

RACING SOLIDARITY, REMAKING LABOUR:  
LABOUR RENEWAL FROM A DECOLONIZING  
AND ANTI-RACISM PERSPECTIVE

by

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**Abstract**

The study examines how Aboriginal workers and workers of colour experience union solidarity and explores the necessary conditions for the remaking of solidarity and the renewal of the labour movement. Grounded in anti-colonial discursive framework, the study analyzes the cultures and practices of labour solidarity through the lived experiences of Aboriginal activist and activists of colour within the Canadian labour movement.

Utilizing the research methodologies of participatory action research, arts-informed research and critical autobiography, the research draws on the richness of the participants' collective experiences and visual images co-created during the inquiry. The study also relies on the researcher's self-narrative as a long time labour activist as a key part of the embodied knowledge production and sense making of a movement that is under enormous challenges and internal competing tension exacerbated by the neoliberal agenda.

The findings reveal a sense of profound gap between what participants experience as daily practices of solidarity and what they envisioned. Through the research process, the study explores and demonstrates the importance and potential of a more holistic and integrative critical education approach on anti-racism and decolonization.

The study proposes a pedagogical framework on solidarity building with four interlinking components – rediscovering, restoring, reimagining and reclaiming – as a way to make whole for many Aboriginal activists and activists of colour within the labour movement. The pedagogy of solidarity offers a transformative process for activists to build solidarity across constituencies in the pursuit of labour renewal and social justice movement building.

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## Dedication

To

Eugene (xiaopo)  
(1946 – 2008)

*Una parte de mi murió con él.  
Una parte de él vivve conmigo.*

*“A part of me dies with him,  
A part of him lives with me.”*

*Eduardo Galeano*

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# **Solidarity Forever**

by Ralph Chaplin (1915)

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,  
there can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;  
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,  
But the union makes us strong.

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,  
Greater than the might of armies, magnified a thousand-fold.  
We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old  
For the union makes us strong.

CHORUS:

*Solidarity forever,  
Solidarity forever,  
Solidarity forever,  
For the union makes us strong.*

(This song was written the night before the hunger strike demonstration  
in support of the 1915 coal miner strike in West Virginia.)

## **Preface**

How difficult and time-consuming it is to have to reinvent the pencil every time you want to send a message.

Audre Lorde (1981, p. 114)

Then...

In 1975, I began working as a community worker at the University Settlement House, then the hub of downtown Chinatown community organizing. Those were the early days of multiculturalism policies. CARAVAN, the first multicultural festival, was launched in Toronto with much fanfare.

Then the government-sponsored English program was under the Department of Manpower and Immigration (later renamed as Human Resources Development Canada). The 6-month English as a Second Language (ESL) program with a weekly training stipend was only reserved for the newcomers who were designated to enter into the labour force (i.e., head of the household). Virtually all immigrant women regardless of their previous occupations were denied access to this program on the basis that they came in as spouses, sponsored by their husbands, and therefore not destined supposedly for the labour market, even though in reality, many of them took jobs to survive. It was a state program designed to deny immigrant women equal access to language training program and thereby, creating a sub-layer within the surplus army of labour on the basis of class, race, and gender.

I remember taking a client who had been laid off as a hotel room attendant to the Manpower Office. She used to be a medical doctor in China and her dream was to get into a retraining program to upgrade her English so she could return to her original profession or a

health related occupation. After a 2-hour wait, the response we got was, “You don’t need English to sew or clean toilets...you should be happy that we let you work in Canada.”

And now...

It was the fall of 2009; the unemployment rate in Toronto was at 10.1% (Statistics Canada October, 2009). I have been working with a group of predominately immigrant workers and workers of colour who had lost their jobs due to a sudden plant closure at the height of the manufacturing crisis.

The Ontario government has launched a Second Career Program in July 2008 to provide support for workers who have been laid off and are in need of retraining to meet the challenges of a highly competitive and ever shrinking job market. There is a pre-Second Career literacy and academic upgrading program for those who might have gone straight to work after quitting school in Grade 10, or immigrant workers who might have immigrated to Canada in the 1980s or early 1990s, landed in a survival job and have never had access to ESL / upgrading program. For these workers without jobs, the possibility of upgrading and entering into a new career with a better job prospect has infused them with a renewed sense of hope.

