

The background of the entire page is a repeating pattern of small, stylized human figures in a light orange color, set against a darker orange background. The figures are arranged in a grid-like fashion, creating a textured, crowd-like effect.

Amended Report **From the Indigenous Working Group**

April 24, 2023



NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

Report to 2023 Convention

AMENDED REPORT FROM THE INDIGENOUS WORKING GROUP APRIL 24, 2023

Produced across the Unceded, Traditional territories and Treaty territories of Indigenous peoples.

It has been a busy three years, with another six months until Convention. So much has happened within the Union, the borders of Canada and across Mother Earth.

For the past two years, the IWG has provided artwork to the Union for different events. For September 30, Orange Shirt Day, and the now recognized National Day of Truth and Reconciliation, members of the group reached out to Indigenous artists and Elders for their input. Through consensus, we agreed that truth is the first step of reconciling. With that in mind two shirts came to be offered.

The first was of an officer (referred to as “enforcer” by the artist’s family), a child, and a mother. This represented the children that had been removed from their families by the use of law enforcement to attend residential schools. This historical truth was gathered from witness testimonies given to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as well as direct recollection from the artist’s, Vanessa Willow’s, own family. For those that haven’t seen the image, the back of the shirt read: “It’s only when the truth is known, that real healing can begin.” This shirt definitely stirred emotions, but because of this, difficult and meaningful discussions began to take place. Even APTN (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) reached out to CUPW for an interview. It is our hope, that because we have started these difficult discussions, our Union will continue to engage in respectful dialogue and be an active and respectful ally and take these interviews on. We would see this as an act of solidarity.

The second shirt, offered in 2022, was a residential school with representatives of the Church in the doorway and within the hills of the school, you see unmarked graves and representations of our children who never made it back to their families. The words to accompany this shirt read: “And then a little voice whispers, they found us. They tried to bury us, but forgot we are the seeds.” This is also artwork based on the witness statements from the TRC, done by the same artist some time ago.

With the announcement of the Tk'emlups te Secwepemc, proof of unmarked graves provided by the ground penetrating radar at the Kamloops Indian Residential School, we saw a wave of recognition from the Canadian people move from coast to coast to coast. (Our children really were the seeds of change, awakening a sleeping nation). This truth is one that Indigenous peoples have always known; it is a truth that all governments of Canada have known about, even as it happened. It is a truth that members of the Church have known about and have hidden in their unreleased documents, truths that some Canadian citizens have heard about, but had been indifferent to... Since then, the Pope made a visit to Canada to apologize and still the apology seems to have fallen short. An apology because some members of the church behaved badly, but not one on behalf of the Church. Families continue to wait for church records to be released, so they may have access to the names of family members that were stolen from them and never returned. One day families might have closure.

We have seen in the news, Canadian citizens threaten the lives of Mi'kmaq fisherman, their families, coworkers, and friends. Metis men have lost their lives while hunting and providing for their families. We have seen Indigenous peoples, mothers, daughters, fathers, Elders die while waiting for medical attention. They have suffered abuses and been the focus of racialized "games" within our hospitals, where they have gone for medical care. We have seen firsthand the government use excessive force – armed military and police – to remove Indigenous peoples off of their traditional territory. We have seen corporations and government use injunctions to buy themselves time, while displacing Indigenous persons, so they can quickly construct and destroy what Indigenous peoples have been fighting to protect. With the forced removal and injunctions also comes the silencing of Indigenous voices. We can clearly see the tragedy still unfolding. It's a fact that we have much work ahead of us.

IWG members and allies have visited Dididaht and Pacheedaht traditional territory where people have gathered to protect ancient old growth forest. Canadian citizens are showing up at these gatherings, actively listening and participating; they too are tired of the corporate steam roller running over Indigenous peoples' rights, tired of their practice of extracting all that they can from the land, leaving nothing for generations yet to come. We have had opportunities to listen to members from the Six Nations speak on their relationship with Mother Earth while visiting and supporting other Nations along the West Coast. While reconciliation is discussed and sold to us by corporations and government, while they are busy checking boxes, the government and corporations are also busy trying to cash out on every possible resource available to them, hopeful to capitalize exponentially before they are forced to actively participate in reconciliation in a meaningful way.

Did you know that in surface area, Indigenous peoples are only left with 0.3 of a percent of Canada, according to Canada? And still corporations and Canada seem to desire more.... As this cycle continues, we have seen Indigenous peoples come together from different territories to support each other, shutting down transportation routes, standing side by side when confronted by military force.

Indigenous peoples, including members from the Indigenous Working Group, have come together at events and shared their histories and truths about how their people are connected to the land with those who have chosen to join them. Although governments and citizens of this country seemingly support reconciliation, their actions on all levels would suggest otherwise, making it stink like propaganda. Regardless, members of the Indigenous Working Group are still here, willing to work, and willing to make connections and nurture the relationships we have been fortunate to build. We have put recommendations forward to the NEB regarding the importance of land acknowledgements and supporting #landback. Reconciliation will never happen until land issues are settled.

As more truths are revealed, difficult conversations are taking place, and as the Indigenous Working Group, we feel a responsibility to our communities, which includes the Union and all of you, to have this dialogue and communicate and work together in a good way.

