

Colonialism and the Working Class in Canada - “What it means to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples within Canada?”

Monday 25 August 2014, by [CAMFIELD David](#) (Date first published: 10 August 2014).

It’s good news that in a number of cities people “are meeting together in growing numbers to explore what it means - and doesn’t mean - to stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples within Canada,” as journalist Meg Mittelstedt [wrote recently](#).

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As Mittelstedt notes, this is happening because of the recent upsurge of protest and resistance by indigenous people. This includes [Idle No More](#), campaigns around [murdered and missing women](#), confrontations with companies that hope to make big profits from [fracking](#), [pipeline construction](#), [mining](#) and other activities on the traditional territories of indigenous peoples, and conflicts with governments that want to dismantle anything they see as barriers to corporate profit, including environmental regulations and indigenous rights (see the damning report on “[The Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada](#)” released by Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, James Anaya in May of this year).

Indigenous solidarity activism raises many questions for participants. One of them is this: what’s the relationship between the struggle against colonialism (to be precise, settler-colonialism, the kind of oppression that indigenous people have experienced since Europeans took control of Northern North America and many settled permanently in the newly-acquired territory) and other social struggles?

Chief among these other struggles are efforts by people who work for wages to defend their jobs, pay, benefits and working conditions against attacks from employers and governments, or to improve them. There are also efforts to defend welfare, health care and other social programs, as well as fights around housing, public transit, immigration status and more. These specific fights are part of the larger struggle of the working class against the capitalist ruling class - the class struggle.

Efforts to stop logging, mining, drilling and pipeline construction immediately bring up the relationship between anti-colonialism and the working class. Workers in those industries are often pitted against indigenous peoples trying to defend their land.

More broadly, people who want to transform the relationship between Canada and indigenous peoples in order to dismantle colonialism face the question of whether it’s possible to win significant support for this kind of radical change in the non-indigenous working class. Or is this impossible because non-indigenous workers benefit from colonialism?

It's pretty obvious that the capitalist class benefits enormously from colonialism. Canadian capitalism was made possible by [driving indigenous peoples off most of their land](#). Capitalism in the Canadian state is colonial capitalism. It wouldn't survive without access to indigenous people's lands.

Corporate profits and power would be dealt a huge blow by the kinds of changes needed to put an end to colonialism. These are summarized by Taiaiake Alfred in his book [Wasáse](#) as "the return of unceded lands, reforms to state constitutions to reflect the principle of indigenous nationhood and to bring into effect a nation-to-nation relationship between indigenous peoples and Settler society, and restitution."

Workers and colonial privilege

Before looking at the working class and colonialism, we need to be clear who we're talking about. Although in Canada the term "working class" is usually understood to refer only to "blue collar" workers or low-income people, this is too narrow. The issue isn't how much money you make, or the kind of work you do. Class is about your place in society's system for producing goods and services. The working class is made up of everyone who has to try to sell their ability to work in exchange for a wage (except for high-ranking employees with a lot of management authority) or depend on someone who does, because they don't own a business (large or small) and can't survive just by living off the land. In capitalist societies around the world, the entire working class is exploited - it produces wealth in the form of commodities worth far more than it receives back in wages and benefits. [1]

So the working class is broader than most people realize. It includes everyone from high-paid computer programmers to low-paid cleaners and unpaid caregivers. Most members of the working class also experience at least one kind of oppression, such as sexism, racism, heterosexism and colonialism. Forms of oppression, along with differences in pay, workplace authority and status, create many lines of division within the working class. [2]

So does the over 95% of the working class that isn't indigenous benefit from colonialism? Even those who experience racism do definitely have advantages relative to the conditions of indigenous people (just as all members of dominant groups do in relation to members of oppressed groups). These advantages can be called colonial privilege. People don't freely choose privilege - it comes from belonging to a dominant group whether you want it or not.

Colonial privilege includes lives that are likely to be longer and healthier. Non-indigenous people generally earn more money and have lower chances of living in poverty (especially dire poverty) or in wretched housing. Some own houses or cottages on land stolen from indigenous people.

Colonial privilege also includes all sorts of preferential treatment given to non-indigenous people in Canada, including people of colour. As new immigrants often learn, one way to be more accepted as a "real Canadian" is to repeat common slurs against indigenous people - "they're lazy," "they're asking for too much." These slurs fuel very real discriminatory practices against indigenous people by employers, police and others.

