minority" registered apprentices; the exact number is unknown because the union did not collect data on its members' racial identities, just like building trades unions in Ontario today. Since then, American (and Canadian) IUOE locals have received government funds to run or upgrade skills-training programs tied to job-creation measures for "disadvantaged minorities" and women.[29]

In Ontario, and specifically the GTA, efforts in the early 1960s to break through the exclusive Anglo-Canadian dominance of building trade unions were led by Italian immigrants and other "foreigners," who quickly became the overwhelming majority in the industry. These newcomers created their own residential-sector unions and carried out the largest construction strikes in Toronto's history. After initially resisting this militant activism, the older unions changed their position once they realized that their survival depended on welcoming immigrant workers into their ranks. From that process emerged some of the largest private-sector unions in Canada.[30] Their victories turned

28. Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

29. Goldberg and Griffey, *Black Power at Work*, 2–6; Mangum and Walsh, *Union Resilience*, 136–141.

30. Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto*

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this industry into a gateway for newcomers, where even most Canadian-born unionized workers are second- or third-generation descendants of immigrants.[31] This has given rise to strong ethnic identifications with specific trades and union locals. In the best case, this association has led to multiple forms of community unionism, where unions have collaborated with ethnic and diasporic organizations of various kinds. In the worst case, it has turned them into strongholds of particular European immigrant groups and contributed to the systematic exclusion of non-Europeans in similar ways that Anglo-Canadian tradespeople once excluded them. This kinship nepotism is also manifested in the traditional open-hiring methods used by subcontractors, which usually employ small crews with family ties and other privileged relationships. In a 2007 survey of 1,214 construction workers across Canada, 51 per cent said that they entered the industry through family or friends, and only 18 per cent entered through a union hiring hall. By recruiting workers on the basis of interpersonal connections and informal references, which are stronger among members of the same cultural and linguistic community, subcontractors are a major factor in the perpetuation of systemic discrimination in the industry.

In the 1970s and 1980s, concerns over skilled labour shortages in metropolitan regions and in large energy projects in western Canada prompted the creation of many labour-management training trust funds (TTFs), with support from government. Ontario's Progressive Conservative (PC) premier Bill Davis introduced Canada's first program of incentives for TTFs in 1984, which matched employee contributions to these funds up to $10,000 for each company.[32] In the 1980s and 1990s, construction employers and unions were forced to address the lack of Indigenous people, racialized people, women, and people with disabilities in the workforce following the introduction of federal and provincial employment equity legislation. The most comprehensive and debated legislation was Ontario's short-lived *Employment Equity Act*, introduced by the New Democratic Party (NDP) government of Premier Bob Rae in 1994. Like their American counterparts in the 1960s, construction union leaders supported the legislation's general objectives but resisted the imposition of "unrealistic" universal hiring quotas and timelines. These, they argued, would have to be determined on a trade-by-trade basis and account for the projects' locations – for example, it is easier to recruit Indigenous workers in Northern Ontario than in the GTA. They also worried that a small number of equity hires would receive a disproportional number of jobs, thus disrupting their hiring halls' neutrality. Instead, the unions proposed to collaborate with

(Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Gilberto Fernandes, City Builders: A History of Immigrant Construction Workers in Postwar Toronto (website), accessed 3 December 2021, https://toronto-city-builders.org/.

31. BuildForce Canada, *Immigration Trends*, 8.

32. O'Grady, *Training Trust Funds*, 13.

employers toward offering more entry-level opportunities for equity-seeking workers.[33]

The NDP's legislation triggered a process of self-reflection, education, and experimentation with anti-racism, anti-harassment, and other equity measures. But it also prompted significant backlash from Conservative politicians and white unionized voters. Working against it was the fact that Ontario experienced what was then the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, leading to high rates of unemployment across the sector. Two years after its introduction, the NDP's legislation was replaced by PC premier Mike Harris' neoliberal "equal opportunity" policy, which dealt with employment discrimination as an individual complaint–driven process under the Human Rights Code. The following year, 1997, the Canadian Labour Congress' Anti-Racism Task Force found that racism was endemic in Canada's labour movement. When releasing the task force's report, then president Bob White noted, "We can't change history, but we can change the future."[34] Since then, the share of Indigenous, women, and racialized workers in Ontario's on-site construction workforce has witnessed very modest increases. In 2016, of Ontario's unionized on-site construction workforce, 89 per cent were white and 97 per cent were male. "Visible minorities," who represented 29 per cent of the province's population, made up 17 per cent of the non-unionized construction workforce (6 per cent more than the unionized). Women, who represented 51 per cent of the population, made up 4 per cent of the non-unionized workforce (double that of the unionized).[35]

One of the barriers repeatedly mentioned in the literature, and by some of the interviewees in this study, are the unions' "dispatch systems."[36] Priority on the out-of-work lists follows the general rule of "first out of work, first to get called." This is qualified by the members' skills and certifications, whether they have paid their dues, previous refusals, and, in some cases, seniority. The union's ability to provide contractors with the most skilled and productive workers (presumably the most senior) is what gives them a competitive edge over non-unionized companies. Nonetheless, seniority – formal or effective – has the unintended effect of preventing the advancement of new entrants and institutionalizing the privileges of older workers, who are predominantly white men. While dispatch systems are meant to be neutral and fair, they

33. "Talking Union," Koskie and Minsky newsletter, November 1993.

34. Canadian Labour Congress, *Challenging Racism: Going beyond Recommendations*, report of the CLC National Anti-Racism Task Force (Ottawa: CLC, October 1997).

35. Prism, *Demographics & Diversity*, 7, 9.

36. Cohen and Braid, "Training and Equity Initiatives," 90-92; James Nugent, "The Right to Build the City: Can Community Benefits Agreements Bring Employment Equity to the Construction Sector?," *Labour/Le Travail* 80 (Fall 2017): 108–109; Suzanne Mills, "The Geography of Skill: Mobility and Exclusionary Unionism in Canada's North," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 51 (September 2018): 734, 737.

