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Report National Human Rights Committee

Canadian Union of Postal Workers
Syndicat des travailleurs et travailleuses des postes

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NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE

Report to 2023 Convention

This report has been written across the unceded, traditional territories and treaty territories of Indigenous people, finalized and translated on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabeg people.

As we gather at the opening of this 52nd Convention of CUPW, it is time for us to reflect, re-energize and re-commit to boldly move forward with action. The NHRC has been in place since 1996, therefore we must reflect upon what has been accomplished in 27 years, what is still to be done and how we get there together.

While one would hope that human rights in the Union, in the workplace, and in the world would have made significant gains by 2023, nearly a quarter of the way into this new century, there are countless incidents of unspeakable violence and inequitable treatment and practices that continue to thrive. We are witnessing the consolidation globally of a capitalistic, militaristic, imperialistic world that values power and profits over people. Colonialism, neoliberalism, imperialism racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism and patriarchy still define our societal norms that negatively impact our work lives, and personal realities. As active members of CUPW and the broader labour movement, we are called upon to do better and fight these injustices locally and globally. That is the *raison d'être* for our National Human Rights Committee (NHRC).

The NHRC's mission and directive is to bolster CUPW's capabilities, by applying an anti-oppression, anti-racism lens to the all the Union's work - committees, policies, practices, procedures, campaigns, and struggles as the union like society is not immune to the racism and oppression that exists in the world.

The NHRC is made up of four working groups that work separately and collaboratively to bring awareness and action to their particular equity group issues as they support and are in solidarity with all 4 Equity-seeking group in the NHRC that twice a year, brings together:

1. Workers of Colour
2. LGBTQ workers
3. Indigenous workers
4. Differently abled workers

The objective of the NHRC is to improve human rights within CUPW, our employers, and in society more broadly. The Committee does this by undertaking research and reporting on various issues that concern each equity-seeking group, and to make recommendations to the National Executive Board to improve equity internally and externally to the Union.

The Committee is made up of:

- One Regional Representative for each working group (4 Members 8 Regions = 32 there are also two alternates for each equity group)
- Each elected National and Regional Representative of CUPW who self identifies as one or more of the equity-seeking working groups

The current term has been a difficult one as we have faced the challenges and revelations not only of the unprecedented pandemic, but the real time witnessing of the killing of George Floyd as we were locked down in our homes, forced not to look away and the continuing discovery of countless Indigenous children found in unmarked graves on the grounds of residential institutions.

Since the NHRC was elected, there continues to be numerous killings of Black and Indigenous people at the hands of police; the continued discrimination and hatred towards lesbians, gays, bisexual, trans, queer and non-binary people, exclusion of people with disabilities to take their rightful places within workplaces or workplaces providing access/accommodation and the continued exploitation and brutality meted out on women and all marginalized people.

These injustices are what fuel our passion to push human rights issues and make a difference. During our term, we can proudly report on the following CUPW NHRC accomplishments:

- We participated in uncovering and publicizing the story of Albert Jackson the First Black Postman known, a stamp unveiled in his honour and finally the celebration of a new processing centre in in Scarborough that proudly displays Albert Jackson's name and face.
- We fulfilled the following resolution passed by the NEB in 2017 that had been delayed:

RECOMMENDATION # 26:

It is MOVED, SECONDED and CARRIED to adopt the NHRC Recommendation # 26.

NHRC RECOMMENDS that an equity audit of the elected leadership of CUPW be completed and done at the local, regional, and national levels.

BE IT RESOLVED that an equity audit be done throughout CUPW at the local, regional, and national levels of the staff.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that it shall be done by December 2017.

We began the first phase of this ground-breaking CUPW Equity Audit with a survey launched in July 2022 closed in August 2022 with data still being analyzed to determine the next steps for phase two.

Phase 2 will be based on the results of the phase one survey and take a holistic approach to further examine CUPW structures, work and services with an equity lens, to further assist CUPW in ensuring a representative leadership structure. This phase 2 will also support CUPW in advancing human rights issues and becoming a model for the broader labour movement.

