

Counterpoint

SPECIAL ISSUE **WATER**

- Access to water for Indigenous communities
- **The power of in-house services, in Canada and around the world**
- Allies for water protection

Black Lives Matter

Addressing mental health in the workplace



KAREN GARRETT
President, CUPE 556

“You can really see the difference when comparing a private contractor clearing roads to our municipal workers doing their work.”

Karen Garrett, President, CUPE 556, p. 3

We're lucky to have the NDP fighting for us during COVID-19

You wouldn't know it from media reports, but without the federal NDP and its leader, Jagmeet Singh, we wouldn't have the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) or the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) as we know them, or many of the other critical supports the government introduced since the COVID-19 pandemic swept across Canada.

While the Conservatives and the Bloc have been fighting to cut people off their benefits and force

them back to work before it was safe, the NDP has shown the power and importance of having a determined, if small, opposition in Parliament that is focused on helping people in need.

Many of the measures the Liberals introduced initially were inadequate to address the depth and scale of the economic damage of COVID-19 on working people in Canada. The NDP fought hard to make them better. Without a strong NDP at their heels, it's not hard to imagine the Liberals

listing even further to the right, leaving many more people behind.

For example, let's consider the CERB. In mid-March, when it became clear that the government's original aid package for out-of-work Canadians would be woefully inadequate, the NDP stepped in with a plan to provide \$2000 per month – and within days the Liberals announced the NDP plan as its own. Since then, 8 million people have applied for the CERB.

And when it became clear that the Liberals'

criteria for accessing the CERB were still leaving up to a million people without benefits, the NDP fought to remove those barriers. In doing so, they secured access to the CERB for students, seasonal workers, owners and operators, people who had exhausted their EI benefits, and those who continued to receive modest income from part-time work.

For another example, let's look at the emergency wage subsidy. In March, as businesses told the government that its 10 per cent wage subsidy would not be enough to prevent skyrocketing layoffs, the NDP called for a 75 per cent wage subsidy to mount a so-called “firing freeze”. Thousands of workers were rehired at their companies as a result.

The NDP has also used its position in the minority

parliament wisely, scoring key victories for working people when the Liberals needed the support of another party to pass its agenda. Most significantly, Jagmeet Singh won a commitment from the Liberals to provide ten days of paid sick leave for workers during the pandemic, so that no one has to choose between spreading the virus or earning a living. Singh also used his negotiating leverage to extend the CERB from the original 16 weeks to 24 weeks.

For us in the labour movement, and for all who fight to make life better for working people, it's clear that Jagmeet Singh and the NDP have our back, they are our voice and our ally in Parliament.

■ **Hugh Pouliot**



Should we worry about lead?

In March 2019, the federal government has lowered the maximum allowable lead concentration in drinking water, from .01 mg/liter to .005 mg/liter. This gives Canada one of the lowest lead content targets in the world.

However, it has created issues for municipalities, some of which find that their drinking water no longer meets the national standard. This issue, which was highlighted in a study from late 2019, found that for one-third of Canadian households surveyed, the amount of lead in the tap water exceeded .005 mg/liter.

In fact, nothing has changed about the safety and purity of municipal drinking water in Canada. Our cities and towns continue to enjoy one of the highest water safety standards in the world. Our tap water leaves the municipal processing plants lead free. But lead can still be found in the service lines of old homes and buildings – the old pipes that connect to the municipal system.

Removing this last trace of lead will take a long time and require significant support from various levels of government. CUPE believes the federal government should provide financial support to municipalities to assist with service line replacement.

■ **Robert Ramsay**

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Door-knocking activism defeats P3

For CUPE 556 President Karen Garrett, an activist's motivation for protecting public water and wastewater is a no-brainer: all services provided by a municipality should be public.

When Karen's local learned in 2016 that the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) was planning to use a public-private partnership (P3) to provide sewage treatment, members knew they needed to fight the project with everything they had.

The CVRD held a referendum seeking public approval to go ahead with

the P3 project. There were a lot of unknowns, including who the provider would be and what moving from a septic tank system to a wastewater treatment plant would really cost residents. With only six weeks before the vote, CUPE 556 had to act fast.