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require a considerable degree of discretion from the dispatchers, who base their decisions on multiple factors. In the past, race and gender were unspoken qualifiers determining who got the jobs, which made dispatch systems linchpins of the industry's systemic discrimination. One interviewee, whom we will call Joseph, a former executive officer of a building trade union with many Indigenous members (himself being one), shared, "I knew exactly who was Native by our list and who wasn't, and who was the dispatcher of the day by who he called first. It's supposed to go in order, the names on the list. But nine times out of ten you would go down to look at the list and he'd bypassed ten people."[37] In this case, when pressed to explain why he had skipped so many Indigenous workers, the dispatcher said that he had called but no one picked up. Catherine, a former union staff member, said,

> Unions will always stand there and say: "but we have a dispatch system; it's first on the list, first out." That is not what happens when you are actually inside the union. … Preference goes to their friends. Always! … When it comes to the construction trades there is an awful lot of cronyism. Just a ridiculous amount. When your breaking point is: "this is the fourth generation of this family to be an apprentice at this local," it makes it very hard to bust down those walls. It takes up a lot of people in positions of power internally to be able to stand up to that. Awful lot of backlash when we start taking a look at things.[38]

Marc Arsenault, who was the Ontario Ironworkers District Council's director of stakeholder and industry relations at the time of our interview (and has since been elected business manager of the Ontario Building and Construction Trades Council), suggested differently, "The construction industry is not about making decisions on who is a good candidate for the industry. That's done on your merit. … Anyone [in our union] who can put in a good day's pay for a fair day's wage, that's what it's all about. It doesn't matter where you came from or who you are."[39]

Such uncritical belief in the unions' merit-based system, which denies that racism and sexism play a role in determining who gets the jobs, implies that equity-seeking groups are a small minority in the construction workforce because they lack merit. Denial and agnosticism toward systemic discrimination is a major part of its perpetuation and aligns with neoliberalism's individualization of achievement or the notion that a person's socioeconomic advancement is largely under their control. From the point of view of older union members, they have the skills and the experience to get the job done on time; the damaged bodies from years of working in a dangerous industry; their own difficult histories, personal goals, households to provide for, and communities to give back to; their families, from which they have had to spend much of their working lives away because of the early morning starts, exhausted evenings, and weeks on the road; memories of discrimination, exploitation,

37. Joseph (pseudonym), interview by author, 27 July 2021.

38. Catherine, interview, 2021.

39. Marc Arsenault, interview by Amy Barlow, 18 January 2021.

and trauma passed on by their own immigrant ancestors whose ambiguously "white" ethnicity was not always a source of privilege; experiences with cyclical economic downturns and long periods of unemployment, impacting not just their livelihoods but their dignity; and their union dues, paid for every month despite it all. In short, they have "merit." From these individual perspectives, hiring less experienced workers on the basis of race and gender seems unfair. Racist and sexist views may or may not be a factor in their minds at the outset but often become the framework through which unionized and unemployed white male workers come to oppose employment equity measures, believing themselves to be victims of racial or gender discrimination. The suggestion that employment equity policies discriminate against white men and are a form of "reverse racism" has been a typical response by conservative politicians and those who benefit from the status quo. It follows from a lack of acknowledgement of the historical barriers facing equity-seeking groups.

Intergenerational Barriers

The relative disengagement of Indigenous workers with unions says less about their capacity for collective action and more about the labour movement's traditional expectations about the nature of employment and workplaces, as well as its limited experience beyond white male workers. Indigenous activists have historically articulated their social and economic issues as part of their decolonization struggle, in which private-sector unions have largely been absent. As settler institutions that benefitted from the expansion of Canada's colonial state and its interconnected resource extraction economy, the labour movement has in itself been both a by-product and enabler of colonialism. At various points in their history, unions have also helped push Indigenous peoples out of the waged workforce.[40] Overcoming distrust of unions among Indigenous people, many of whom perceive them to be another "white man's" tool of assimilation, has been a significant challenge for the labour movement.[41] On this point, Dave Turple, vice-president of the IUOE Local 793, noted,

> It is really difficult to say, "let's just put them to work." That's what John A. Macdonald wanted to do. So sometimes when you are a union or an organization trying to help [an individual] get a career and get to a better place from where they started, you have to be cognisant of the fact that … you are kind of making that the completion of the assimilation that the government wanted in the first place. [F]or a lot of the Indigenous people we came in contact with, I don't think that's lost on them at all.[42]

40. Lynne Fernandez and Jim Silver, *Indigenous Workers and Unions: The Case of Winnipeg's CUPE 500*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Manitoba office (January 2018), 5.

41. Suzanne Mills, "Limitations to Inclusive Unions from the Perspectives of White and Aboriginal Women Forest Workers in the Northern Prairies," *Just Labour: A Canadian Journal of Work and Society* 11 (Fall 2007): 66–79.

42. Dave Turple, interview by author, 8 September 2021.

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Nevertheless, Indigenous dockworkers, lumbermen, fishermen, canners, ironworkers, and public-sector workers have organized at various points in history.[43] The most relevant example for our discussion are the Mohawk "Skywalkers" who rigged the steel beams supporting the skyscrapers and other tall structures in major North American cities.[44] Their sizable membership in the Ironworkers union has for many decades been the exception when it comes to Indigenous overrepresentation in the industry. Today, more than half of the membership of the Ironworkers Local 736 in Hamilton is Indigenous, some going back four generations in the union. Joseph, a member of the Six Nations of the Grand River, is a multi-generational tradesman, whose father and uncles pushed him to follow the same occupation. But other families on his reserve live with what he called "intergenerational dysfunction" resulting from residential school trauma. "The individuals [that the] unions are going after now are people who don't have that patrilineal lineage," Joseph noted. "They don't have relatives in the trades."[45]

The vast majority of First Nations youth on reserves have little exposure to or knowledge of how to enter the building trades. Different governments have tried to attract more youth into the trades for years. The provincial government's flagship initiative is the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), which offers high school students the opportunity to explore a wide range of trades by way of co-operative education and school-to-work transition programs. But given the low number of Indigenous students in provincial school districts, the effectiveness of this program for Indigenous youth is very limited. There is no OYAP equivalent for First Nations schools on reserve.