With the unprecedented severity of the economic recession, the Second Career program has been oversubscribed. The provincial government exceeded their target of 20,000 applications and suddenly there was a backlog of 7,000 files. The communiqué from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) in November 2009 stated that the new guideline for approving applicants would be very limited in order to maximize the potential of the Second Career program. The perennial question of who is more worthy for these precious training opportunities has become a fairly subjective exercise among those

who have the power to decide. Workers are being told that they do not have a high enough level of English to succeed in a retraining program. The implicit message is that you do not need a high level of English to continue to stay in precarious employment!

The immigrant women, who were once excluded from accessing government sponsored English program, are now the victims of this new stringent and arbitrary process. The two incidents, 35 years apart, remain strikingly similar in both its intent and impact. While the language couched in the latter incident is not as blatant, the adverse effect on the workers remains equally disheartening.

In those early years of community organizing, I was deeply affected by the anguish and muteness among immigrant women workers who would jokingly characterize themselves as the “walking blind, deaf, and dumb” for not knowing how to speak up, or understand when they are being sworn at.

Now I am enraged and extremely disappointed about how little things have changed. Much as the language of equity gets adopted even among the policy makers, the ideology of race remains entrenched. It bursts the bubble of possibilities and dreams that these women have for once, dared to hold.

Then as a young community organizer, my efforts were focused on setting up language classes, thinking naively that if workers were equipped with the language skills, they would be able to participate in their community and union meetings, and be able to assert their own rights. As the part of the colonized mindset, I addressed the issue as a typical organizer, trying to fix the problem, without putting in the larger systemic context of race, gender, and class construction. It was a rude awakening to recognize that it would take more

than language classes and skill upgrading to break the invisible, and yet formidable, wall of systemic discrimination.

It is disconcerting that after more than three decades, we have not moved as much as we had hoped. How many times do we have to keep “reinventing the pencil” as poignantly referred to by Lorde? It is that sense of frustration that has prompted me to return to the academy. There is also a sense of urgency for me as an activist-organizer that has led me to recognize the potential of research as an act of resistance. This is how my research journey begins. It is my way of making sense of the problematic, imagining possibilities; and remaking solidarity.

## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction**

It is a tumultuous time for the labour movement in Canada and across the globe. The scale and pace of labour market restructuring has dismantled workplaces, devastated communities, and created havoc in the lives of workers and their families. Unionized and non-unionized workers alike have been caught in the eye of a storm through no fault of their own. Within the Canadian context, we are witnessing disturbing signs of a labour movement that is fragmented and stretched to its limit by competing interests. For a movement that prides itself in defending the power of working people and being in the forefront of the social justice and equality agenda, it seems reasonable to ask whether the core value and strength of trade unionism as expressed in the labour anthem, “Solidarity Forever” by Ralph Chaplin, will last forever and is being truly felt by all.

Labour movement has been my site of activism for the last 30 years and it pains me to see it in such a state of crisis and internal tensions exacerbated by the neoliberal agenda. The purpose of the study is therefore, an explorative journey in search of ways to reinvigorate the labour movement from an anti-racism and equity perspective. Through the lived experiences of a group of Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> and workers of colour<sup>2</sup> labour activists including my own narrative, this inquiry is a critical examination of the concepts and current practices of solidarity from an anti-colonial framework. The main research questions are: how do Aboriginal workers and workers of colour within the labour movement experience solidarity? What are some

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the thesis, I have used primarily the term Aboriginal Peoples to refer to First Nations, Metis and Inuit populations who are the first people of this land. Aboriginal Peoples is also the term that is more commonly used also within the labour movement. The term Indigenous Peoples is also used throughout the document when it is referred to broader international context.

<sup>2</sup> A worker of colour is a terminology used to refer to racial minorities.

alternate educational approaches to remake solidarity that can contribute to the goal of labour renewal? By probing into the current practices and the concepts of labour solidarity, the study aims to examine how race impacts and intersects with class in the building and fracturing of worker solidarity. How is solidarity extended-by whom and to whom? How much is such extension of solidarity based on race, gender, and all the other markers of social identities that make us whole and, at the same time, unique?

At the same time, as a long time labour educator engaged in anti-racism and equity work within organized labour, I wish to probe deeper into the role that critical education on race, power and privilege can play in the collective endeavor of remaking solidarity and renewing labour. This learning objective stems from my concern on the demise of anti-racism education in the climate of growing acceptance for political incorrectness and a sense of urgency for more holistic critical education that can overcome the me-first mentality and the fear factor. This research is therefore, also an explorative journey to reimagine an alternate approach on critical education on solidarity building especially among Aboriginal workers and workers of colour.

