

WATER IS LIFE

Indigenous communities confront environmental racism

What is environmental racism?

Environmental racism is a form of systemic racism that leaves Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities far more exposed to environmental hazards than predominantly white communities. It includes industrial and environmental policies and practices that lead to environmentally hazardous sites being located close to Black, Indigenous and racialized communities. Environmental hazards linked to environmental racism include polluting industries, landfills, toxic waste disposal sites, garbage dumps, noise from ground transportation such as highways and trains, and other harmful activities that add to community contamination and pollution.

The devastating effects of environmental racism can severely harm the health of community members.¹ Environmental racism is rooted in the policies and decisions of many political bodies and industries. It can come directly from municipal, provincial or federal decisions, or from corporate projects such as pipelines that are supported by government policy. Significant

government delays or complete refusal to support the cleanup of environmental contaminants and disasters allows environmental racism to continue, sometimes even decades after a corporate project has left a community.



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Systemic racism also means Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities have unequal access to power structures. They are underrepresented in elected government positions, as well as in “mainstream environmental groups and on decision-making boards, commissions and regulatory bodies.”²

How does it affect access to clean water for Indigenous peoples?

Environmental racism means many Indigenous communities have lost or have never had reliable access to clean water because of government policies and funding decisions, as well as corporate policies. When the Canadian government forcibly relocated Indigenous peoples onto reserves, they often chose remote places where non-Indigenous people would not choose to settle.

Since these relocations, governments have often allowed environmentally harmful facilities such as landfills and processing plants, as well as infrastructure for natural resource extraction to be located on or close to reserves, creating conditions that non-Indigenous communities would not agree to live with. Extracting natural resources such as natural gas often leads to environmental disasters. These catastrophes have been made worse by government inaction on pollution and industrial accidents caused by corporations. All these policies and actions (or inaction) have harmed water sources on Indigenous territories.

How does it harm Indigenous communities and workers?

Indigenous communities are some of the most harshly impacted by environmental racism. It affects many aspects of work for Indigenous peoples. We can all imagine how challenging it might be to have clean clothes, wash dishes and shower for work without access to water that is safe for these everyday tasks. Unsafe water has immense cost-of-living impacts. The hard-earned wages of some Indigenous households get spent

on bottled water for drinking, cooking and washing dishes, instead of on other needs and priorities.



Indigenous communities that have experienced environmental racism for generations can face long-term, inter-generational health impacts such as increased rates of cancer, autoimmune diseases, or neurological impacts. These lived experiences all affect workers' needs in bargaining, including long-term health and care costs that may not be covered by provincial health care.

What are some affected Indigenous communities?

GRASSY NARROWS ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

Asubpeeschoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows First Nation) is located north of Kenora, Ontario. The community is living with the consequences of mercury poisoning after Dryden Chemicals Ltd. dumped mercury into the English-Wabigoon River system, upstream from Grassy Narrows, from 1962 to 1970. This poisoned the fish from the river system as well as the soil.

Dryden Chemicals shut its doors in 1976, but the impacts of mercury contamination, and the fight for effective health care and chemical poisoning management

are ongoing for the Grassy Narrows community. CUPE is a longtime ally and supporter of Grassy Narrows. Many CUPE members have rallied at demonstrations and support the Grassy Narrows River Run protest held every second year at the provincial Legislature.

WET’SUWET’EN PIPELINES FIGHT

For decades the hereditary chiefs of the Wet’suwet’en First Nation, along with many members and allies, have organized against the Coastal GasLink pipeline using strategies including legal battles and physical blockades. The Coastal GasLink pipeline would transport liquefied natural gas from northeast British Columbia to a terminal near the town of Kitimat. The community is concerned that the project will destroy habitat for many species and ecosystems, and be a likely site of environmental disaster. CUPE has been a proud supporter of the Unist’ot’en Healing Centre.

SIPEKNE’KATIK FIRST NATION SHUBENACADIE RIVER WIN

In 2007, Alton Gas proposed a project to store natural gas in underground salt caverns near the Shubenacadie River in Nova Scotia, a plan that could have had serious environmental consequences. By 2016, the Sipekne’katik First Nation opposed the project on the grounds they were not properly consulted throughout the project’s development.