To be eligible for an apprenticeship in a Red Seal trade (government certified), applicants must meet educational prerequisites that vary according to the trade. The ten building trades that require a minimum Grade 12 education or a General Education Development (GED) certificate, including all compulsory trades (requiring government certification), have some of the highest hourly wages, ranging from $54 to $64 per hour as a unionized journeyperson in Ontario in 2018. Their unions have a challenging time recruiting Indigenous apprentices, given the large number of First Nations workers without high school degrees. But there are fifteen other trades that only require Grade 10; their union hourly wages in 2018 ranged from $43 to $59. The length of the

43. Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1848–1930* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1996); Hunt and Rayside, "Labour Union Response"; Andrew Parnaby, "'The Best Men That Ever Worked the Lumber': Aboriginal Longshoremen on Burrard Inlet, BC, 1863–1939," *Canadian Historical Review* 87, 1 (March 2006): 53–78; Suzanne Mills and Tyler McCreary, "Social Unionism, Partnership and Conflict: Union Engagement with Aboriginal Peoples in Canada," in Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage, eds., *Rethinking the Politics of Labour in Canada* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2012), 116–131.

44. David Blanchard, "High Steel! The Kahnawake Mohawk and the High Construction Trade," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 11, 2 (1983): 41–60.

45. Joseph, interview, 2021.

apprenticeship programs also varies widely, from 2,500 hours, or two years, to 9,000 hours, or five to six years.[46] The announced ending of GED certification in Canada in the spring of 2024 will exacerbate this educational barrier. At the time of writing, no alternative program has been presented by the Ontario Ministry of Education.[47]

The unions' annual apprenticeship intake is based on employment forecasts for each trade, which provide an estimate of the number of new recruits that can realistically be brought into the labour market without increasing unemployment among their members. Forecasts for the post-pandemic recovery indicate the possibility of a low unemployment rate in the near future, thus removing a major obstacle for apprenticeship intakes. But some trades are in higher demand than others, and different unions have different apprenticeship intake systems.[48] The larger ones, like the Carpenters, Electrical Workers, Ironworkers, Labourers, Operating Engineers, Painters and Allied Trades, and Pipe Trades have their own training facilities, some of which are quite large. This gives them discretion over the entire recruitment and training process, enabling them to scale up or down their intake on short notice and create their own programs for equity-seeking groups. For instance, all of the unions listed above have (pre-)apprenticeship programs and other initiatives targeting First Nations workers in Northern Ontario. They also have higher completion rates than non-union training programs. This is because they offer better facilities, support services, and opportunities with multiple employers.[49] For smaller unions that rely on third-party skills-training providers, like colleges or their International's facilities in the United States, it is more challenging to launch programs for equity-seeking groups since these unions have less control over their own apprenticeship systems.

Low apprenticeship completion rates have been a persistent reality across the skilled trades. Ontario, one of the four provinces with the best results in 2019, registered only a 46 per cent completion rate. However, its rate of attrition (the lowest in Canada) was only 6 per cent – this varies significantly across the trades. Generally, the older the individual is at the start of their apprenticeship, the least likely they are to finish it. This is because they are more likely to have competing family and financial obligations. Indigenous apprentices tend to be most affected by this barrier, given their lower exposure to the trades in high school and the larger number who complete their secondary studies later

46. Ontario Construction Secretariat, *Careers in Construction: Experience the Possibilities* (2019).

47. Josh Goeree, "GED Testing Set to End in Canada," CityNews, 21 October 2023, https://kitchener.citynews.ca/2023/10/21/ged-testing-set-to-end-in-canada/.

48. Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, *Apprentice Demand in Red Seal Trades: A 2021 National Labour Market Information Report* (2021), 38.

49. Sean Strickland, "Completion Counts: Raising Apprenticeship Completion Rates in Ontario's Construction Industry" (Ontario Secretariat of Construction, 2014), 22.

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in life. Individuals coming from low-income families that lack the means to support long periods of unemployment and schooling, as is the case for most Indigenous apprentices, are also less likely to complete their programs.[50] This is even more challenging for Indigenous women, who are often required to do a great deal of unpaid support labour for their families and communities, forcing them at times to pause their studies for lengthy periods of time.

For Anna Willats, founder of the Women Transitioning to the Trades pre-apprenticeship program at George Brown College, a major challenge facing training programs that are geared to marginalized individuals is the "check the box" metrics of government funding. Under the standardized, inflexible, short-term focus of neoliberal training policies – which measure success in terms of how quickly an apprentice can find employment – non-linear education paths are counted as failures. This privileges those individuals who are "most ready" to enter the workforce, which are predominantly non-Indigenous students. As MacKinnon argued, neoliberal training models are ill suited to Indigenous apprentices because they dismiss the complexity of colonialism and "the need for comprehensive, holistic programming to address low-self-esteem, lack of motivation, personal and family issues, and low educational attainment," along with racism.[51] Holistic training models that integrate relationship-based Indigenous teaching methods and focus on "healing the spirit" – that is, boosting self-esteem and self-confidence and reclaiming cultural identities and teachings – are at the core of decolonized and Indigenized training. "Education and training should be about the whole person," Willats added. "If I can't eat properly, I can't learn properly. If I can't have my kids taken care of safely, I can't leave them and go off to a construction site or any place of work. That's the revolution that we need."[52]

With neoliberal education policies tying limited public funding to immediate industrial needs, non-profit organizations, employment and training agencies, social enterprises, colleges, and unions have had to step in and offer comprehensive programs for marginalized individuals. No single non-profit organization, no matter how large and well resourced, can provide all of the wraparound support – that is, academic advising and upgrading, access to food banks, housing, bursaries, career coaching and mentoring, child care, financial counselling, driver's education, job placements, tools and equipment lending, travel subsidies, and mental health and addiction services, among others – required for holistic training without partnering with other organizations. This range of services and partnerships have been most utilized

50. Hyeongsuk Jin, Manon Langevin, André Lebel, and Michael Haan, "Factors Associated with the Completion of Apprenticeship Training in Canada," *Insights on Canadian Society*, Statistics Canada, 9 December 2020, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2020001/article/00008-eng.htm.

51. MacKinnon, *Decolonizing Aboriginal Inclusion*, 31, 39, 42, 77–78.

52. Anna Willats, interview by Amy Barlow, 5 February 2021.

by urban Indigenous people in the cities, where they are most readily available, as opposed to First Nations reserves (especially northern), which are largely underserved.