In underscoring the importance of forever and for-all in the notion of solidarity, the research is grounded in the learning and knowledge constructed through the subjective realities of Aboriginal workers and workers of colour who are anti-racism activists within the labour movement. How will our insights and experiences inform and deepen the collective quest for a movement transformed and solidarity undivided?

### *Locating Myself as the Researcher*

In 1977, almost 10 years after arriving in Canada as a foreign student from the former British colony, Hong Kong, I was introduced to the labour movement, and became the first woman of colour union organizer with International Ladies Garment Workers Union in Toronto. In September 2006, 8 years after being the Ontario Region Director of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the national labour body that represents 3.2 million unionized workers across the country, I took a leave of absence and returned to the academy for a pause from the highly political and unrelenting pace of work within the labour movement. It has been a liberating experience to speak for no one else but myself, with no fancy titles or any institutional constraint. It has also been a reflective time to recover some of my own experiences within a movement that has given me some of the most exhilarating moments and then, equally disheartening ones.

Most of my citizen engagement and the sense of political efficacy have taken place in Canada. My experiences as a feminist and a community and labour activist for the past 35 years have been a transformative process. I have unlearned and relearned about my own stereotypes, my privileges, and my bias, and at the same time, I have taken personal risks and challenged the system, and as well, been ignored and humiliated. Throughout my years of activism, I have always been driven by a sense of outrage. That fire in my belly fuels my passion for justice and my actions of resistance. The experiences are so intertwined and layered that it is not easy to unpack.

In a way, it seems like an overanalyzing to devote the weightiness of doctoral research to something that is so obvious and fundamental to the labour movement. Yet that is exactly the purpose of this research. Just because we sing *Solidarity Forever*, we chant and

scream about it in rallies, it does not mean we have felt it in our hearts and been transformed by this intrinsic value of the labour movement. The question is how it is practiced and manifested in our everyday action as trade union members and activists. Just as Dorothy Smith (2005) refers to the everyday practice of patriarchy as the normalcy of everyday interactions, the same can be extended to the concept of union solidarity as the invisible daily practices within the broad frame of the labour movement. The concept of solidarity is so embedded that it has become invisible and taken for granted. The notion of solidarity in its purest form represents the *why* of the labour movement; however, do the daily practices in the name of solidarity express that same sentiment?

In that regard, the aim of my study is a journey to make the invisible visible. The research is intended to be constructive rather than a critique for critique's sake. Nor is this research an exposé on how Aboriginal workers and workers of colour are excluded or silenced within the labour movement. To examine the notion of solidarity is an exploration that goes to the heart of the labour movement, and therefore, it is appropriate that this research comes from the heart to focus on matters that make our spirit soar and give us hope.

What we need, then, are “real utopias”: utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have pragmatically accessible way stations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of muddling through a world of imperfect conditions for social change. (Wright, 2003, p. vii)

Erik Olin Wright's vision is both inspiring and instructive as it challenges us as activists to put visions of “real utopias” into practice. As a trade unionist, my site of practice is in the labour movement. Imperfect as they may be, trade union organizations remain one of the most populist and independent social institutions within the broader social context.

Therefore, the inspiration for my research stems from the firm belief that the presence of a

strong, independent labour movement is essential to a healthy civil society. My commitment to building a vibrant, democratic, and inclusive movement is instructed by my personal experiences and lived reality as a woman of colour primarily in Ontario for the last 35 years. The experiences and insights I have gained through these years of community and labour activism have placed me in a unique position to conduct this research from an insider-researcher perspective. In many ways, this research is a reflection of my personal journey in the labour movement as an anti-racist feminist. It traverses in parallel and, at times, in direct opposition to the mainstream of the movement; and like so many other activists from the diverse equity constituency groups, we have stubbornly stood our ground and refused to walk away because this is our labour movement too.

The aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 has had a devastating impact on the labour movement; at the same time, it has offered more political space for soul searching and thinking outside the box. There is a collective recognition among labour scholars that the status quo has not worked and new ideas are emerging (Fletcher, 2008; Ganz, 2009; Milkman, 2006). I take courage in particular from the following insight by Marshall Ganz (2009), the former Director of Organizing with the United Farmworkers: “One lesson I learned is that things don’t have to be the way they are, but they don’t change by themselves. Challenging status quo takes commitment, courage, imagination, and above all, *dedication to learning*” [my italics] (p. ix).