- We were also able to identify the first Indigenous postal worker John Fletcher who worked in Fort Williams, Thunder Bay. The installation of a plaque in his honour is in the planning stages.
- The planning is underway by a NHRC sub-committee for the Conference that will take place in Montreal, April 13-15, 2023. The theme of the Conference will centre around rejuvenating, re-energizing, and re-activating Human Rights Activism. We are hoping for up to 150 participants.
- We are introducing a newly designed weeklong mandatory Human Rights Course for Leaders to be delivered in February and April 2023 for a total of up to 30 CUPW elected National and Regional Leaders.
- Members of the NHRC are part of the multi union Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Committees at all levels of the Union. The EDI committees can play a role in supporting efforts to advance inclusion at CPC and more broadly. We have been able to sign memorandum of agreements with Canada Post to advance the hiring of Indigenous workers and advance community hubs from our Delivering Community Power Indigenous communities.
- The hard fought mandatory human rights training, contained within our collective agreements as Appendix HH manuals have been updated and training of facilitators has commenced.

Water Is An Issue of Human Rights and Connects Us All

The National Human Rights Committee has included a reusable water bottle in every delegate's Convention kit to bring attention to and share information about the importance of water as a human rights issue. We are focusing on three areas of concern:

1. Importance and necessity for clean drinking water for all.
2. The history of the struggle against not having the basic human right to clean drinking water in Indigenous communities.

3. A call to action of how non-Indigenous people can stand in solidarity understanding the issue of clean water is an issue for all Canadians to fight for until there is clean drinking water in every Indigenous community. We encourage all CUPW members to get involved in water campaigns in their regions.

To Indigenous people, water is life; water is the source and continuity of all living things. This is exemplified in their culture, artistic expressions, spiritual ceremony, and daily life. Through their teachings, we learn of Turtle Island and how everything is connected - a circle of life, a continuum as set out in the article titled “The Water Crisis in Canada’s First Nations Communities, Carina Xue Luo, University of Windsor, November 14, 2021 - [Basdeo & Bharadwaj, 2013])”

It is unconscionable that in Canada accessibility to clean drinking water has been a challenge for many First Nations communities, some, for decades. We have had a generation grow up in some communities, only knowing bottled water.

Relocation of First Nations Communities to secondary habitats with insufficient water supply, and deficient water systems with low support for water operators and inconsistent training, only exacerbate the issues. (David Suzuki Foundation, 2017). Often, the water in their communities has been put under a water advisory by Health Canada. Water advisories recommend an action that must be taken for self-preservation: 1) Boil Water, 2) Do Not Consume, or 3) Do Not Use.

In a community with a boil water advisory or a do not consume advisory, tap water may still be used for bathing and laundry; however, the risk of a rash or skin irritation is commonly neglected when weighed against the arduous task of hauling water. But when the advisory is Do Not Use, water must be brought in from an outside source and provided for every member! Every day!

In most Canadian cities, water is filtrated through a sanitation plant and monitored hourly for contaminants that are harmful to human beings. Regulated water quality and guidelines have been put in place to safeguard the delivery of clean water. Water Advisories, when issued, are not usually long term, however this is not the case in many First Nations communities which demonstrates environmental racism. (Barlow, Maude, 2016, Boiling Point, ECW Press Toronto p.9-16).

Prior to industrial expansion, most water systems in Canada were also free of contaminants; health and safety laws were put in place to protect not only our workers, but also those people living a rural lifestyle and acquiring well water from aquifers. These are usually tested annually.

With the advent of technology and economic growth, industry and agriculture faced a new series of challenges. In many parts of the country, laws were changed, transferred, enhanced, or eliminated to accommodate business expansion. Energy, mining, and agriculture required their own specialized regulation. Where Canada was able to, it passed responsibility to the provinces, and the provinces passed on what they could to municipalities. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts, increasing costs, and many other factors, the ability to monitor and enforce regulation was impaired, and regulation itself was eroded. (Barlow, Maude, 2016, Boiling Point, ECW Press Toronto p.26-47).