The government's preference for per-project funding also creates a competitive grant-seeking environment that is antithetical to the collective principles of both Indigenous peoples and the labour movement. Some of our interviewees noted that Indigenous employment and training agencies that receive federal funding though the Indigenous Skills and Employment Training (ISET) program have resisted collaboration among themselves and with non-Indigenous organizations. According to Arsenault, ISET-holders do not usually maintain regular communication with unions, which means they are not always up to date on apprenticeship intake requirements, timelines, and forecasts. As per Joseph, one of the reasons behind this distancing is the fact that ISET-holders have their own apprenticeship programs in partnership with colleges and compete with unions for government funds. Another factor dampening the reach and efficacy of ISET-holders is their relative lack of visibility. For instance, one of our interviewees, a human resources and labour relations manager with a major contractor, who was responsible for overseeing equity hiring on a major project in Toronto, had never heard of a single ISET organization or the province-wide Aboriginal Apprenticeship Board of Ontario. Many of these challenges can be attributed to the high staff turnover typical of non-profit organizations, which can result in the loss of relationships, institutional memory, and communications. Another barrier might be related to intercommunity trust and the relationship-building work that still needs to happen. This is a matter not only for white settlers and their organizations but for all non-Indigenous people. The TCBN's executive director, Rosemarie Powell, a Black woman, articulated this point:

> When I think of the experiences of Black and racialized peoples … we are overrepresented as well, whether it be in the criminal justice system or the foster care system. We have a lot of experiences that are similar to the Indigenous communities and yet that kind of rapprochement doesn't seem to happen very organically. There are distancing silos that exist within our different cultures, and there needs to be more intentional effort put into building those relationships, and trust before we have any expectations of being able to work together.[53]

The way that (pre-)apprenticeship programs are delivered is another major factor in determining student retention. The best tradespeople do not necessarily make the best teachers, especially if they have received no pedagogical or Indigenous awareness training. It is essential that instructors understand the deep and multilayered impact of colonialism. For Indigenous apprentices, the notion of leaving their homes to learn a trade at a faraway training centre for a lengthy period of time may trigger painful intergenerational memories of residential schools. Decolonized curricula that encourage Indigenous youth to

53. Rosemary Powell, interview by author, 23 July 2021.

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learn about their history before and since colonialism and appreciate their traditions while learning the skills required in the workplace, have been deemed essential for cultural survival.[54] As MacKinnon confirmed after studying multiple training programs in Manitoba, "trainees who are most successful … are those who have come to understand their troubles as being deeply rooted in their oppression. Individuals who understood their learning as part of something more than just a means to an end have a much richer experience, which often leads them to pursue further training."[55] The motto "Indian control of Indian education" that rules Indigenous educational institutions might be impractical in union training centres, which are open to apprentices of all backgrounds and funded by the dues of all members. But Elders and other Indigenous experts can advise on and implement culturally sensitive curricula.[56]

Construction employment is highly sensitive to economic cycles. Labour recruitment gains during periods of growth are inevitably lost during downturns, with apprentices being the first to be laid off and the last to be hired back. Like all laid-off union workers, apprentices are expected to put their names on the dispatcher's out-of-work list, pay their monthly dues, provide their contact information, and call in to the union once a month to say if they are available to work. However, Indigenous apprentices often cease to communicate with their unions after the construction project for which they were initially hired ends. As Arsenault revealed, whenever Indigenous recruits "vanish," the unions become reluctant to hire again from the same First Nations community. Joseph, who now works for an Indigenous-owned contractor, placed the onus on the unions:

> Once they put their name on the books they are forgotten. … [T]hese people lack the confidence to give the union a call and say: "hey, I'm still looking for a job. Where is my name on the list?" … I'm trying to keep the confidence level up within my own manpower, reinforcing that they are doing a great job, just continue doing it and showing up for work every day is a big plus.[57]

For those apprentices who manage to get into a union and pay their monthly dues but never get called for work, the whole process becomes disappointing. The perception that they have been duped is likely to follow. It does not take many such anecdotes for an Indigenous community to lose what little trust it had in unions. The need for labour market intermediaries – who can facilitate, motivate, and act as champions of Indigenous apprentices who are encountering for the first time the professional expectations of modern workplaces

54. Fernandez and Silver, *Indigenous Workers and Unions*, 10.

55. MacKinnon, *Decolonizing Aboriginal Inclusion*, 172.

56. Kenneth Tourand, "Embracing Aboriginal Values and Traditions in a Unionized Environment," *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* 4, 1 (2004): 14–21.

57. Joseph, interview, 2021.

and union membership – has been identified by our research participants and the literature.[58] Lack of access to computers, internet, or cell phones might be wrongly interpreted by the unions and employers as lack of interest or professional integrity. Moreover, what recruiters, instructors, dispatchers, and employers might interpret as "idleness," whether informed or not by the persistent racist myth of the "lazy, drunken Indian," is in fact the outcome of one of the most pernicious and destructive forms of colonialism – namely, the internalized belief of inferiority and inadequacy.[59]

Another key factor impacting apprenticeships in the construction industry is mobility. Willingness to travel is an essential trait for construction workers, given the scattered and mobile nature of projects. As Arsenault explained, "We breed a workforce to work themselves out of a job. … When you finish, you need to be able to throw your toolbelt and a duffle bag with a couple of days' worth of clothes in the trunk of the car and make your way to the next site."[60] For some trades, like heavy equipment operator, having a driver's licence is also a prerequisite for an apprenticeship. Some sectors, like road building, also sometimes require workers to use their own vehicles to travel within the job site. Mobility is especially important in low-density areas where there is little public transit and the most common construction jobs – that is, road, bridge, sewer, and watermain building – require lengthy periods of travelling and sleeping in motels. Unionized workers, the majority of whom live in urban centres, have on average longer commute times than their non-unionized counterparts.[61] That is because when jobs become scarce in the cities, unions facilitate their movement to other regions where employment is available. Given that 48 per cent of Canada's Indigenous population live in areas with fewer than 30,000 residents, whereas 65 per cent of Ontario's construction workforce is concentrated in the Greater Golden Horseshoe – the most densely populated and unionized region in the country, centred around Toronto – the result can be reduced opportunities for non-unionized workers in rural areas.[62]