"We wanted to educate homeowners on the fact that if the facility was being operated and maintained by a private company, that company would be unaccountable to taxpayers," said Karen.

With the support of CUPE National, Karen Garrett and others developed a campaign focussed on educating the public on the consequences of the P3 project. Radio

ads, community-wide mailings and signs were some of the many tools used to mobilize the public. A community group opposed to the project helped the local by putting up signs.

CUPE members knocked on more than 1,500 doors in the Vancouver Island communities of Union Bay, Royston, and Kilmarnock, talking with residents about the options.

They kept the discussions simple: if there was a \$100,000 surplus at the end of year and the service was publicly run, that \$100,000 would stay within the service area and get spent to benefit the community. With a private company doing the work,

that surplus could go to shareholders.

The message to support affordable, accountable, public sewage resonated with the public.

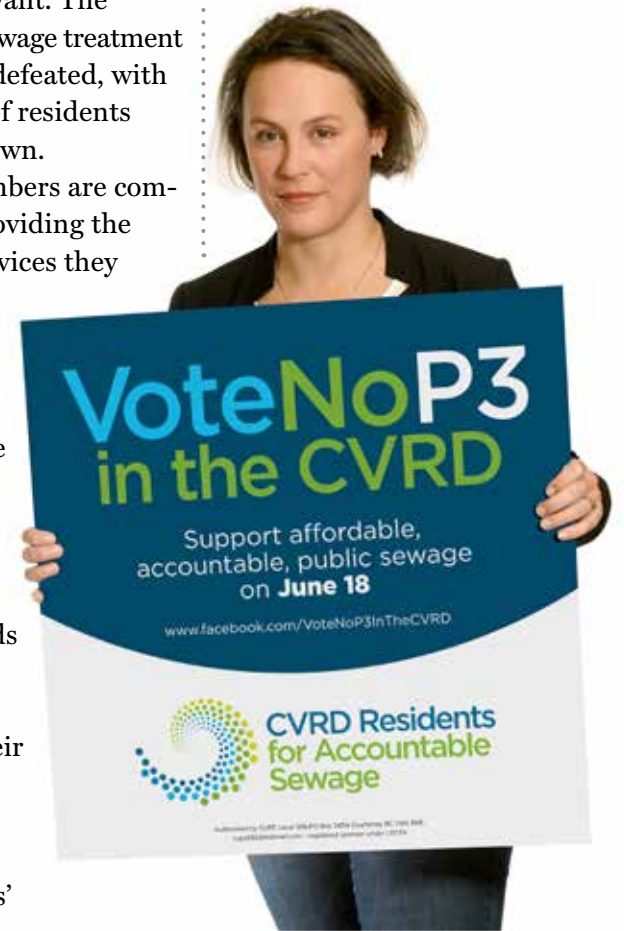
In the end, residents were very clear about what they didn't want. The Comox P3 sewage treatment project was defeated, with 75 per cent of residents turning it down.

"Our members are committed to providing the very best services they can to our community. You can really see the difference when comparing a private contractor clearing roads to our municipal workers doing their work," said Karen, commenting on her members'

work clearing snow in the Comox Valley this winter.

"It's the day-to-day things that families rely on where you can really see a difference."

■ Janet Szliske



NATIONAL PRESIDENT MARK HANCOCK

We must defeat Bill 32 and defend the rights of all workers

When Jason Kenney became Premier of Alberta in April 2019, we knew we would have some tough fights on our hands. We knew we'd be facing attacks on health care and education, on the vulnerable in our society, and on the services our members provide.

Now, our right to even speak out about those issues is under attack by Kenney's United Conservative government.

That's because this summer, Kenney railroaded Bill 32 through the legislature – a bill designed to prevent

unions from talking about issues important to their members and working families. It attacks workers' freedom of expression and assembly, by legislating restrictions on where unions are allowed to picket and forcing them to apply to the government for permission to picket.

It attacks the rights of non-union workers too, cutting overtime pay and paid breaks, and making it easier for employers to lay off or terminate workers en masse.

This legislation doesn't just threaten generations of work by the labour movement to strengthen workers' rights and bring fairness into the workplace.

It threatens the right of workers to have a voice in our democracy.