My research is not intended to be an evidence-based approach to prove the existence of racism or to expose the racial politics within unions. The heart of this inquiry is about the spirit of a group of Aboriginal worker and worker of colour activists – how they have experienced solidarity, what keeps them going; and how they have re-imagined and

reclaimed space for solidarity making. The richness of their voices, experiences and courage will contribute to our collective learning on how to re-imagine and rebuild a movement with all its challenges, goodness, and potential that has yet to be harnessed.

### *Groundings of the Research*

The study is grounded in an anti-colonial discursive framework that provides a specific entry point to examine the broader and historical context in which trade unions as a social institution have operated and participated in the nation building of Canada. It is a recognition that the ongoing colonization of Indigenous Peoples needs to be made explicit and integrated into any anti-racism work within organized labour. George Dei's (2006) work on anti-colonial perspective has been most succinct and instructive for my research:

An anti-colonial perspective is about developing an awareness/consciousness of the varied conditions under which domination and oppression operate. Such a perspective seeks to subvert the dominant relations of knowledge production that sustain hierarchies and systems of power. (p. 5)

Such a theoretical framing has enabled me to put my personal and collective activism for social and racial justice within the labour movement and in the broader community in a historical context and see it as part of the ongoing political project to resist and subvert those conditions of dominance.

As a member of the immigrant community, the research is also the beginning of my own relearning process to develop a deeper awareness of the historical and ongoing colonization of Aboriginal Peoples, and how that impacts on their experiences within organized labour. The research is also a critical examination of our roles as immigrants, as worker of colour union activists in the ongoing colonial project of Indigenous Peoples and

strategies to construct in-between space where knowledge can be co-created to counter the dominant Eurocentric worldview. Throughout the thesis, I have relied on the wisdom and teachings of the Aboriginal worldview and the richness of the Chinese language as alternate prism to probe deeper into the concept of solidarity.

Marlene Brant Castellano (2000) refers to Aboriginal knowledge as personal, oral, experiential, and conveyed in narrative or metaphors. She further asserts that personal experience is the root of knowledge and no claims are made to universality. I find the holistic character of aboriginal knowledge to be liberating as it brings together different ways of knowing to understand how the parts fit together to make the whole and as Jean Paul Restoule (2000) poignantly observes that the Aboriginal way of knowing encompasses so many perspectives that they are capable of accepting contradiction.

Indigenous scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) challenges the tendency to view research as separate from action. On the contrary, she sees them as inextricably linked and characterizes research more as an indigenous community development project where participants represent a community of shared interest.

We have a common struggle – that is to decolonize ourselves and our knowledge production. We need to change research methods to end the objectification of Aboriginal communities, and to encourage action based knowledge that is useful on the road to self-determination. (p. 24)

The parallel can be drawn from anti-racism activists who have tried to reclaim the space and refused to play by the rules as prescribed by those in power.

In carrying out the research, I have been mindful not to essentialize Aboriginal Peoples and people of colour. Too often, there is a tendency to view the two groups as each being homogeneous communities or to lump them together as one. Such generalization is a

total disregard of the diverse cultures, histories, languages and belief systems. It is therefore, critical for me to make it explicit that the lessons and conclusions drawn from this qualitative research are grounded in the perspective of a group of Aboriginal and workers of colour activists who have shared their experiences and hopes within a movement that sometimes render them invisible. In the context of doing anti-racism work within organized labour, despite the diversity in heritage and cultural backgrounds of these activists, they share a common political project of engagement and resistance. I have purposefully brought them together for this study in the hope that both the relationship built through the research process will provide new learnings and insights on ways to create and deepen the notion of solidarity building.

Nancy Jackson (2005) poses some fundamental questions on research knowledge on what counts as learning and by whom. Part of the motivation of my research also stems from recognition that there is a void of substantive qualitative research led by Indigenous researchers or researchers of colour to capture the authenticity of our experiences and diverse perspectives within the labour movement. I am greatly influenced by Dorothy Smith (2005) in her commitment to reconstruct sociological knowledge based on women as “subject” and “knower” in exposing the normalcy of everyday world of male hegemony. In a parallel view, it is imperative for Aboriginal activists and activists of colour to document, to voice, and to engage in knowledge production that exposes the everyday normalcy of White dominance and privilege.