The construction industry is transregional. It is not bound by the typical labour geographies of most industries and their spatially fixed worksites. But even spatially bound resource extraction companies in northern Canada are tapping into the highly mobile southern construction workforce to meet their labour needs by way of fly-in/fly-out systems. In doing this, they add not only more stress on the construction industry's labour shortage but also greater incentives for Indigenous workers to enter their linked labour circuits. At

58. MacKinnon, *Decolonizing Aboriginal Inclusion*, 168–172.

59. MacKinnon, *Decolonizing Aboriginal Inclusion*, 4.

60. Arsenault, interview, 2021.

61. Prism, *Demographics & Diversity*, 1, 13.

62. Prism, *Demographics & Diversity*, 14.

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the same time, these companies are also bound by IBAs to meet Indigenous hiring targets, which require them to engage in workforce development. Building trade unions with their own training facilities have recognized this as an opportunity to organize these employers by offering to train northern Indigenous workers. The latter, in turn, have the opportunity to learn the skills that will give them access to the many jobs that are expected to come from the $33 billion ($11.8 billion in Ontario) investment in infrastructural development promised by the federal government, much of which will happen on Indigenous territories. These projects will draw unionized southern contractors, which will be able to meet the IBA's hiring targets and cut costs by employing local workers with the unions' help. Among these employers are the growing number of Indigenous-owned contractors, like A6N, a joint venture between the Six Nations of the Grand River (majority holder) and Aecon. This utilities contactor operates primarily within the Haldimand Tract – an area covering over 384,000 hectares along the Grand River – but has done work as far east as Windsor, as far north as Sudbury, as far west as Pickering, and in the future, as far south as New York State. Two of the largest construction unions in Ontario, the IUOE and the Labourers' International Union of North America, have granted A6N the ability to bypass their dispatch systems and "name hire" workers from any First Nations community, provided they become union members and pay their initiation fees.

This is a significant departure from the ways construction unions dealt with Indigenous workers not long ago. At the Voisey's Bay nickel mine in northern Labrador, construction unions in the early 2000s opposed the preferential hiring of local Inuit and Innu under the IBA, arguing that they would not make good construction workers on account of their supposed "lack of mobility." Much as "industrial skills" were historically defined by racist and gendered notions, perceptions about which groups are more or less mobile are also based on colonialist stereotypes. In the paradoxically self-fulfilling way in which stereotypes operate, the lack of material and logistic means that would allow Indigenous apprentices to travel is sometimes equated with their unwillingness, which in turn denies them the jobs that would afford them the means to be mobile.[63] For an impoverished person, the costs of driving school – absent on many First Nations reserves – or of buying a vehicle, insurance, and gas are prohibitive on an apprentice wage.

Nonetheless, our Indigenous interviewees confirmed that one of the most significant challenges facing union recruiters is the reluctance of First Nations youth to leave their reserves and travel for training. Besides the lack of means, the intergenerational trauma of residential schools and the resulting distrust in colonial institutions is another barrier. "We call them 'one-county boomers,'" Joseph remarked. "A lot of people are afraid to leave the community or go beyond having to stay overnight or relocate off their territories. … Because

63. Mills, "Geography of Skill," 724–742.

there is an uncertainty there. And they are unsure about themselves because there is not much self-worth installed in that generation."[64] Yet Indigenous networks, too, are transregional. They do not follow the colonial spatial organization on which Canada was founded. Mobility has long been a major part of Indigenous history that was repressed by their land dispossession, collective resettlement, and bureaucratic restrictions. First Nations peoples have been migrating from reserves to the cities in significant numbers since the 1940s.[65] Multi-generational urban Indigenous people maintain high levels of mobility, as confirmed by the Toronto District School Board, which has identified this as a major challenge for ensuring continuity in the education of First Nations students.[66] The importance of mobility is also reflected in the history of Indigenous unionism, like the Squamish longshoremen of Burrard Inlet, BC, who in 1906 founded Local 506 of the Industrial Workers of the World. This industrial alternative to craft unions organized unskilled, marginalized, casual, and mobile workers and allowed Indigenous workers to remain union members despite their seasonal absences for hunting and fishing. It was only when the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union implemented strict seniority and leave of absence rules in 1953 that the number of Indigenous longshoremen declined.[67]

Of the 31 collective agreements examined in this study,[68] 15 include seniority rules. These apply mostly to the order by which workers are laid off and subsequently rehired, or by which they are given the opportunity to work overtime. One of the ways employees can lose seniority is by failing to return to work within two to eight working days (depending on the contract) without notifying their employer. In some cases, employees can lose their seniority if they fail to provide a reason for their absence that is "acceptable to the Employer." None of these agreements included leaves for spiritual and cultural observances required by Indigenous faith and culture, or for traditional economic practices like hunting, fishing, berry picking, or spending time on the land. Yet these are major Indigenous "bread and butter" issues. Since 2013, members of

64. Joseph, interview, 2021.

65. Evelyn Peters, "'Our City Indians': Negotiating the Meaning of First Nations Urbanization in Canada, 1945–1975," *Historical Geography* 29 (2002): 75–92; Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, "Urban Indigenous People: Not Just Passing Through" (2019), 5.

66. Maria Yau, Jan O'Reilly, Lisa Rosolen, and Bryce Archer, "Aboriginal Students," *Census Portraits: Understanding Our Students' Ethno-racial Backgrounds* (Toronto: Toronto District School Board, 2011), 1.

67. Parnaby, "Aboriginal Longshoremen," 68, 77.

68. These agreements covered the period of 2004 to 2025 (25 of them covering 2018 to 2025) and were signed by the Ontario district councils or Toronto locals of the Labourers (7), Operating Engineers (6), Electrical Workers (4), Ironworkers (3), Painters and Allied Trades (3), Sheetmetal Workers (3), Carpenters (2), Plumbers and Pipefitters (2), Millwrights (1), and Boilermakers (1).