How can we report without discussing Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls and 2 Spirit + (MMIWG2+) people. The IWG had discussions and made recommendations regarding a poster that came out for summer solstice. Most recently, more than 100 advocates and allies gathered in Winnipeg calling for a national state of emergency to be declared for MMIWG2+ people. We hear and see the news, and do we stop and wonder: “Why this is happening to one group of people?” We would ask you to look deeper into the “why.” Why when a woman goes missing, a national man hunt ensues to great degree, but when Indigenous women go missing in this nation, the nation we live in, this government’s agent of law refuses to search a landfill? Where is the media? Where are our allies? Where is the justice?

Our work started this mandate by putting out a poster with artwork done by Tristen Jennie, an Indigenous artist who created work to recognize our stolen sisters. If you didn’t know, sister Michelle Riley’s image was used by the artist for creating it. The IWG was honoured that she allowed her image to be used, as she is an incredible advocate and works tirelessly to bring awareness to MMIWG2+. Members of the IWG continue to go to events, bring information back to their locals and regions, and will continue to advocate for an end to this genocide.

The artwork that the Indigenous Working Group provides to CUPW has always been a part of our circle. We only put it forward once we have reached consensus, and have all shared our voice, guided by our Elders. Some is celebratory, some is thought provoking, some is painful, beautiful, some you will be drawn to and some you will not. Regardless, Indigenous people have always used art to convey truth, and the Indigenous Working Group honours this through our actions.

We were all impacted by COVID. It has been difficult on all of us. Lives were lost, people were isolated, travel was restricted, events were restricted in size, we had to learn to navigate new waters, and zoom took a while to adjust to. As Indigenous peoples, this meant holding a circle and working in a traditional sense was challenging. Our work is often steeped in controversy and trauma and is challenging in the best of times. COVID amplified these challenges. It is difficult to create and hold safe spaces through Zoom and to support one another in a meaningful way online.

Although Zoom allowed us to meet, it also amplified inequities. It showed the challenges of meaningful participation due to lack of reliable internet service in both isolated and Indigenous communities. Still the IWG worked and achieved many things.

Many of the IWG have attended union events via Zoom and in person to share teachings with the membership. We are lucky that the members of our group are so committed, that even while doing their own personal work to grow and heal, they opened themselves up to share with you. Over the past few years, we have lost some of these amazing Indigenous advocates from the IWG. All champions of human rights, always pushing and working towards building a stronger Union, a better world, while still recognizing the Union, the membership, for supporting and holding them up. They have flown around Turtle Island presenting and holding hard discussions, whether it be about the oppression Indigenous communities still face (poisoned water, food insecurity, lack of communication services such as internet, MMIWG, forcibly removing Indigenous people off the land they steward, continued taking of Indigenous children...) or about reconciliation, they share their perspectives from an Indigenous world view, discussing what actions people can take, and what it means to be an ally. As they have given endless hours of their time and sacrificed their comfort so we might be better off, it is only right to recognize them for all their efforts, dedication and accomplishments. Even though they are no longer official IWG members (or won't be after convention) they will forever be a member in our hearts, and we will continue their work, as their struggle is our struggle. Much thanks and love to our Indigenous Union family who have left, and to all those who will not be rejoining us after convention, we see you and wish you well, continuing your life journey.

In 2022, with travel restrictions lifted, it is great to have educational courses happening in person, once again. Turtle Island is an excellent course offered by CUPW and Indigenous facilitators. A course that takes us through the history of this country while sharing experiences and history through an Indigenous lens. Ask your Union comrades to see if any of them have had the opportunity to take it, and if you have had the opportunity, please share a little about your experience with others. Many of the IWG are facilitators for this course, and education is our passion. It was passed previously at convention, that National officers take this course during this mandate. Knowing that travel has ranged from being non-existent to challenging to back to normal, it is our hope they set this as a priority.

It is exhausting, as part of this group, to have to try and explain the complexities of Indigenous issues, while trying not to offend and move forward in a good way, so we can then move forward with the IWG recommendations to the National Executive Board (NEB). While some members in leadership roles have already taken on the challenge and personal work of reconciliation, the IWG expects all leadership to commit to this work. Not only will this action assist us in our union work, but it is a step towards removing the unknown biases we have within ourselves, leading to deeper understanding and building a strong foundation not only for our union and leadership, but for all of us in our relationships and responsibilities to one another.

As stated before, the Indigenous Working Group works through issues steeped in controversy and often trauma. We have put forward numerous recommendations to the National Executive Board this mandate, recommendations around Louis Riel Day, a writing campaign supporting the struggle for the liberation of Leonard Peltier, and recommendations to include more Indigenous voices to the Delivering Community Power Campaign. However, it is still obvious we have much work ahead of us. We look forward to moving more recommendations structured around the Truth & Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action, the MMIWG 231 Calls for Justice, #Landback and other Indigenous movements around Mother Earth. We would ask our brothers, sisters and comrades to take some time and look into some of these causes and actions or events. Having respectful dialogue with one another, learning about these issues, celebrating the diverse backgrounds & experiences of all equity seeking groups, is the beginning of building better relationships, stronger communities, and a stronger union. You are instrumental to this...Solidarity. In good spirit, All our relations.