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I am writing as a 2spirit Red River Métis person. My work is grounded in harm reduction and social justice through an anti-colonial lens. From this perspective, I do not believe labour unions should embrace the paradigm of “reconciliation” or perceive themselves as the ones who will lead the way in the work that needs to be done.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission defined “reconciliation” as “establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country”; Eurocentric dictionaries describe it as the restoration of friendly relations. To use this word implies that there once was a time of friendly relations to which both sides caused harm, and that both sides are complicit in disrespectful relationship. This misportrayal conceals the violent, abusive, and fundamentally non-consensual nature of how settlers have imposed relationship on Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island.

To be clear, the work that is needed is not the same on both sides and Indigenous people have nothing to “reconcile” with settlers. Settlers, particularly White settlers, and predominantly-settler organizations like the BCGEU and other labour unions, may wish to begin their exploration of what is to be done by considering why the word “reconciliation” has been used instead of “decolonization”, “settler accountability”, “transformative justice”, or “settler violence cessation”.

Unions may also want to consider their place in a process of moving towards healthy relationship with Indigenous people within the union, and the many more who have been excluded from and/or rejected capitalist economy and on whose (stolen) lands union members work and benefit from. Decolonization, accountability, and genuine transformation requires that non-Indigenous people start being truthful about their place on these lands, honest about the miseducation they have received about history and about how to be in respectful relationship here, and accordingly humble about being in a position of learning and unlearning. An appropriate role for settler-dominated organizations in this process may look very different than what unions think of as “leadership”.

I suggest that a more appropriate role for unions is to examine who holds power within the organization, how to disrupt these patterns, and work to understand why Indigenous people, particularly local Indigenous people, are absent. Unions can support decolonization by leveraging labour power to dismantle capitalist economies that are toxic to wage labourers, Indigenous communities, and these lands including supporting its members to refuse to perform work that violates Indigenous consent. The BCGEU could simply start by asking Khelsilem and Cindy Blackstock for consent to use their identities in the Step-Up course instead of assuming entitlement. Unions must also explore what it means to respectfully invite relationship with Indigenous people and nations. If such relationship is agreed to, unions can then learn from Indigenous people and nations’ how to stop causing colonial harm and begin to engage in relationship repair. If sufficient trust is built, unions may be invited to work with Indigenous nations to establish economies and ways of relating within the workforce based on consent, respect, and care.