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the Six Nations of the Grand River have exercised their right to hunt for deer at Short Hills Provincial Park under the Nanfan Treaty of 1701. The annual hunt happens on six separate days between October and December, where it has been met by protests from local settlers. Six Nations members have also hunted in Dundas Valley Conservation Area, near Hamilton, throughout November. Any First Nation member can also hunt or fish outside their treaty areas, provided they have permission (a Shipman letter) from the local Nation's Chief and Council. As Indigenous peoples revive their land-based cultural traditions, rediscover the benefits of eating traditional foods,[69] and reintroduce their traditions to their fast-expanding youth, the more pressing it becomes for unions not only to accommodate but to bargain for Indigenous-specific leaves in their collective agreements. In this regard, building trade unions can learn from public-sector unions, which have bargained for Indigenous-specific leaves, paid Indigenous holidays, Indigenous language allowances, allowing for Elders to be present in disputes involving Indigenous employees, and specific needs of Indigenous workers' extended families.[70]

For the reasons mentioned above, recruiting, training, and employing Indigenous apprentices is a lengthier and costlier process than training workers with fewer barriers. This is why governments prefer to fast-track skilled immigrants into trades in high demand.[71] Even the Ironworkers, who have a long history of training and employing First Nations, have preferred to recruit certified workers in other industries looking to move into the building trades, since they have years of experience, are less costly to retrain, and are easier to employ. Arsenault elaborated: "Even though the building trades unions have committed to promote the trades in such a way that they run in parallel with colleges and universities as a first-choice post-secondary option … Unions cherry pick for the best intakes. Their reputation is tied to it."[72] Understandably, unions must ensure that they can satisfy employers with their immediate labour needs and that their members are (at least perceived to be) the most skilled and safety-conscious workers in the industry, since their organizing and negotiating strength depends on it. But by privileging the short-term gains of their current and aging membership, they trade off long-term growth and miss the opportunity to lead on workforce development and reconciliation, which are key for both Indigenous communities and the future of the building trade unions.

69. Chezney Martin, "Hunting Part of a 'Beautiful System' in Six Nations, Ont., among Traditional Foods Highlights in New Study," CBC News, 7 December 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/short-hills-deer-hunt-1.6275741.

70. Suzanne Mills and Louise Clarke, "'We Will Go Side-by-Side with You': Labour Union Engagement with Aboriginal Peoples in Canada," *Geoforum* 40 (2009): 991–1001.

71. MacKinnon, *Decolonizing Aboriginal Inclusion*, 47.

72. Arsenault, interview, 2021.

The Way of Local 793 and the OETIO

When the *Daily Commercial News* – the construction industry's leading news outlet in eastern Canada – published an article titled "First Nations skills training: There's a will but is there a way?" in October 2016, the business manager of Local 793 and IUOE vice-president for Canada, Mike Gallagher, was happy to respond in a letter to editor: "I can assure that [my union] is offering a way."[73] Local 793's "way" dates back to 2005, when the OETIO started providing training to Inuit students after it was contracted by the government of Nunavut under the Canada–Nunavut Labour Market Development Agreement in preparation for upcoming mining developments. This was the first time that a union-led centre trained workers from Nunavut. However, these workers had no formal connection to Local 793, which had no jurisdiction in that territory. The reason the Nunavut government sought the OETIO was not because of its union ties but for its state-of-the-art training facility in Morrisburg (over 2,100 kilometres from Iqaluit). Inaugurated in 1993 on a 130-acre site, this hoisting and earthmoving training centre – which includes accommodations, kitchen and dining hall, gym, auditorium, classrooms, and training grounds – frequently hosts students from around the world.[74]

The OETIO's first Indigenous pre-apprenticeship program opened in 2011 with funding from the Ontario government. At this point, the union started recruiting and training First Nations youth in communities where major developments were to take place in the coming years. Its first batch of trainees comprised 26 operators from the Moose Cree First Nation, who worked in the construction of the Lower Mattagami River hydroelectric project. Local 793 continued its momentum in 2013 by hiring its first Indigenous coordinator, whose job was to engage with First Nations leaders and coordinate outreach efforts among the union's offices across the province.[75]

That same year, Gallagher was a guest speaker at an Indigenous-led and OETIO-sponsored conference in Thunder Bay dedicated to the topic of apprenticeships. After inviting First Nations leaders to work with Local 793 and citing the many employment opportunities coming to Northern Ontario, the union leader stated, "If all of the development that takes places is done non-union you'll have none of those enforcement abilities to make sure the promises can be kept." This cautionary remark would be uncontroversial for a non-Indigenous audience familiar with labour organization. But for an Indigenous audience, it might have sounded like all-too-familiar colonialist paternalism, in the way that it presented the union as "saviour" and dismissed

73. Mike Gallagher, "IUOE Local 793 Is Offering a Way for Aboriginal Youth," letter to the editor, *Daily Commercial News*, 14 November 2016.

74. IUOE Local 793, "Centennial Celebration: 100 Years Strong" (2019), 37, 44, 51, 66, 73, 82.

75. IUOE Local 793, *793 Operator*, December 2005, 4, 19; September 2009, 5; Spring 2011, 34–35; Fall 2012, 25; Spring 2013, 27; Fall 2013, 5, 26–28; Spring 2018, 35.

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Indigenous forms of resistance as ineffective. At its national conference the following year, where the Canadian IUOE passed a resolution stating that unions "need to be part of the solution" to the problems facing Indigenous peoples in Canada, Gallagher made a more measured statement: "[Unions are] not the only solution, in fairness, but they are definitely part of the solution if we engage [Indigenous communities] and can convince them that the union way is the way go to."[76]

Six months later, Local 793 condemned the federal NDP for opposing the Keystone XL pipeline. In a press release, the IUOE expressed its disappointment with the NDP for dismissing the controversial project's net benefit to workers across Canada who "depend on the resource sector and construction for their livelihoods." The communiqué quoted the IUOE's general president, James Callahan, who stated, "If you are on the side of working people, then you should be for this project."[77] Considering that First Nations were the most vocal opponents of this project, the union's statement inadvertently labelled Indigenous peoples as being *against* working people. It also implied that the livelihoods of union members were of greater importance than those of Indigenous peoples whose economic practices might have been jeopardized by the pipeline. These dissonant communications reflect not only the learning processes that unions undergo in their path to reconciliation but also the conflicting priorities of construction unions and Indigenous communities when it comes to environmentally damaging and aggressively colonialist projects.[78]

In 2014, Local 793 requested and received from the IUOE's American head office an additional charter granting it jurisdiction for all of Nunavut; it then started the slow process of organizing workers in that territory. That year, Local 793/OETIO also partnered with the Matawa First Nation, the government of Ontario, Aecon, ATCO Structures & Logistics, Bell Canada, Cisco Canada, Galaxy Satellite, and Confederation College to create a mobile remote training centre – unveiled at the Neskantaga First Nation – that allowed northern students to take courses taught by instructors in the South via satellite uplink. The goal was to give northern workers who were interested in finding employment in Ontario's Ring of Fire – a vast region of Northern Ontario that may contain one of the largest mineral deposits in Canada, where several mining developments have been proposed – an opportunity to start learning the required skills without leaving their communities.[79] One positive by-product of this

76. IUOE Local 793, "Gallagher Speaks to First Nations Leaders," 26 March 2013; "Union Looking to Develop Partnership," 19 March 2014.

