




# **WALKING THE TALK:** A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO RECONCILIATION FOR CUPE LOCALS

***CUPE***



CUPE is committed to reconciliation and justice for Indigenous peoples. That is why we continue to call on all governments in Canada to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action.

But we as a union also have our own responsibility to achieve reconciliation. To do that, we must continue to build a respectful relationship with Indigenous peoples inside our union, across the entire labour movement, in our workplaces and in our communities.

This guide provides CUPE members with key resources to better acknowledge and include Indigenous members in our union, and to help locals take concrete action towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

## **DEFENDING PUBLIC SERVICES FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

Canada has a proven history of underfunding services and infrastructure for Indigenous peoples. This chronic neglect has created injustice and crisis in Indigenous communities. That's why one of the priorities of CUPE's reconciliation work is to advocate for better public services for Indigenous peoples, including:

- Safe drinking water
- Good schools and lifelong learning resources
- Quality accessible health care in Indigenous communities, and
- Fair and equal social services

Indigenous peoples deserve the same quality public services and infrastructure available to everyone else in Canada. Indigenous communities, both on- and off-reserve and in urban centres, also have the right to control the services their people depend on.

**We must advocate for all Indigenous peoples to have fair and equal access to public services.**

# THERE IS NO RECONCILIATION WITHOUT UNDRIP

UNDRIP is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) refers to it as "the framework for reconciliation." The TRC used the Declaration as a guiding framework for both its report and its 94 Calls to Action. Calls to Action numbers 43 to 49 specifically call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to fully adopt and implement UNDRIP into Canadian law.

While the Declaration is not legally binding, it is the most comprehensive international human rights instrument for the individual and collective rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world. It provides guidance to cooperative relationships with Indigenous peoples, and addresses a wide range of rights to culture, identity, language, health and education.

The guiding principle of UNDRIP is "free, prior and informed consent." Whether it's land development or resource extraction on traditional territories, or changes to laws and legislation that affect the lives of Indigenous peoples, the Declaration clearly states that Indigenous peoples have a right to a meaningful say in the decisions that impact their land, territories, languages, cultures and way of life. In effect, this means the right to say "no" to government and industrial actions that will harm their languages, cultures, and the well-being of their communities.

**Read more about the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at [UN.org](http://UN.org)**

## ACKNOWLEDGING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN OUR UNION

There are many ways to acknowledge and include Indigenous peoples in CUPE conferences, conventions and other events. Locals can ask an Elder to conduct a ceremony, or invite a Chief or other representative from the territory to speak and provide a detailed land acknowledgement.

Please note that each option has different cultural protocols that should be respected. Some options might not be appropriate in all situations. Each Indigenous nation's protocols are unique, but there are some general guidelines.

### ***Guidelines for Indigenous nations' protocols***

#### **Elders**

It is customary for many Indigenous cultures to begin meetings or other gatherings with a ceremony lead by an Elder. They may also be a knowledge carrier, or someone with a similar cultural role. The Elder determines which ceremony is appropriate. It is considered improper for others to suggest or dictate what form that ceremony should take.



Protocol for asking an Elder for ceremony:

- Contact the Elder, or their helper/assistant, to check on availability. If you are not sure about the Elder's protocols, this is the time to ask. Some Elders will not attend events where alcohol is being served, so make sure the Elder is aware in advance.
- Offering tobacco is not universal for all Elders. Many Indigenous peoples have different customs and protocols. It is okay to ask the Elder (or their helper/assistant) what their protocols are and what is an appropriate gift.
- Make a formal invitation to the event, confirming time and date. This includes telling the Elder about CUPE and the specifics of the event. Traditionally, this is done face-to-face with an offering of tobacco. Most Elders are okay with a phone call, and understand that the tobacco will be offered prior to the event.
- When offering tobacco, it must be held in the left hand out towards the Elder. The person offering the tobacco will tell the Elder specifically what they are asking from them. When the Elder understands the request, they will accept the tobacco.
- The Elder should be the first order of business (a welcoming by the MC is acceptable, but the Elder should be the first speaker).
- When the Elder is done, it is customary to give them a gift. It should be done privately and offstage, and should include an honorarium.
- Also, if there is food served at the event, the Elder should be served first.

### **Chiefs and other representatives**

Inviting a Chief or other representative from the Indigenous nation on whose territory the meeting is taking place is another option. Openness to accepting the invitation depends greatly on the individual Chief and Councils and the traditions of their communities – some welcome the opportunity, while others see it as an imposition. There can also be issues of legitimacy and authority with regard to the invited representatives – many territories are shared, and some nations are split between traditional leadership and settler government mandated leadership structures.

When inviting a Chief or other representative, we should never ask them to “welcome us to their territory,” unless CUPE has undertaken the proper protocols to ask permission to enter their territory. For most Indigenous nations, this is a lengthy process of relationship building, and many will not undertake it with a non-governmental organization.