Shutting out the voice of workers in political discussions isn't a side effect of this legislation. Shutting us up is the whole point.

This law is not just offensive, unnecessary, and anti-democratic. It's an attack on our constitutional rights. Unions have always played a key role in the democratic process in Canada. For years, we have been the proud voice of working people, fighting for justice when the deck is stacked against us in favour of employers and big business.

Let's be clear, if this can happen in Alberta, it can happen anywhere. This isn't just an issue for our 40,000 members in Alberta, or our 700,000 members nationwide. It's an issue for every single worker in this country. As Canada's largest union, CUPE will be leading the fight against this bill in the months to come.

MARK HANCOCK ONLINE twitter.com/MarkHancockCUPE





Niibi Bimaadiziwin / Water is life

Niibi Bimaadiziwin. When translated into English, it means water is life. While not universal, it is a law common among many Indigenous nations. To harm or threaten water is to harm yourself, your family, your people, the land and all that live on it.

Today, 'Water is life' is a rally cry for Indigenous peoples facing a devastating water crisis.

Water problems in Indigenous communities are well documented. Since 2004, 400 of the 614 First Nations in Canada have been under some form of drinking water advisory.

At one point, in 2012, 116 First Nation communities could not safely drink from their water systems – one out of every five homes on a First Nation reserve could not depend on the household tap.

As hard as it is to believe, this doesn't fully capture the scope of the crisis. Many First Nations don't have

any water/wastewater infrastructure at all and are not captured under government water advisory reports.

The news stories and images are stark. Time and again Canadian governments pledged to address the crisis, but it persists.

People around the world are shocked that these conditions can exist in a nation-state worldly renowned for its public water and wastewater infrastructure. The question gets asked time and time again: why can't this crisis be fixed?

For Indigenous peoples, however, the answer has been part of daily life for generations – colonialism.

Crisis 500 years in the making

Colonialism is the policies and laws that impose control over Indigenous peoples' territory with the aim of economic development and dominance.

Colonialism isn't just for history books. It is alive today and very much at the root of the water crisis.

For much of Canadian history, governments aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples into 'Canadian' society. This was the very root of the residential school system – forcing Indigenous peoples into learning English or French, adopting Christianity, abandoning their ways of life to become part of the broader capitalist system, and occupying unceded territory for settlement.

While settler society experienced upheavals in the 1960's, Indigenous peoples did as well. The movement of Indigenous resistance to assimilation policies took

root. Indigenous nations and groups organized to oppose Canadian colonialism.

This movement led to the founding of the Indian Brotherhood (that became the Assembly of First Nations), the eventual closing of residential schools, and the acknowledgement of Indigenous rights in the Canadian constitution.

Yet the central legislative tool to control Indigenous peoples, in particular First Nations people, remains – the *Indian Act*. First introduced in 1876, this archaic and paternalist law gives almost total legal control over First Nation communities to the federal government.

Permanent austerity

Some of the more archaic parts of the *Indian Act* have been amended or are no longer enforced. But instead of trying to control the daily lives, languages and religions of Indigenous peoples with the *Indian Act*, Canadian government tactics changed to focus on using the Act for controlling Indigenous communities' finances.

Governments started to greatly restrict what they decided was their 'obliga-

tions' to Indigenous peoples – a power held through the *Indian Act*. This severely limits spending for on-reserve infrastructure.

Downloading of services, funding caps, rigid administrative bureaucracies, and over-the-top reporting requirements hoisted on First Nation governments, via the *Indian Act*, tipped already minimal on-reserve infrastructure into all-out crisis.

By the 2000's, the drinking water crisis shocked enough people that Canadian governments could no longer ignore it.

Successive Conservative and Liberal federal governments pledged to address the crisis. But their solution consistently comes tied to a familiar threat to public infrastructure – privatization.

Contracting out colonialism

Stephen Harper's Conservative government implemented new laws which they said would address the crisis. The 2013 *Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act* set out stringent regulations

Many Indigenous communities rely on water sources that have been harmed by resource development projects or are being threatened by new development going through their territories.