77. IUOE, press release, 7 November 2013.

78. Suzanne Mills, "Beyond the Blue and Green: The Need to Consider Aboriginal Peoples' Relationships to Resource Development in Labor-Environment Campaigns," *Labor Studies Journal* 36, 1 (2011): 104–121.

79. "Grand Opening of First Remote Training Centre Celebrated in Neskantaga," *Cision*, 19 August 2014; Grant Cameron, "OETIO to Offer E-learning at Training Facility," IUOE Local 793.

partnership was when Local 793 used its presentation time in December 2020 at the House of Commons' Indigenous and Northern Affairs Committee to advocate for the building of clean drinking water infrastructure at Neskantaga, which has been under a boil water advisory since 1995.[80]

The following year, Local 793 rolled out its Aboriginal Engagement Plan for Ontario and Nunavut, which included marketing its training programs with First Nations communities, offering information sessions for those interested in learning about the union, compiling information about Indigenous OETIO graduates so that the union could follow up with each apprentice, and recruiting approximately 50 Indigenous workers every year. Since then, Local 793/OETIO officials have visited communities in Nunavut where construction projects were underway and participated in trade shows, conferences, and other Indigenous-led events. The union cemented its relationships with First Nations communities in 2016, when it signed a statement of partnership with the Chiefs of Ontario at the Assembly of First Nations' general assembly. Under this three-year partnership, the parties agreed to work together toward recruiting students to the OETIO's (pre-)apprenticeship programs. By the fall of that year, 626 Indigenous workers, including women, had received training at the institute over the previous twelve years.[81]

The OETIO's Indigenous pre-apprenticeship is an eleven-week tuition-free program paid for by Local 793 and the provincial government, designed for twelve students from Ontario – for scale, in 2022–23, the OETIO had 126 trainees in earthmoving equipment, 132 trainees in hoisting equipment, and 36 youth pre-apprentices, in addition to the Indigenous program. The first three weeks are dedicated to preparing students for the trades' certification exam, which they must pass before advancing. Students can work at their own pace, spend time one-on-one with instructors, and have the exam read to them (in English) if necessary. Should they fail their first attempt, they are given two days to work on subject areas where they need help with before rewriting the exam. According to an OETIO staff member whom we will call Sandra, a non-Indigenous former civil servant with decades of experience in Indigenous employment and training, no student has yet failed the exam. As she noted, the exam preparation component is the only formal difference between the Indigenous program and their general youth pre-apprenticeship.[82]

After students pass their exam, they have a two-week e-learning course. If their ISET agency cannot supply them with a computer, the OETIO provides laptops they can borrow while they are at the facility. After the theory

80. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs, *Evidence*, 43rd Parl., 2nd Sess. (1 December 2020), 1120–1125, https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-2/INAN/meeting-9/evidence#Int-11051086.

81. IUOE Local 793, *The Operator*, Spring 2014, 41; Spring 2015, 35; Fall 2016, 5, 33.

82. Sandra (pseudonym), interviews by Amy Barlow, 26 January 2021, and Gilberto Fernandes, 3 August 2021.

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coursework is complete, the students start practising with small machines and loader haul trucks for entry-level positions. At the end of this program, they are offered an eight-week paid placement with a unionized contractor at a $15 hourly wage (as of August 2021). If they are successful, the contractor usually keeps them as Local 793 apprentices, at which point they start earning higher wages; they also pay a union initiation fee of nearly $1,000. At a later date, the students return to the OETIO for a twelve-week apprenticeship program – not exclusive to Indigenous students – where they practise on larger earthmoving equipment. This program has an $810 enrolment fee, but the institute has been able to cover this expense when needed with funding from ISET agencies and other Indigenous organizations.

The OETIO recruits Indigenous students through ISET agencies, at job fairs, by running advertisements on local radio stations, through social media, and by word of mouth. Most of its recruits have a high school diploma or college degree, have a driver's licence, and are selected based on their perceived readiness to complete the program, move on to the apprenticeship, and ultimately enter the workforce. The latter is how the OETIO defines success. Its program is not holistic, informed by Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods, rooted in anticolonialism, or seeking to "heal the spirit." But according to Sandra, staff will go the extra mile for "the ones who really want help. If [they] don't really want help, [they] might as well get home on the first bus."[83] The kind of personal investment from staff includes suicide prevention and addiction counselling, as well as referrals to Alcoholics Anonymous or the De Novo Treatment Centre – an addiction rehab facility founded in 1993 by construction unions and contractors, usually accessible only to union members and their families as part of their health benefits. Although not informed by holistic methods, the OETIO does offer wraparound support in partnership with ISET agencies, including a $100 to $200 weekly allowance, transportation to Morrisburg, protective gear, and free accommodation, food, and other amenities. Local 793's and OETIO's staff have also benefitted from Indigenous awareness training and visits from Elders who have shared their stories, which, according to Sandra, have significantly reduced discrimination within the organization. However, these visits have not been integrated into the Indigenous pre-apprenticeship program. As per Sandra, the main challenge is retention: "[Training is] good to the point when they get a cheque. But when they get laid off it's like everything stops."[84] To address this issue, Local 793 hired an Indigenous coordinator in 2022 whose job is to follow up with apprentices and remind them to put their names on the out-of-work list, call in once a month, and pay their $25 monthly dues.