Indigenous activists across Canada organized to support this cause, CUPE financially supported the Grassroots Grandmothers in their struggle, and our members took part in demonstrations. In 2020 Sipekne’katik First Nation won a court case overturning the project’s industrial approval. Alton Gas officially cancelled the project in 2021.

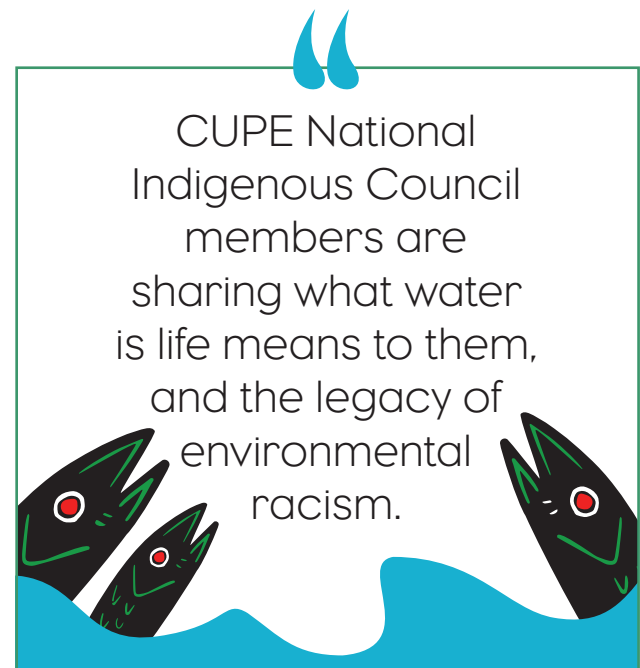
CUPE National Indigenous Council members speak out

On World Water Day 2023, CUPE launched videos featuring four Indigenous CUPE members. They were interviewed sharing their stories about what water is life means to them, and the legacy of environmental racism in their communities.

CUPE 1880 member Dawn Bellerose speaks about the difference in water quality and access between urban centers and Indigenous communities, and about Grassy Narrows’ fight for clean water.

CUPE 1500 member Nathalie Claveau describes the vital relationship that she and her community have with Lac Saint-Jean in Quebec, and the legacy of logging pollution for the lake.

CUPE 1870 member Leo Cheverie highlights the importance of community organizing in defence of water, as well as how large monocultural farms are starving lakes and ponds on Prince Edward Island of oxygen, including a pond that Leo has grown up with, Diligent Pond.



CUPE 4070 member Lindsay Poll shares how the pollution of Lac Ste. Anne in Alberta has affected her and her family, and also speaks about the importance of protecting water as part of our responsibilities to future generations of Canadians.

Everyone is encouraged to listen to these stories, learn more about the root causes, and act for environmental justice for all.

UN declaration a tool to fight back

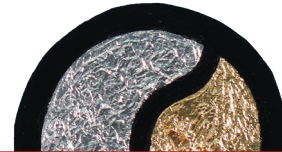
The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is an important tool for Indigenous peoples fighting environmental racism. The guiding principle of UNDRIP is “free, prior and informed consent.”

Whether it’s land development or resource extraction on traditional territories, or changes to laws 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.

The federal government has committed to implementing UNDRIP’s principle of free, prior and informed consent, and CUPE’s *Walking the Talk* guide highlights that there can be no reconciliation without Canadian governments at all levels adopting and implementing UNDRIP’s principles.



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Listen, learn and act

Indigenous peoples have been fighting environmental racism for generations through many strategies including community organizing, legal action, government lobbying, as well as direct actions such as blockading the locations of environmentally racist infrastructure like pipeline routes. Communities like Grassy Narrows have been fighting for decades. It is vital to recognize the strength and dignity of Indigenous peoples who have undertaken this work.

CUPE’s Water is life campaign provides educational tools to learn about Indigenous water issues and mobilize in support of Indigenous peoples and allies to protect and fix the water. You can pledge your support, watch our member videos, find ways to support Indigenous communities fighting for clean drinking water, and more at cupe.ca/water-is-life.

¹ Working harmoniously on the earth: CUPE’s national environmental policy.

² *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, “Environmental Racism in Canada.”