Artwork: Christi Belcourt, Métis visual artist
 Above: Manitou Giigoonh #2, 2017, acrylic on canvas.
 Below: Water Has No Flag, 2017, acrylic on canvas.
 christibelcourt.com

for on-reserve water/wastewater systems, but without providing for any new funding to help First Nations meet or maintain the new standards.

At the same time, the Harper government put a virtual halt to any infrastructure spending to Indigenous communities that weren't part of a public-private partnership (P3).

Over the nine years of the Harper government, only one First Nation P3 project was ever completed – a correctional facility in BC.

Unable to meet new water regulations with crumbling infrastructure, and unable (and often unwilling) to partake in P3 projects, First Nations governments simply couldn't get ahead.

Over the course of the Harper government years, there was practically no improvement to the numbers of water advisories on First Nations.

Trudeau: one step forward, half step back

A key promise of the first Trudeau Liberal government was addressing the water crisis and pledging to eliminate all advisories by 2021.

While the federal government is still trying to entice First Nations into P3s (with no success), funding has increased significantly for on-reserve infrastructure. This funding, however, is still not at the levels seen prior to the drastic cuts of Harper government.”

Since 2015, 88 boil water advisories have been resolved.

But over that time, at least 30 new advisories were issued.

Despite even more funding for 2019, the numbers barely moved. Indigenous Services Canada reporting shows only four fewer long-term boil water advisories by the end of the year.

With one year left to the 2021 target, over 6,000 homes and community buildings still can't depend on tap water. That's tens of thousands Indigenous peoples without dependable safe drinking water.

What's still wrong?

Despite investments to build new infrastructure, Canadian colonial policies are still hindering real progress.

Yes, new water treatment plants are being built. But First Nations don't have the resources to operate and maintain them. Only 56 per cent of First Nation water systems have a primary operator. Nineteen per cent don't have any back ups. That means no vacations, no time off, and a sick day could mean a whole community loses its drinking water.

At least three per cent have no operators at all.

With many on-reserve operators making as little as \$12 per hour, it's hard to recruit and even harder to retain qualified staff.

Raising awareness

Increasingly troubled by the lack of real progress and the lack of understanding about the root causes of the crisis in colonialism, CUPE's National Indigenous Council made water a priority going into the last National Convention.

Council members prioritized a resolution for CUPE to raise awareness about the traditional role of Indigenous peoples as stewards of water, and the traditions in Indigenous law to observe 'water is life' – a concept that extends from making sure Indigenous water/wastewater systems are safe, reliable and well maintained, to protecting and healing water in Indigenous territories.

The campaign, resulting from the adoption of this resolution, is in the very early stages. It will be a difficult, but necessary, next step for CUPE, and all of Canada, in reconciliation.

■ Gregory Taylor



Without long-term, predictable funding for operations and maintenance, at the same levels spent for infrastructure in non-Indigenous communities, the crisis may linger for generations.



Global Justice

The global fight to protect public water

Around the world, workers and community members are organizing to protect water services and resources, including in Cameroon where water services are back in house after 10 years of privatization.

The government of Cameroon ended privatization in 2018, but the World Bank and other international

players are pushing hard for a new public-private partnership (P3) for drinking water distribution.

The Cameroon National Autonomous Union of Energy Water and Mines Workers Union (SYNATEEC) and Public Services International (PSI) are leading a national campaign to keep water public. They have built alliances with other unions and community groups through the Cameroon Public Water network.

Fatou Diouf, PSI Coordinator for French-speaking Africa, explains that the campaign aims “to ensure all Cameroonians have access to enough good-quality water,

as a universal right. The best way to achieve this is for the company that manages the water to be public. The state cares about access to water and the state cares about water quality. Any company that comes to Cameroon is there to make a profit, and this profit will be made on the backs of Cameroonians.”

The network members have creative ways of mobilizing the public, ensuring their message is heard loud and clear. SYNATEEC and its allies have connected with churches, traditional chiefs and municipal associations to spread the word.

The network also engaged students through an online

Cameroonians have lived the impacts of privatization, including poor-quality water that led to illness, and the elimination of free water fountains in low-income neighborhoods. Women and children had to fetch water daily instead of working or going to school.

contest inviting students to post speeches about keeping water public, a tactic Diouf says helped to broaden their audience. Water worker union president Chief Ewoukem boosted media attention by reaching out directly to journalists as workers, through their unions, ensuring journalists learned about the issues.

