June 19, 2020 |

Statements

Statement on National Indigenous Peoples Day 2020

June 21 is a day to recognize and celebrate First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. And while we celebrate Indigenous peoples, we must also recognize that these continue to be difficult and painful times. The promise and hopes for reconciliation raised over the past few years have often failed to turn into meaningful action. And fine words from governments often turn out to mean little when money and power are on the line.

The systems and forces supposedly in place to protect Indigenous people and communities are proving instead to be far more effective at separating them from their land, their children, their heritage and their rights — and most outrageously, even their lives. The violent legacy of policing in our country echoes today; and in recent weeks we have seen story after story about beatings and deaths at the hands of police in Canada and beyond.

The need for far-reaching change is urgent. The images of assaults captured on smartphones only hint at the full impact of violence on the lives and communities of Indigenous people. And that violence isn't limited to policing or to physical violence.

The Calls for Justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls have languished without progress for more than a year. Canada's courts and prisons disproportionately jail Indigenous people at an unacceptable rate.

There’s violence, too, in depriving communities of essentials like clean drinking water and stable Internet connection to the outside world. The economic, health and social impact of those failures has been amplified dramatically by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has threatened the safety of Elders while silencing protests that had been gathering international solidarity.

In many ways, the land itself, so central to Indigenous culture and identity, is under attack. Far too often, Indigenous peoples’ land rights have not been respected in decision-making processes that have major implications on their land and the environment.

Yet there is hope, and there are still reasons to celebrate today. BC’s implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act adopted last October creates a framework and a just and equitable path for economic development that benefits all, while recognizing Indigenous peoples' inherent right to self-determination.

We have also seen the rise of powerful activism among Indigenous communities. And there are many British Columbians who have honoured that spirit in the tradition of solidarity and justice.

There’s also a growing understanding of the connections between movements: how dismantling colonial structures is inextricable from struggles to end racism, to achieve gender equality and equity, to bring about economic and workplace justice, to address climate change and sustainability, and much more. Those connections lend new energy to all social justice movements, as well as the opportunity for each of us to understand our own roles in changing those structures.

On behalf of the labour movement, we recommit to listen, learn and grow and take meaningful action. All of this gives us hope that, next year, we may have much more to celebrate together.

In solidarity,

Laird Cronk, President
Sussanne Skidmore, Secretary-Treasurer
British Columbia Federation of Labour