The most publicized and publicly acknowledged example of the consequences of this type of negligence is when seven people died and 2,300 became ill when E. coli contaminated Walkerton, Ontario's water supply in May 2000. It occurred after rain washed manure from a local farm into one of the town's wells. This was considered a tragedy across the country, yet, every day First Nations Communities across our country face similar realities. They live with water advisories for many years, for example Shoal Lake has been under a water advisory for 20 years, while Neskantaga First Nation, is currently going on 27 years, and must constantly advocate for access to clean drinking water. (Barlow, Maude, 2016, Boiling Point, ECW Press Toronto p.52-76).

In Indigenous communities affected by contaminated water, mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and suicide are not uncommon and cancer, stomach ailments, skin conditions, birth defects, and death, can all be attributed to their water (Anny Burns - Pieper/The Tyee May 5, 2021).

When communities lack a mainstay resource such as water, children grow up relying on sugary drinks that are more readily available and often cheaper. This contributes to serious chronic illness such as obesity, diabetes, and negative dental impacts. In some communities, amputations are much higher than average due to the lack of proper sanitation and the inability to properly clean a wound results in infection. (Anny Burn- Pieper/The Tyee March 2021).

Yet none of this is tracked in Indigenous communities. There are no government agencies or official representatives collecting data or statistics (Anny Burn- Pieper/The Tyee March 2021); there is no public outcry in the local paper, because there is no local paper. These communities are isolated; these are people who chose to practice their traditional ways and have a promise from the Crown, to be allowed to do so.

On July 28, 2010, the United Nations passed Resolution 64/292 which states "the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights." (The Right to Water Fact Sheet, No. 35, United Nations, OHCHR, UN-Habitat, WHO, 2010).

In 2015, newly elected Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, stated that all long-term drinking water advisories for First Nation Communities would be lifted by 2021, but the Government failed to meet that commitment. (Barlow, Maude, 2016, Boiling Point, ECW Press Toronto p.58).

As of December 2022, there are 32 long-term drinking water advisories in effect in 28 communities. (Government of Canada - Indigenous Services Canada - Water in first Nations Communities, Website, 29 December 2022).

Water and sanitation are a human right, and we invite you to look for a sheet in your delegate materials that provides links for you to get more involved by going to the websites and contacting the organizations of your choice to get more involved.

Reports From the Working Groups

Indigenous Working Group

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.

The slogan for Orange Shirt Day – Every Child Matters – is a declaration that no matter how much they were ignored and dismissed during Canada’s residential school era, the lives of Indigenous children matter.

The unofficial day has been observed since 2013 and is called Orange Shirt Day in memory of a piece of clothing then-six-year-old Phyllis Webstad had taken from her on her first day at a residential school in 1973. The former Mission, B.C. residential school student had gone to school wearing a brand-new bright orange T-shirt from her grandmother. When Webstad got to school, educators forced her to remove the clothing in favour of mandatory uniforms.

“When my clothing, including my new orange shirt, was taken, it didn’t matter how much I protested or told them (the nuns and priests) I wanted it back, they didn’t listen,” said Webstad during an online launch for the book *Beyond the Orange Shirt* in September 2021. “This was the beginning of that feeling that I didn’t matter. We could be crying, we could be hungry, we could be sad, we could be lonely, and our feelings did not matter. That’s where ‘Every Child Matters’ comes from. They were children. They mattered. And the ones who never made it home; they mattered. And in this Day of Reconciliation, every child matters.”

In 2017, Georgina Jolibois, an NDP MP from Saskatchewan, sought to make Orange Shirt Day an official holiday focused on reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and introduced a private member’s bill.

September 30th has now been made a federal government holiday in Canada, called Truth and Reconciliation Day. Some, but not all, provinces and territories are also observing the holiday with a day off for provincial and territorial workers and schools.

Indigenous leaders have called on Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the country to mark it with solemn reflection.

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.

LGBTQ Working Group

This term was exceptionally difficult for all the working groups. We were unable to meet in person and had to complete all of our work via zoom because of the pandemic. This did not stop any of us from doing the work that we have always done in previous terms. We worked around this issue and continued to do our work. We've accomplished some great things during this mandate. For years, we have been fighting to end the degrading practice of conversation therapy. In 2021, the House of Commons passed a bill banning conversation therapy (C-6) which is a great victory for everyone.