But colonial privilege is contradictory for the non-indigenous working class. It makes life easier in some ways. At the same time, it's harmful because it encourages non-indigenous working-class people to bond with the ruling class - the capitalists that are exploiting them, trying to take away past gains and threatening everyone's future with economic activity that's fuelling climate change. It pits non-indigenous people against indigenous people.

This plays into the divide-and-conquer strategy that rulers love. People who get worked up when indigenous people demand justice and who blame indigenous people for problems in their lives aren't likely to notice what capitalists and the governments that cater to them are up to. So colonial privilege - like all privilege conferred on working-class people who belong to dominant groups (men, white people, straights...) - is poison bait.

This means that privilege is contradictory for non-indigenous working-class people, not a straightforward benefit the way it is for the ruling class and most of the middle class (self-employed professionals, middle managers and the like). When this reality is exposed, openings are created for convincing non-indigenous workers to support the struggle against colonialism.

Openings and barriers

If that's so, why isn't there more support for anti-colonialism in the non-indigenous working class in Canada? First, we shouldn't forget that there is support, even if it's usually passive and untapped. For example, many of the thousands of non-indigenous people who took part in the [Vancouver march for reconciliation](#) in September 2013 were working-class people. So are some of the people who have recently felt the need to educate themselves about indigenous peoples by doing things like reading Tom King's best-seller [The Inconvenient Indian](#). Whatever the limits of the call for reconciliation, which falls far short of what's needed to end the oppression of indigenous peoples, many non-indigenous people support it because they feel that terrible injustices have been done and change is needed. There are openings here for politics that aim to uproot colonialism altogether.

Of course, there's no denying that few non-indigenous people have a clear understanding that Canada is a colonial-settler state and that colonialism can and must be abolished. That's because the way most people make sense of Canada and the situation of indigenous peoples in it is influenced by the ideology of settler-colonialism. Its assumptions shape how history is taught and how the mainstream media presents society.

Settler-colonial ideology comes in different versions, from the vicious right-wing "Native people were ignorant savages and Europeans were justified in taking the land" all the way to the left-wing "indigenous people face racism, but Canada is no longer colonial because indigenous people have won rights." What they all deny or obscure is the fact that Canadian society was built by Europeans taking land from indigenous peoples and displacing them, and that colonialism persists today in Canada and Quebec. [3]

This powerful truth is threatening to those who rule within the Canadian state. They have every reason to hide or deny it. People who want radical social change have no good reason to do so (though the realities of colonial privilege sometimes make non-indigenous radicals slow to realize this).

But the radical left in Canada is [small, fragmented](#) and disproportionately made up of people with a high level of formal education. It is also still influenced by Canadian nationalism (less so than in the past, fortunately), which gets in the way of a full reckoning with colonialism. These weaknesses mean that the radical left's ability to help more non-indigenous working-class people put the pieces together and recognize colonialism for what it is remains limited.

Another very important reason for the low level of support for anti-colonial politics is that the level of working-class struggle in Canada has been low for some time. When not many people are organizing collectively to confront bosses or governments, fewer people will question the status quo in any way. This means people are less likely to come through their own experiences to the conclusion that the

social order is unjust and should be changed - a conclusion which would make them more open to anti-colonial politics.

It's also worth mentioning that the indigenous groups with the greatest ability to reach non-indigenous people with political ideas are institutions like the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) that represent officials who head up the band councils set up by the Indian Act. The politics that dominate in these organizations are all about [reforming colonialism in Canada, not uprooting it](#). Non-indigenous people who look to the heads of such organizations for guidance will only rarely hear an uncompromising critique of colonialism.

Although there is far too little support for anti-colonial politics among non-indigenous people, there is now a real opening to change this for the better. More non-indigenous people are listening to the voices of indigenous resurgence.

This means that there are greater opportunities for non-indigenous workers to discover that their interests converge with those of indigenous people. During the Idle No More actions in late 2012 and early 2013, many were inspired by indigenous people's defence of nature and indigenous rights against a federal government they loathed too. Many are sympathetic to ongoing indigenous opposition to tar sands development, fracking and other profit-driven activities that fuel climate change. The leading role of indigenous people in opposing these grim realities of our times creates possibilities for more non-indigenous people to start to question colonialism.