The Cameroon Public Water network plans to ramp up advocacy efforts and

continue working closely with community members to keep privatization off the radar.

CUPE is working with PSI to support this campaign and strengthen worker-to-worker connections with SYNATEEC members. Read more about other CUPE international solidarity projects at cupe.ca/international-solidarity.

■ Monique Ménard-Kilrane



Allies for water protection

On the banks of the Shubenacadie River, near Stewiacke in Nova Scotia, sits a Treaty Truck House. This wooden structure provides shelter and a meet-



Sean Foley, CUPE Nova Scotia Area Vice-President and member of CUPE 8920 fishing for striped bass at the Shubenacadie River, which is being threatened by a gas company.

ing place for Mi'kmaq and non-Indigenous allies who are trying to stop a gas company from pumping salt into the river.

The Alton Gas company is looking to store natural gas underground, in salt caverns, on a site by the river. At full operation, this project will release about 10 million liters of salt into the river system each day.

Sean Foley, an acute care worker and member of CUPE 8920, was raised to respect Mi'kmaq values by his Indigenous stepfather, believes in preserving water rights. He fishes in the Shubenacadie River, catching striped bass, shad and the silvery gaspereau that make their way upstream every spring.

“The Shubie River is a natural spawning ground, and any change puts that system in jeopardy,” says Sean.

Like other trade union members, Sean has taken



CUPE Nova Scotia President Nan McFadgen (second from right) met with Indigenous women and union activists last year to strategize on ways to protect the Shubenacadie River from being poisoned by Alton Gas.

part in demonstrations against Alton Gas and has met with the Grass Roots Grandmothers, who are leading the charge to protect the water. In Mi'kmaq culture, women take on the main responsibility of protecting the water.

Band members of the Sipekne'katik First Nation are asserting their rights under the Peace and Friendship Treaties of the 1700s. Those treaties give the Mi'kmaq the right to protect the fish and the water.

The Grass Roots Grandmothers have been stand-

ing up to Alton Gas for more than three years now. Last year, three of the Grass Roots Grandmothers were arrested, and complicated legal challenges are now before the courts.

CUPE 8920 is one of the many locals who have gathered donations to help with legal costs associated with the fight.

In January 2017, the Nova Scotia Supreme Court ruled that the Sipekne'katik First Nation was not properly consulted during the environmental assessment process. They still have not

been consulted. The provincial government has made outrageous claims, such as refusing to consult with “unconquered peoples.” The federal government is currently writing new regulations governing the deposit of brine into the Shubenacadie River.

If the gas company wins, it will be both an environmental disaster and a blow for treaty rights of Indigenous peoples. CUPE 8920 and Sean Foley will keep being allies in this fight.

■ Gaëlle McNeil

Fighting Anti-Black Racism

“Our time is now”

The brutal death of George Floyd, a Black man killed by the police in Minneapolis in May, has triggered a worldwide wave of indignation and amplified the ongoing struggle to name systemic racism and anti-Black racism. CUPE’s Diversity Vice-President, Racialized Workers, Yolanda McClean spoke to Counterpoint about Black Lives Matter and the importance of seizing the moment.



You have been fighting against racism and for employment equity for decades. What is your take on the current situation?

YM: As a Black woman, I feel very sad and very angry at times. I start cringing before listening to the news, because I fear that another Black man or woman has been killed by the police. But I am also very hopeful when I see people who don’t look like me marching and protesting because they now understand that Black lives matter.

They are finally paying attention. We have been advocating for some of these issues for decades and, finally, people are hearing

what we are saying and waking up to the fact that there are problems and that we should fix them.

Watching what is happening in the US leaves us with the impression that the situation of Black, Indigenous and racialized people in Canada is better. What do you say to people who believe that racism isn’t really a problem here?

YM: Let’s not fool ourselves. Racism is not just an American problem. It exists in Canada, right here in our backyard. Canada has its own history of the enslavement of Black people, and that systemic violence continues today. In Toronto alone, Black people are 20 times more likely to be fatally shot by the police than white people.

