

Unifor Policy on Racial Justice

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Unifor acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, Indigenous territories on which we work, learn, and organize. The work that our union takes on must be situated within Canada’s historical context, with a clear-eyed view of our shared histories. Canada’s history, even its name, is intertwined with Indigenous knowledge and language. The name “Canada” likely comes from the Huron-Iroquois word “kanata,” meaning “village” or “settlement.”

The trade union movement was built by working people determined to bring fairness and justice to our workplaces and our communities. Our greatest progress has come when we have understood the importance of combating discrimination and uniting all workers regardless of race. Unifor continues that tradition and is committed to using our bargaining power, people power, and political power to bring about racial justice.

1. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY RACIAL JUSTICE?

Racial justice means more than simple notions of equality and changing an individual’s actions. Racial justice means acknowledging, identifying and dismantling systemic barriers, institutionalized and cultural practices and organizational policies that continue to oppress and deny Indigenous and people of colour from the same rights, privileges and opportunities available to the dominant white class.

Canadians often believe that our country is free from racism, but this is not true. Canada is a settler society, built forcibly on Indigenous land. Many of the lands remain unceded territories – meaning that Indigenous title has neither been surrendered nor acquired by the Crown.

Unifor supports the application of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Government lack of action on these demands makes it clear that colonialism and cultural genocide are not part of our past.

Canada is also a country of immigrants of all races. Canada’s immigration policies, however, are largely based on the demands of the capitalist class for low-waged, exploitable workers. Canada’s immigration policies have historically been race and class-based, from who was granted farmland and who was forced to work the land as indentured labourers to who was brought in to build the railroads but denied full citizenship rights, to who was interned during the first and second World Wars and had their homes and property stolen, to who is kept out of Canada, even today. What we see in Canada today with the rise of temporary migrant worker programs and precarious work is not a departure from past practice. It is part of a historical pattern of economic racism and injustice. Not coincidentally, resistance through protest and other forms of direct action grow in

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response to income and wealth inequality, and as the economic opportunities for most Indigenous, Black and people of colour looks markedly different from those of White Canadians.

2. WHAT WOULD RACIAL JUSTICE LOOK LIKE?

Racial justice cannot happen without economic justice. That means that Indigenous people, Black people and people of colour in Canada would have fair wages, access to good jobs and unions and the same health and safety protections as the rest of the population. Grassroots movements in recent years have spurred social change that must now be reflected in policies and government action.

Idle No More and Black Lives Matter movements build momentum for racial justice and decolonial resistance.

Unifor understands that Indigenous peoples in this country have some of the longest outstanding grievances and that Canadians and social justice activists must commit to understanding and righting the wrongs of the past.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that workers of colour are more frequently on the front lines of the health crisis, and are disproportionately impacted by the disease. These health and economic impacts are paired with increased discrimination targeting people who are perceived to be Asian or Chinese. Racial justice would mean that no racial slurs, comments or violence would be excused or tolerated. It would also acknowledge that there are multiple dimensions to racism, playing out differently with devastating impacts on racialized communities – such as anti-Black racism being perpetuated amongst some people and communities of colour.

The Black Lives Matters movement has made strides in exposing and challenging racial injustice in many institutions. Spring 2020 global protests are a testament to the growing strength of and support for Black communities. We have seen people of all races unite against police brutality that overwhelmingly targets Indigenous, Black and people of colour. When we achieve racial justice, Indigenous, Black and people of colour would not live in fear of over-policing, state violence and incarceration.

Just as we are in a critical moment in the movement for racial justice, we are in a critical moment for workers to defend and strengthen their rights. Unions, which have been a major force for economic justice for Indigenous, Black and people of colour in the past, are essential for the future.

3. WHAT ARE THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF UNIONS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE?

Our union has successfully negotiated seniority provisions, pay structures, and protective language that prevents employers from discriminating against workers on the basis of race. However, the Canadian job market continues to be racially segregated. This will continue unless our fight for

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equality includes demands for employment equity, for fair and full immigration rights and status, for acknowledgement of foreign credentials, for an end to bogus “Canadian experience” requirements, for Indigenous self-government and for better labour laws that allow all workers to easily join a union.

There is much work to be done. Work to create a fairer immigration system. Work to demand the implementation of the Calls for Justice of the Final Report of the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Work to increase minimum wage across the country. Work to enforce our anti-harassment policies. Work to get employment equity legislated and implemented. Work to negotiate language training and on-the-job training. Work to support our allies who are taking the lead on Indigenous justice, on justice for migrant workers, and on criminal justice reform. Work to support our co-workers who subsist on temporary contract work. Work to build our union and build solidarity among all workers.

To make sure that at every level, workers of colour, Black and Indigenous workers have their voices heard and represented, and are part of the leadership of our union – locally, regionally and nationally.

Regional Aboriginal and Workers of Color committees are leading the way on the struggle for racial justice. Part of the work ahead of us requires recognizing that racism based on White Supremacy divides the working class in Canada and is a major issue for unions. It serves as a tool of capitalism and imperialism.

At Unifor, it is critical that we put an anti-racist lens and equity lens on every campaign and organizing drive we undertake, every round of negotiations we participate in, and every union election we run. Challenging bigotry and discrimination takes leadership, courage, and learning. Our union is strong. We are strengthened by our diversity. We can be a mighty force for racial justice.

4. REVIEW PERIOD

This policy will be reviewed annually by the National Secretary-Treasurer’s office.

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References