The grounding of the research also stems from the integration of my self-narrative as a critical methodological feature of this study. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2004, p. 14) offers instructive insights on the normalcy and tendency of western education that has precluded

Indigenous peoples “from writing or speaking from a ‘real’ and authentic indigenous position”. The revelation of my own personal location as Chinese Canadian woman who has been involved in the struggles of labour rights and anti-racism with all its idiosyncrasies and history is very much the beginning of decolonizing my own mindset.

In relying on personal and collective narratives as the critical source of my research analysis, I am drawn to the strength of oral testimony and concur with the stance taken by Pamela Sugiman (2001) in asserting oral testimony as “a valuable methodological tool to unearth the histories of invisible groups, who by virtue of their small number have escaped scholarly attention” (p. 84). I am following the tradition of critical race theorists in creating counter-hegemony narratives that will expose the hidden and omitted knowledge of those who have been objectified.

By focusing on the authentic voices and lived experiences of this group of activists, my research is grounded in Dei’s (2008) stance on the importance of the embodied knowledge as part of the necessary conditions for anti-racism work and political action.

To have embodied knowledge – the bringing of personal feelings, emotional and spiritual connectedness and a deep passion and commitment to seek knowledge – is to transform existing conditions as a noble cause that emanates from within the self. This is the transcending of theory into practice. (p. 74)

It is the integration of our whole complex being in body, mind, and soul that shapes our experiences and knowledge, and propels us to act. The data will reveal some of the invisibilities on how race intersects with class and manifests itself through the lived experiences of Indigenous workers and workers of colour as activists and as subjects within the labour movement. The construction of knowledge that is grounded in their realities is very much needed in the field of labour renewal literature.

Finally, also utilizing participatory action research (PAR) and arts-informed research approaches, has ensured that the inquiry process has been a project of empowerment. It has been a collaborative initiative in engaging a group of research participants in a process of reimagining the potential and possibility of a renewed labour movement that will both be transformative and lasting.

### *Overview of Chapters*

This thesis is organized into nine chapters. The first three chapters provide an overview of the terrain and theoretical contours in which my research is situated. Then the methodology chapter outlines the different methods used in the research. The next three chapters as a group are the data in the voices and lived experiences of participants including my own. My personal narrative serves an introductory chapter to the following two primary data chapters, which reveal how the research process unfolded and the key themes emerged. The final two chapters provide a proposed framing on the pedagogy of solidarity and implications for future research, both of which are grounded in the richness of the data and the process of this research.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the thesis and a description of my role in this research. The labour movement is the site of practice for my activism and this research is a personal and collective exploration on a different approach to labour renewal. The heart of the matter is the notion of labour solidarity.

Chapter 2 is an overview on the challenges confronting the labour movement and putting labour renewal in the Canadian context of the economic crisis of 2009, the pace of the global neo-liberal agenda, and the demographic shift. The second part of Chapter 2 offers

a brief overview on the organized labour's anti-racism agenda and key milestones over the years. Drawing upon the literature of labour scholars, this chapter traces some of the earliest developments on the human rights agenda within the labour movement and the transition of its role. The chapter ends with a brief exploration on the relations built between the Canadian labour movement and Aboriginal Peoples.

The third chapter is a literature review of the theoretical groundings of my thesis. The three interrelated theoretical strands of the anti-colonization framework, the hegemony of White dominance and power, and the interracial working class consciousness provide the critical perspective for my research.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology on which the research was premised. It also provides an overview of my research process from one-to-one interviews to focus group dialogue, and from personal narrative to a 2-day solidarity circle process that was grounded in Aboriginal worldviews.

Chapter 5 is a personal narrative of my experiences in the labour movement. It provides the context for the analysis of the data and the collective narrative. Chapter 6 focuses on the daily practices of solidarity from the perspectives of Aboriginal workers and workers of colour. In the spirit of popular education approach to social change, we always begin with the participants' own experiences. The richness in their personal and collective narratives allows for a more critical analysis on the labour's ambivalence towards a proactive anti-racism and decolonizing agenda.

Chapter 7 is an in-depth data analysis and theoretical exploration on the concept of solidarity. From the spiritual dimension of the labour movement to the ethic of deep respect, from the notion as the consciousness-in-action to an act of love, the narrative on solidarity is

unfolded and interwoven with the insights and voices of the research participants. The chapter concludes with a deepening analysis on several visual representations that came out from a collective art making exercise with the participants on the envisioning of solidarity.