We also developed resources to help members who are transitioning, as it is a sensitive and personal issue. We created a support network (resource network) for all major locals and made it readily available to all members. The “Transitioning on the Work floor Tool Kit” provides a direct line to uniform modifications, access to someone in HR to get assistance with a name change, and any other related needs, like bathrooms and education. We also advocated for the creation of barrier free, gender-neutral change rooms in any new Canada Post facility.

We have recommended that the LGBTQ Working Group create an educational video which would include memories and stories from all areas of the LGBTQ community. This video would be shown at all CUPW educational forums and shared with other unions, community allies, and schools for educational purposes.

In previous recommendations, the Committee requested that the mandatory joint human rights training found in Appendix HH of our collective agreement be updated. It was requested that the material in the training manual be non-offensive as the current training manual contains some offensive outdated material. We have requested that the trainers for this sensitive course be from one of the Equity seeking groups on both the CUPW and Canada Post side.

We noticed that there are many new hires that are not getting the training because of the lack of HH facilitators. We need more facilitators to be trained so that we can help get the knowledge out to promote a safe work environment.

Since Human Rights are important to all working groups, the LGBTQ Working Group requested that a three-day Human Rights course be offered at the CUPW Regional Educationals. We also asked that information about the harmful effects of conversion therapy on individuals be added to the course, but unfortunately, this did not happen because of the pandemic.

One sad note to mention; Sister Michaela Reid retired. She was a wonderful human being and activist, with many great thoughts and ideas. She will be missed on the Committee.

Workers of Colour Working Group

Over the last four years, the members of the Workers of Colour Working Group have seen their work recognized within CUPW as well as in the broader union movement and community.

It’s imperative that all equity seeking groups have a safe space to meet and share our common struggles, both at our work and in society. The moments we share in those safe spaces helps us become better workers, and we become better able to serve the membership and society. We don’t live in a bubble, and it was impossible to overlook or ignore some of the major issues that affected people of colour around the world.

INDIA: When oppressed people come together in solidarity to fight attacks created by corporate greed, anything is possible. In 2020, farmers from Punjab and Haryana began marching to the capital, Delhi, in protest of three “anti-farmer laws” passed by the Indian Parliament. Police used water cannons, tear gas and batons to prevent protesters from entering the capital. A self-sustaining village was created in the streets with food, water, and first aid provisions and sleeping quarters. The farmers held their ground, and the government of India repealed the three controversial laws.

UNITED STATES: Most of the world watched the tragic death of George Floyd in May 2020. The 46-year-old black man was murdered by a police officer who held his knee on Floyd’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. His crime? Buying cigarettes with money that may have been counterfeit. The officers were all convicted of crimes and sentenced to prison. George Floyd’s death sparked protests around the world about calling for wide-ranging reforms including defunding of police and reallocating money for law enforcement to mental health, social services, and other resources.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, verbal, and physical attacks against people of Asian descent increased. New York police reported the largest increase of anti-Asian hate crimes between 2020 and 2021.

The Committee has seen the continuation of the recognition of Albert Jackson the first Black Letter Carrier. Attending events, we have been able to share our campaigns.

The way this Committee met changed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic, we were forced to move our meetings to a virtual platform. We are glad we can share this report with the many delegates, guests, and friends.

The Committee worked with officers and staff at the National Office to create posters and bulletins commemorating important months and events for equity groups.

The following posters were produced, reminding us of our diversity and heritage:

January: Tamil Heritage Month

February: Black History Month

March 21: International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

May: Asian and South Asian Heritage

Creating Change: We’re proud of the work we have done within the National Human Rights Committee to make room for all voices to be heard. We did this by encouraging everyone to chair our meetings, starting with a smaller working group to help them feel more comfortable.

The Workers of Colour also helped develop recommendations to the National Executive Board so all CUPW members can better understand the issues we face as workers of colour. We had open and honest conversations on the progressive changes we can all work towards. We all have struggles, but we are all stronger when we work together to make our Union a safe and inclusive place for all.