Inviting a Chief or other leadership representative does not require an offering of tobacco. For the most part they should be treated as other government guests and speakers, such as premiers or mayors.

It is best that these invitations are extended in the context of an ongoing relationship between CUPE and the Indigenous community, for example working in coalition on the issues of mutual concern, such as access to public services, clean drinking water and decent working conditions. The relationship can also include CUPE members and locals acting in solidarity to support ongoing Indigenous struggles to protect land and waterways, among other issues.

# LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has become common practice to have land acknowledgements prior to beginning meetings and gatherings. These are meant to acknowledge the Indigenous nations on whose land the meeting is taking place, and to raise awareness about Indigenous peoples' presence in their territories.

Land acknowledgments can go beyond acknowledging on whose land the meeting is taking place. They can also recount some of the history of the people, their relations with settlers, and acknowledge that the Indigenous peoples still occupy the territory and continue to experience the ongoing effects of colonialism.

When doing a land acknowledgement, it is respectful to use the proper traditional name of the Indigenous nation whenever possible.

## Check out these resources for finding out whose territory you are on:

- **Online at [native-land.ca](http://native-land.ca) | [territoire-traditionnel.ca](http://territoire-traditionnel.ca)**

Native Land is an Indigenous-led not-for-profit educational resource on Indigenous territories and treaty lands. It includes an interactive map tool, and a guide on crafting your own territorial acknowledgements.

- **Your local Friendship Centre**

Friendship Centres are volunteer-driven and locally operated organizations that offer essential programs and services to urban Indigenous people. They are often able to offer advice about whose territory should be acknowledged. Friendship Centres are often dependent on volunteers and limited funding, so it is appropriate to make a donation to thank them for their assistance. Find your local Friendship Centre at [nafc.ca](http://nafc.ca)

- **CUPE Indigenous Councils**

Comprised of Indigenous CUPE members, the CUPE National Indigenous Council promotes and defends the rights of all Indigenous workers in our union and in our communities. Representatives to the National Indigenous Council, and to provincial Councils, can often assist with questions on land acknowledgements and Elder protocols. Your regional Human Rights staff representative will also be able to assist you in contacting a representative. Read more about the CUPE National Indigenous Council at [cupe.ca](http://cupe.ca)

## CUPE AND THE TRC'S CALLS TO ACTION

*"Education is what got us into this mess...  
but education is the key to reconciliation."*

- Senator Murray Sinclair,  
Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

To guide reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made 94 Calls to Action. These recommendations offer real, concrete steps that Canadian governments, businesses, industries, educational institutions, public service institutions – as well as the general public – can undertake to address the legacy of residential schools.

You can read find all 94 Calls to Action at [nctr.ca](http://nctr.ca), the website of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

While many of the Calls to Action focus on government-led action, there is one in particular CUPE locals can take up:

### *Call to Action 57*

*We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.*

As public sector workers, we have a responsibility to learn more about Indigenous peoples. There is much to learn, including Indigenous histories and cultures, the challenges and struggles Indigenous communities face, the importance of our Treaty relationships, and the legacy of residential schools and other forms of colonialism.

## Steps your local can take to support Call to Action 57:

- Discuss with your employer(s) how they intend to offer training and education on Indigenous peoples at the bargaining table and at other joint labour-management processes
- Encourage and sponsor members to enroll in one of the Indigenous Peoples workshops offered by CUPE Union Education:
  - > Learning about First Peoples
  - > Steward Learning Series – Solidarity with Indigenous Workers
- Make solidarity actions in support of Indigenous rights and justice issues a priority in your local, and
- Advocate for the protection and strengthening of public service for Indigenous peoples.

## RESOURCES TO HELP YOUR LOCAL WALK THE TALK

CUPE Indigenous issues and research

[cupe.ca/indigenous-issues-and-research](https://cupe.ca/indigenous-issues-and-research)

National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation

[nctr.ca](https://nctr.ca)

Indigenous territory guide and interactive map

[native-land.ca](https://native-land.ca)

National Association of Friendship Centres

[nafc.ca](https://nafc.ca)

CUPE National Indigenous Council

[cupe.ca/national-indigenous-council](https://cupe.ca/national-indigenous-council)

CUPE BC Indigenous Workers Committee

[cupe.bc.ca/indigenous\\_workers\\_committee](https://cupe.bc.ca/indigenous_workers_committee)

CUPE Alberta

[alberta.cupe.ca/committees/aboriginal-council/](https://alberta.cupe.ca/committees/aboriginal-council/)

CUPE Manitoba

[cupe.mb.ca/about-us/committees-2/aboriginal-council/](https://cupe.mb.ca/about-us/committees-2/aboriginal-council/)

CUPE Ontario Aboriginal Council

[cupe.on.ca/committees/aboriginal-council](https://cupe.on.ca/committees/aboriginal-council)

SCFP Conseil québécois des Autochtones

[scfp.qc.ca/conseil-quebecois-des-autochtones/](https://scfp.qc.ca/conseil-quebecois-des-autochtones/)



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