It would be much easier to realize those possibilities if there were a sizeable political organization capable of uniting people opposed to austerity, ecological destruction and colonialism, who today are very fragmented, as a force for real change (at best all the NDP leadership does is mildly criticize the very worst aspects of neoliberal colonial capitalism, whose fundamentals it accepts). But people can still take advantage of opportunities even though such a badly-needed political instrument is missing. One tiny example: at the height of Idle No More actions, union and community activists organized an anti-colonial lunchroom teach-in inside a Canada Post facility in Winnipeg.

These possibilities don't mean that many more non-indigenous people will finally reject colonialism. We can't predict the future. But there is an opportunity for positive shifts. Indigenous resistance and the fact that colonialism isn't in the long-term interests of the non-indigenous working class make it possible.

The stronger the struggle of indigenous people against colonialism becomes, the more likely it is that more non-indigenous people will recognize the justice of this struggle. The more that non-indigenous workers mobilize against capital, the more likely it is that they will be able to understand that hostility to the aspirations of indigenous people for liberation plays into the hands of those who rule Canada.

Some political conclusions

We can draw several conclusions from this. One is that it's a mistake for foes of colonialism to write off non-indigenous people who "don't get it." This assumes that only a tiny enlightened elite will ever reject colonialism - an arrogant attitude that makes it harder to start a dialogue with people who are beginning to think differently about how indigenous people are treated and what should be done about it. Another is that non-indigenous anti-colonial activists should reflect on how we can be most effective at reaching out to such people.

A third conclusion is that people who want to help forge positive convergences and avoid ruling-class

“divide and conquer” tactics need anti-colonial politics that are also working-class politics. This means, for example, combining uncompromising support for indigenous peoples’ right to determine their own future with support for a just transition to different jobs for workers who are affected by anti-colonial reforms, similar to the just transition approach called for by the climate justice movement.

Much as capital should be made to pay for the transition to a society that no longer pumps out greenhouse gases, the costs of uprooting colonialism should be paid overwhelmingly by the tiny minority that rules Canada, not by non-indigenous workers. Yes, some workers would have to change jobs. Some would probably have to move, and some would lose their cottages. But it’s corporations and the rich who should really be made to pay. Building solidarity with indigenous movements will help to expose the nature of the common enemy and chart the path to radical change. [4]

August 10, 2014

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This article is dedicated to the memory of [Dave Brophy](#).

P.S.

* [New Socialist](#)

Footnotes

[1] Understanding class as all about exploitation is very different from thinking about class in terms of privilege. As Steve Darcy says <http://publicautonomy.org/2014/06/2...>, people who think of class in terms of privilege are often “actively hostile to unions, and either indifferent to or enthusiastic about the disappearance of hard-won advantages that some workers enjoy.”

[2] Natalie Knight’s “‘Building Rage’: Decolonizing Class War” <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/mai...> makes a number of important points. Unfortunately, it also endorses the view that there is a “primary working class” or “real working class” of “racialized women, children, the colonized, and temporary foreign workers.” Knight’s approach is, as she acknowledges, taken from J Sakai. For a critique of Sakai’s deeply flawed analysis and politics, see [Sebastian Lamb](#), “[J Sakai’s Settlers and Anti-Racist Working-Class Politics](#).” Kim Moody’s book review “[Reflections of a Weather Underground Veteran](#)” explains where this kind of politics came from.

[3] The Canadian state created in 1867 was built on the subjugation of both indigenous peoples and the French-speaking population, which later became the Quebec nation and francophone communities outside Quebec. The oppression of Quebec was greatly reduced by the efforts of the Quebec national movement from the 1960s on. However, Quebec’s right to freely determine its own future is not enshrined in the Canadian constitution (never signed by the government of Quebec), which treats it as a province rather than a nation in what is in reality a multi-national state. As a result Quebec is not free of national oppression.

[4] While reforms that weaken colonialism within a capitalist Canadian state are certainly possible, I think it's very unlikely that colonialism could be abolished outside of an anti-capitalist transformation of society by workers and oppressed people. For this reason the relationship between [indigenous struggle and socialist politics is important](#). Dialogue between supporters of socialism from below, like the publishers of New Socialist Webzine, and supporters of other kinds of anti-capitalist anti-colonialism, like the ones presented by [Glen Coulthard](#), and Natalie Knight, is essential.