Drawing from the analysis of the personal and collective narrative of the participants, Chapter 8 is an exploration of the proposed framing and orientation of a critical educational approach on building solidarity. The coming together of Aboriginal activists and activists of colour in a co-created space for this research is positioned as both an act of decolonization and an act of self-preservation. The process of recovering, restoring, reimagining, and reclaiming becomes an evolving project on the making a renewed sense of solidarity. Chapter 9 examines the possibilities of the pedagogy of solidarity as part of the broader vision and strategies in the remaking of solidarity for a stronger movement for justice. This final chapter ends with future research implications and concluding remarks on the hopefulness of this study.

## **Chapter Two: The Current State of the Labour Movement**

As the global financial market becomes more harmonized and integrated, the neoliberal ideology of deregulation and privatization dominates and deepens its reign. Globally, trade unions as worker organizations are wrestling with the daunting challenge of seeking alternatives that will mitigate the bleeding of membership and the dimming of its power as worker organization. Samir Amin (2008) characterizes the development as “global pauperization and the disempowerment of the labouring classes” (p. xix).

The rapid dismantling and latent restructuring of the organization of the working world now dominates the scene. In the relatively privileged centres, this far-reaching change is manifested in the recurrence of mass unemployment, job flexibility, casualization of many employment opportunities, with the resultant resurgence of phenomenon of poverty (which inspires a language implying a reversion to the 19th century “charity”) and proliferation of all kinds of inequalities, which in turn have a bearing on the democratic traditions in crisis. (2008, p. xv)

Declining unionization rate, massive exodus of manufacturing jobs, and growing trend in precarious employment have prompted labour and social movement scholars here and abroad, to emphasize the urgent need for labour renewal (Kumar, 2003; Milkman 2006; Peetz, 1998; Pocock, 1997, Pupo & Thomas, 2010). The interdependency of conditions between the global north and global south and the need for a rebuilding of a new international working class movement have also been highlighted (Klein, 2007; Samir, 2008).

In the Canadian context, January 1, 2009, marked the 20th anniversary of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, and the 15th anniversary of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In the span of 20 years, the forces of the corporate globalization

agenda has accelerated and intensified (Galabuzi, 2006; Kumar & Schenk, 2003). The political, economic, and social landscape that the Canadian labour movement has operated within has been stretched and reshaped like never before. With the anticipated attacks on public sector jobs in the name of deficit reduction, and the downward spiral of unionization rate in private sector, the labour movement is confronted by several key challenges.

### *Decline in Union Density*

According to the CLC March 2010 report on union membership, the unionization rate dropped from 32.2% in 2000 to 29.9% for 2009. In a short time span of 7 years from 2002 to September 2009, Canada lost more than half a million jobs, of which 50% were eroded since October 2008, the onset of the global financial collapse. Fifty-five percent of the job losses were unionized jobs. Of all the industries, manufacturing sector has gone through the most devastating restructuring and experienced the biggest drop in union membership of 39% (Canadian Labour Congress, 2010).<sup>3</sup> Currently, only 26.7% of the workforce in the manufacturing sector is unionized. The union density for the private sector in Ontario was around 19% in 2009.

As someone who joined the labour movement as a union organizer with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), the erosion of our manufacturing base by the current economic crisis reminds me of the demise of the Toronto garment industry back in the early 1980s. This highly unionized industry was one of the first

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<sup>3</sup> Canada lost a total of 258,000 manufacturing jobs and 85% of that job loss have been in Ontario and Quebec (Canadian Labour Congress, 2007). Over 55% of these jobs lost since 2002 have been unionized jobs. The economic crisis of 2009 has exacerbated the situation. In the month of November 2008 alone, 71,000 jobs were eroded, out of which 66,000(92%) were in Ontario where the union density rate in the private sector has barely maintained at 19%. The pulp and paper workers, the auto related sector workers bore the brunt of the recession.

casualties fallen prey to a well-orchestrated transnational project with the capitalist class as the leading conductor accompanied by the states and the international institutions such as IMF and World Bank as their willing partners. The demise of the garment industry, deemed as one of the sunset industries and aptly characterized in a military term as DEW-Line (Danger Early Warning) forebode us what was going to happen in the manufacturing sector. That prediction has come alive in manifold in the current recession of 2008–2009.