We can also talk about COVID-19. Folks who are working in the health care sector, the essential workers not getting the pay that they should, are predominantly racialized. They have been the most impacted by COVID. It is not police

violence, but they are also victims of racism.

Why do you distinguish anti-Black racism from other forms of discrimination? Isn’t all racism equally bad?

YM: Of course, all racism is bad. Black issues do not matter more than other racism and discrimination issues. But Black lives are brought to light in this time. It is OUR moment.

Black people are facing systemic barriers and systemic discrimination that run very deep in Canada. It’s reflected in the jobs that people have, in the economic disparities that exist in our education, our health care, our housing.

We have an opportunity to change that now, and we all need to be a part of this moment. You don’t have to be perfect to be a part of it. Some people who march and protest for Black lives don’t know what the solution to racism is, but they know we must do something. We cannot stop having these conversations.

Apart from protesting, what can we do, together, to effectively combat racism?

YM: Of course, we must have conversations at the dinner table and support Black businesses and Black people. But we also have to bring it to the next level. We must think about solutions like re-allocating police resources to help people in crisis. And we must insist on adopting and implementing employment equity plans in every organization. Because if we don’t do that, we still won’t have Black people in leadership positions where they could make a difference, on the ground.

Unions need to lead the way in that regard. Unions have power. We need to commit real resources to fight racism and amplify the voices of Black members. We need to talk about bylaws, and about how to

create diversity positions, and we need to offer training about racism in the workplace, the same way we are offering training on health and safety.

You have been fighting for employment equity for decades. What keeps you going?

YM: I have this quote from Rosemary Brown that I say all the time. It says: We must open the doors and we must see to it that they remain open so that others can pass through.

I have been saying it for 20 years, and that is the saying I will die with. That is what keeps me going. Because I see injustices, but then I see success. If we don’t open the doors for people who look like me, and if we don’t keep them open for people who are incoming, then what are we doing this work for?

CUPE members can help combat racism and make their workplaces, their unions spaces, and their communities safe and welcoming for people who are Black, Indigenous and racialized. Here are some ideas:

- Acknowledge that racism and discrimination exist in our union.
- Understand that there is no such thing as reverse racism.
- Learn about anti-Black racism, systemic racism and oppression.
- Create space for dialogue with the end goal to identify action points.
- Commit to making space for Black, Indigenous and racialized people.
- Amend your bylaws to ensure there is a spot at the table for racialized members.

NATIONAL SECRETARY-TREASURER CHARLES FLEURY

Working remotely or in an office, our staff continue to provide quality services to CUPE members

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis last March that forced CUPE to shutdown our offices, our staff have continued to offer critical services to CUPE members, working remotely. From servicing, to specialized and technical services, we have supported our chartered organizations and members during these difficult times and will continue to do so.

As we begin to reopen our offices, our 850 dedicated staff will continue to support you, whether working remotely or from one of our 68 offices across the country. The health and safety of our staff and members continues to be our top priority throughout the implementation of our reopening plan. We will respect public health parameters and guidelines in all jurisdictions, while taking into consideration the needs of staff and our specific operational needs to provide the best possible service to members.

The plan will happen in three phases. Phase 1, initiated in August, is the voluntary stage, which means staff may begin to work from the office. As public health measures evolve over time, we will be able to resume full office operations in future phases, when government restrictions are no longer in place.

In preparation for the reopening of our offices, CUPE has left no stone unturned to ensure the offices are safe. COVID signage has been placed throughout the offices, to notify everyone of new procedures around physical distancing, maximum occupancy in meeting rooms and other common spaces, and some public spaces have been closed. Masks will need to be worn in all common areas. Hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes have been distributed throughout the offices. Stringent cleaning protocols have been arranged with the cleaning staff, including disinfecting touchpoints throughout the office on a daily basis. We implemented other preventative measures in terms of improved ventilation, and visitor screening. We strongly urge all chartered organizations to implement similar standards to ensure the safety of all members and staff.

For the foreseeable future, CUPE will continue to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the workplace and follow the advice of public health and government authorities. Conditions will be assessed, and preventive measures adjusted if necessary, before moving to the next phase of reopening. And if COVID-19 cases start to rise in any region, our plan is flexible enough to revert back to an earlier phase. Whatever happens, the health and safety of our staff and members will be paramount and the quality services our members rely on will continue.