Differently Abled Working Group

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges for us all. We noticed that many members faced escalating stress, depression, and isolation. Although we had to meet virtually, we maintained the strength of the working group and each member contributed valuable insights and suggestions.

Challenges this mandate include workplace injuries, disabilities and increasing mental health issues. While we did everything we could to protect ourselves and each other from COVID-19, many of these safety precautions caused complications for some members. Our hearing-impaired members found social distancing and face masks particularly difficult as they could no longer read lips to receive instructions from their supervisors. The Working Group discussed at length whether see-thru plastic face masks should be mandatory to help hearing impaired members work and take instructions. We also discussed whether sign language classes should be given to help the hearing impaired receive information. We put forward recommendations to support hearing impaired members to achieve better communication by requesting access to clear masks during the pandemic for the work floors and sign language interpretation mandatory for all online training and communications.

This term, we focused some of our discussions on accessible washrooms. Many of the accessible washrooms are not up to standards for the people with disabilities. For example, a lot of the washrooms are not big enough to support a wheelchair, and in many instances, even the entrance door to enter the accessible washroom does not support the injured or worker with a disability. Mental health is a rising concern especially since the pandemic. Our group focused on the effects of isolation on many members. We utilized existing support systems such as Social Stewards and members on the work floor, who reached out to members who were suffering and/or unable to work because of their mental health. We continue to promote our social steward network throughout the Union and encourage members to reach out to the social steward in their region.

The Differently Abled Working Group continues to support injured workers, people with disabilities and those of us who suffer from mental health issues. AWARENESS IS KEY.

Conclusion

The covid pandemic has pulled back the curtain on the systemic inequities of race, class, gender, and other intersectional oppression that has deepened as we have witnessed the growing gaps of poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, violence, inadequate access to health care, etc. The middle class is struggling, so what do we think the low waged, low-income people are doing, as they decide between paying rent or feeding their families?

The growing increase of militarism around the globe causing inhumane acts upon innocent people. Yet again, we have heard of the discovery of more unmarked graves of Indigenous children of former residential school sites and sadly, we know it's not over. The global Black Lives Matter protest movement that came to prominence in the summer of 2020 over the murder of George Floyd has also shone a spotlight on anti-Black racism and finally we began to discuss the destructive consequences of white supremacy. A beautiful Family out for a walk were viciously run over and killed because they were seen as Muslims by a white supremacist demonstrating the Islamophobia that is manifested in these vile acts. We witnessed anti-Asian hate that again saw innocent people being harmed and targeted by vile misinformation, ignorance, and hate. Antisemitism has been on the rise as we have witnessed hateful acts on Jewish people and hateful messages sprayed on Synagogues. Our climate is at a crisis, seen daily around the globe with fire, floods, natural disasters, record heat, especially in those countries or marginalized communities who have benefited the least from the greedy practices and industrialization which created this ecological devastation and destruction of Mother Earth, however they are the ones bearing the biggest burned and experiencing the deepest negative effects of the climate crisis.

The road ahead is full of challenges, but we won't let that stop us in our pursuit for justice nor intimidate us. The labour movement is up to these challenges as from the inception of organized labour we were called to be advocates to improve the lives of our members, communities and the world.

CUPW has always embraced and fought for economic, social, racial and climate justice. Only together as that is the true meaning of solidarity can we solve the systemic discrimination and barriers that we have inherited from a racial capitalistic world whose strategy of "divide and conquer," by "pitting workers against one another," to fight each other over the scraps as we buy into the big lie of scarcity, that there is only so much to go around. Meanwhile the small handful of the elite super rich who will never be rich enough, laughs at us fighting and taking our eyes off who is creating the growing gap in wealth, the underfunding of our social programs, schools, healthcare and the list goes on. We cannot afford to fight one another as we must unite to fight for another world that we know is possible.

Hope is a verb as well as a virtue, therefore CUPW along with the rest of the labour movement must be the "hope in the midst of this crisis."

Every CUPW member has a place in this Union, and we invite them to heed the call to champion human rights as union rights. No matter where you live across this country, no matter if your local is big or small, you have a critical role to play. We would like to end our report with the famous quote, “Not all of us can do great things, but we can all do small things with great love.”

/bk cope