The Spadina Avenue and King Street district was once the home of a thriving and vibrant garment industry that was the second largest employer group in the City of Toronto in the early 1970s. It was a source of stable employment for thousands of immigrant women and men who were predominately represented by two clothing unions: the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). Restructuring in the form of contracting out was taking place in unionized shops. During the height of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement debate, garment, shoe, and textile industries were deemed as “sunset industries” with relatively low waged workers. In sum, it was a vulnerable industry with a marginalized and dispensable workforce. With the ease in the flight of capital to set up shops offshore, the local garment industry was decimated. Unionized workers lost their jobs, worked as piece workers to contractors, and then eventually became the invisible home workers in an economy of just-in-time production and just-in-time labour.<sup>4</sup> Just as then the union wage was blamed for the demise of the industry, the same line of attack was also used against the “overpaid”

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<sup>4</sup> I recall attending a public debate on free trade and confronting then the Federal Minister of Human Resources, Barbara McDougall on its impact on immigrant women workers in garment industry. The response was “well, this would be an opportunity for them to go into retraining for a new career. The same chivalry attitude is now also palpable towards the workers who are going through this current recession.

autoworkers during the recent bankruptcy restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler (Stanford, 2009).

The current economic crisis has given employers (private and public sector alike) the best excuse to fully exploit the vulnerability and fear of workers in pushing concessionary bargaining and using lockouts to force workers to concede. Some unions have organized strategically to hold the line in defense of their past gains (Stanford et al., 2009). The strikes staged by municipal workers in Windsor and Toronto in summer 2009<sup>5</sup> and the 10-month Vale Inco strike by the steelworkers in Sudbury are but a testament to workers' strength and determination to stand their ground.

The two municipal strikes, despite the fact that the workers were only defending what they had previously negotiated, provoked strong public disapproval. The trade union movement in general was vilified. In Toronto, proponents for the privatization agenda seized the opportunity and set the stage on the current attack on public services in the name of deficit reduction and fiscal responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Growth in Precarious Employment***

In the early months of 2010, Statistics Canada reported a disturbing trend of an increase in number of new jobs in part time employment and a steady decline in full time work.<sup>7</sup> Precarious employment has been on the rise. The growth in employment is concentrated primarily in the service sector. As a result of the restructuring, what have been eroded are the unionized jobs with decent pay and benefits. At the same time, union

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<sup>5</sup> Canadian Union Public Employees (CUPE) members strike in Windsor lasted for 106 days and 30 days in Toronto.

<sup>6</sup> The recent expose of the TTC workers / ATU members, is part of the continuous campaign to introduce private public partnership arrangement on our public transit system.

<sup>7</sup> For the month of March 2010, we lost 14,000 full time jobs and gained 17,000 part time positions.

leadership led by the majority members who are full-time working members have resisted for a long time to organize part-time workers and acted as willing partners with the labour relations board and employer in accepting two tiered wage and benefit system for part-time/non standard labour (Metushi, 2000).

Given the fact that 13% of labour force is now made up of temp workers and that one in five new hires is a temp worker (Statistic Canada, 2003), it is quite common to see the presence of temp workers in workplaces within the private and public sectors, in addition to the existing full time and part time employment classifications. In some workplaces, there are multiple categories of workers: permanent, contractual, and temporary workers. In such two- or three-tiered workplaces, groups of workers work side-by-side doing the same work, yet with difference in wages, benefits, and working conditions according to the status of their employment.

Currently, only about one in every ten low-wage workers belongs to a union. Unionization is about 14% in trade and non-professional business services and is just 8.5 % in accommodation and food services. The overall union density in private sector has slipped below 20% (Canadian Labour Congress, 2010). The precarious nature of temporary work and contract part-time work has been a major challenge for unionization. Interest in joining a union among these low wage precarious workers has waned from 35% to around 14% over the last decade (CLC, 2010). The most sobering figure from this study is that only 8% of Canadians who are non-unionized workers would consider joining a union. It speaks to the serious challenges that lie ahead for the labour movement.