Local 793's main focus of late is Nunavut's mining industry. In 2018, the fly-in/fly-out workers at Baffinland's open pit iron mine in Mary River – located

83. Sandra, interview by Amy Barlow, 26 January 2021.

84. Sandra, interview by Amy Barlow, 26 January 2021.

about 176 kilometres from the nearest hamlet, Pond Inlet – approached Local 793 with the intention to unionize. As it signed up the workers, Baffinland realized the union's potential use in helping the company meet its lofty commitment of having a 25 per cent Inuit workforce at the site, as stated in its IBA with the Qikiqtani Inuit Association (QIA). The company volunteered to sign its first collective agreement (or "mutual gains partnership agreement") with Local 793, ratified in April 2019, granting it bargaining rights over 800 haul truck drivers, heavy equipment operators, and other trades outside the union's traditional jurisdiction. Since then, the QIA, Local 793, and other stakeholders have discussed plans to build a training centre at Pond Inlet. In the meantime, the QIA, Baffinland, and the local ISET agency have recruited Inuit workers – a process that involves a medical examination, criminal background check, and job readiness program (where they learn financial and banking skills, plus other "life skills") – and sent them to Morrisburg with travel expenses paid. Recruiters in Nunavut typically receive only a handful of applications. Given the region's lack of employment opportunities where the recruits can gain previous work experience, recruiters take into account technical skills specific to life in the Arctic (e.g. fixing snowmobiles, handicrafts) as transferable skills. According to Sandra, the average recruit is around eighteen to twenty years old, is fluent in spoken (not necessarily written) Inuktitut, and can comprehend English; at Morrisburg, they are encouraged to speak Inuktitut among themselves. At the time of our interview, the OETIO was considering translating training materials into Inuktitut; some of Local 793's internal communications, including safety materials and the business manager's reports, are translated into French, Italian, and Portuguese.

New challenges for Local 793 have arisen since 2019, including the global COVID-19 pandemic, a protracted review of the mine's expansion – which the Nunavut Impact Review Board ruled against in May 2022 – and a protest blockade by local hunters and trappers opposed to the mine's expansion.[85]

Conclusion

In recent years, some of the largest building trade unions have recruited, trained, and employed Indigenous workers in northern communities ahead of the many infrastructure, mining, and green energy developments promising relatively steady employment in the foreseeable future. The efforts of these unions, combined with those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations, governments, and contractors, are starting to show positive results. Among construction unions in Ontario and Nunavut, Local 793 is considered a leader

85. Meagan Deuling, "Nunavut's Mary River Mine Workers Vote to Ratify 1st Union Deal," CBC News, 25 April 2019, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/mary-river-mine-ratifies-union-deal-1.5109541; "Nunavut Mine Blockade to Continue until Concerns Are Addressed, Say Inuit Hunters," CBC News, 5 February 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/baffinland-blockade-hunters-group-1.5902516.

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when it comes to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and contributions toward their economic self-determination. The union has built relationships with Indigenous leaders and organizations, partnered with IBA-signatory employers, offered Indigenous-focused training programs, hired Indigenous coordinators and intermediaries, and bypassed traditional dispatch systems, among others.

But can these efforts be seen as forms of decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization? Arguments can be made on both sides of this important question. On the one hand, Local 793 and the OETIO have shown a genuine commitment to fundamentally renegotiating their relationship with Indigenous peoples by making it a strategic priority for their growth, recognizing the sovereignty of and developing partnerships with Indigenous governing bodies, and investing significant resources into recruiting and training this group of workers in Ontario and Nunavut. These are important steps toward diversifying and decolonizing the labour movement and the construction industry, including the missteps from which Local 793 and other unions can learn important lessons. On the other hand, unions remain settler organizations ruled by Western traditions and colonial legislation. Their industries still contribute to the environmental degradation of Indigenous land and livelihoods, into which, some argue, unions seek to "assimilate" Indigenous workers. While the OETIO provides wraparound support and personalized help, its training methods have not been Indigenized (they do not seek to "heal the spirit") and largely correspond with neoliberal expectations of individual merit and job readiness. Furthermore, unions, which are governed by non-Indigenous executives and members through majority rule, are novel political bodies in what are already complex polities, which might include IBA-signatory organizations; hereditary and elected chiefs; Indigenous and settler environmental organizations and review boards; Indigenous and settler local, regional, and multinational corporations; and territorial, provincial, and federal governments. Unionized Indigenous workers may benefit from the many legal, financial, and political resources that unions provide, but the legitimacy of the unions' colonial-regulated jurisdiction and representation is sometimes challenged by non-unionized Indigenous employers and governing bodies, especially when their economic interests collide. Tensions between Local 793 and Inuit organizations have already emerged at the Mary River mine over the right to "speak for" the interests of Inuit workers.

The Indigenous workforce development methods used by Local 793 and the OETIO have not been fully decolonized. But do they work? It is too soon to answer that question definitively, given that the economic impact of the training provided is still largely prospective of continued employment in upcoming infrastructure, mining, and green energy projects. It is also difficult to assess the overall impact of training Indigenous apprentices, since Local 793/OETIO, like all building trades unions, have not kept track of the apprentices' journeys once they complete their programs. While the union

and its training arm believe that their Aboriginal Engagement Plan has been largely successful, as reflected in the number of recruits and graduates coming out of the OETIO, the retention of Indigenous workers in the construction industry remains a challenge. The reasons for this are varied; some are related to colonialist barriers whose resolution falls beyond the scope of any single union. But it also means that there is plenty of work left to do.

Unions and Indigenous organizations will disagree over their motivations, methods, and goals. But as the main opponents of neoliberalism, unions should be part of the solution to the problems resulting from colonialism and ought to engage in decolonization, reconciliation, and Indigenization as a natural extension of the collectivist principles that they share with Indigenous peoples. As far as working-class organizations go, unions have the most political resources, infrastructures, and networks. They can also generate their own core funding, through membership dues and employer contributions, and are privileged recipients of government grants. Unions can leverage their political and financial power as Indigenous allies and help fill some of the gaps left by successive neoliberal government policies when it comes to training Indigenous workers. Nonetheless, it is important not to lose sight of the massive scope and complexity of the problems facing Indigenous peoples in Canada or place unreasonable expectations on any one union to solve them. Even a craft union as large as the IUOE Local 793 has limits on its resources and scope of action. Still, it is encouraging for progressive forces in the labour movement to see construction unions move beyond the traditional "bread and butter" interests of their members toward organizing and empowering historically marginalized workers. We are still learning about the achievements, pitfalls, and long-term outcomes of labour–Indigenous partnerships. But as the data suggests, there are reasons to be optimistic.

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