CHARLES FLEURY ONLINE twitter.com/CUPENatSec

Bargaining for mental health

Talking about mental illness is more and more common, thanks in large part to unions and other civil society organizations that have long pushed for adequate funding of mental health supports and services. Today, even corporations run campaigns to foster conversations around mental health and illness to lower the potency of stigma.

These conversations are welcome. However, too often, they overlook the workplace context. As workers know full well, work stress, excessive workload, and toxic working environments are massive contributors to mental illness and injury – either as direct causes or as aggravating factors.

Your union can help. Workers have the right to psychologically safe and healthy workplaces, and workers can assert that right through organizing, campaigns, and bargaining.

Here is some general bargaining language that

locals can adapt for their own bargaining proposals:

The Union and the Employer shall cooperate to promote and to improve rules and practices, which enhance the physiological and psychological conditions of employees, and

which provide protection from factors that undermine employee health and safety.

Note that this language has two distinct aspects. The language calls for “rules and practices”, which both enhance workers’ wellbeing

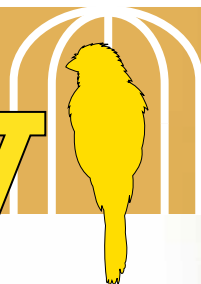
and protect them from harm. In fact, any collective agreement language on workplace mental health (or psychological health) should have prevention of mental injury from workplace conditions at its core.

■ Troy Winters

Further points for bargaining proposals:

- Psychologically healthy and safe workplaces can be achieved by reducing psychosocial hazards.
- Initial risk assessment for mental health hazards will be performed and conducted as needed (or at least every two years), or on the recommendation of the Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) or the health and safety representative (HSR) (as applicable).
- The Employer and the Union agree to develop a workplace mental health hazard prevention policy, as well as a program to implement it in the workplace.
- The program will include measures and procedures for reporting any mental health hazards in the workplace, as well as measures to assist employees who have experienced mental distress.
- The policy and the program will be reviewed annually, or as often as needed or recommended by the JHSC or the HSR (as applicable).
- The Employer will develop information, instruction, training and education on the mental health hazards in the workplace and how these workplace factors contribute to mental distress with the JHSC or the HSR (as applicable).

THE canary



5 ways to build mental health solidarity

Building solidarity is what unions do, and that’s why CUPE is helping locals take action to protect and enhance the mental health of our members.

CUPE locals and their members regularly address workplace issues to make sure that the workplace is safe and healthy for everyone. This includes ensuring that people have a workplace that is physically safe – and mentally healthy.

Here are five ways your local can build solidarity for mental health:

1. Strengthen your rights and understand your employer’s responsibilities

Workers have the right to psychologically safe and healthy workplaces and workers can strengthen that right through organizing, campaigns and bargaining. All employers have a legal obligation to provide a healthy and safe workplace, including a workplace that is free from mental health hazards.

2. Identify mental health hazards in the workplace, including discrimination

Psychological health and safety means preventing mental injuries arising from hazards in the workplace, including excessive workload, stress, discrimination and toxic workplace cultures. If you experience any of these, report them to your employer and to your union.

3. Build a culture of respect in your local

Building mental health solidarity comes with the territory when we strengthen our locals using member engagement principles. Building a respectful culture is an ongoing process of being responsive, approachable and leading by example. Being inclusive builds strong locals – and naturally leads to strength at the bargaining table, as well.

4. Bargain mental health provisions

Perhaps the best way for CUPE locals to build mental health solidarity is to bargain good language into your contract. Strong bargaining language enhances wellbeing and emphasizes the prevention of mental injury.

5. Deepen health and safety practice at your workplace

Thanks to activists pushing the issue through the health and safety process, the impact of the workplace on workers’ mental health is becoming better understood every day. Remember, the process to work through health and safety concerns related to mental health hazards is the same as working to solve physical hazards.



CUPE has the tools you need to take action. Check out our toolkits on Occupational Mental Health and Violence Prevention, and build your local’s capacity with our *Health and Safety Committee Resource Kit*. As always, you can reach out to our dedicated health and safety staff who can provide guidance and support.

■ David Robbins