### ***Demographic Shifts***

At the same time, the Canadian work force is undergoing some dramatic changes with the retirement of baby boomers and other demographic shifts (Conference Board of Canada, 2007). According to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 70% of the net growth of the Canadian labour force in the first half of the 1990s was the result of immigration. It is projected that all of the net growth of the labour force will come from immigration by 2011 (A. Jackson, 2005, p. 13). The population growth trends indicate that by 2017, one in five people in Canada could be a racial minority member (Statistics Canada, 2005), and in urban contexts like Greater Toronto Area (GTA) where most jobs are located, it will be over half. In addition, the Aboriginal population could increase to 3.4 % of the working age population. For example, 20% of the population in Saskatchewan will be Aboriginal by 2017.

These demographic shifts provide a frame for some critical reflection within the labour movement. What is the capacity for reaching out to the diverse population and more fundamentally; can we afford to continue business as usual? The labour renewal literature has given priority to new organizing, particularly among women, workers of colour and Aboriginal workers who are the predominant workforce in the low wage, non-unionized service sector (Fairbrother & Yates, 2003; Kumar, 2003; Milkman, 1997).

### ***Internal Disconnect Between Leadership and Members***

For rank and file membership, the local union is where participation counts the most. Within the hierarchy of union structures, the local becomes the site that is closest to the membership; this is where members can experience the union moments, develop their sense of political efficacy, and get more involved in shaping the character of the union. Through

the process of information interaction and participation, the union local becomes “a community of practice” where meaning and identity among the group are forged. It further serves as “primary means of sustaining alternative political cultures” (Merrifield, 2002; Wenger, 1999). At the internal union level, these communities of practice are a training ground for every new generation of activists in the day-to-day representation of members and the decision-making process of the union local; and on a broader level, it has also been a fertile ground for raising class consciousness, at times not by design, but by a culture of dissent and resistance against the race to the bottom in the globalization context. Above all, it is also the site where their voices are heard and their experiences validated.

One of the biggest challenges is how the internal working of a union organization can provide enabling and participatory practices to involve its membership. Labour scholars highlight the need for labour to democratize internal union practices for better membership participation (Bernard, 2006; Levesque, Murray, & Le Queux, 2005; Lopez, 2004). In a survey conducted by Levesque et al. (2005) with over 1,000 union members from different sectors in Quebec on union disaffection, the findings are quite revealing. Over 70% of members recognize the values and principles of trade unionism despite the labour market restructuring and the growing aggressiveness of employers. However, the single most key variable that causes members’ alienation is how the local union conducts itself. The perception of the democratic character of the local is the most important factor in determining membership’s affinity to their union.

A key challenge for union revitalization therefore concerns unions’ institutional capacity through enhanced possibilities to participate in the life of the union. It should be emphasized that solidarity does not exist a priori but is rather the result of a process of socialization, of repeated efforts to develop alliances and complicities between workers, despite the differences that might separate them. (Levesque et al., 2005, p. 418)

If solidarity and efficacy comes with practice and social interaction, then the current institutional structures and established practices of some unions pose serious challenges. A case in point, for many New Canadian members who speak English as a second or third language, the issue of meaningful access and participation has been a perennial issue. Many can recall the local number but not the full name of their unions. The frustration over the absence of linguistically and culturally appropriate ways of communication has impeded the bridging between the two. Many may not even be aware of the presence of anti-discrimination clauses in collective agreements (Das Gupta, 1996; Ng, 1997). In that regard, it is regrettable that the scope of Levesque et al.'s research does not further explore the difference in union affinity from a gender, race, or other equity perspective.

### *Missing Real Alternatives to Neo-Liberalism*

With the decline in membership and unionization rate, and the disappearance of traditional jurisdiction boundaries, the Canadian labour movement is facing serious challenges to sustain its political relevancy and strength, as reflected in Bickerton and Stinson's (2008) assessment:

The Canadian labour movement needs collectively to develop coordinated strategies to address the problems concerning organizing, political action and collective bargaining rights. It must also seriously examine its own institutional structures to promote greater working class power within society, at the bargaining table and in the political area. In addition to waging defensive strategies to protect established gains, the Canadian labour movement must also develop an analysis and programme of real alternatives to neoliberalism. (p. 177)

What is left unsaid in Bickerton and Stinson's stance is the "what if" question: What if a working class analysis and a real alternative is not developed? Would we continue the "to each its own" organizing mentality and follow the path of free fall of the American labour

movement until it is shaken to the core? Alternatively, could we draw lessons from the U.S. experiences in organizing and mobilizing in order to accelerate our own rebuilding process, and begin a different type of transformative change? Fletcher and Gapasin (2008) argue passionately on the need for a transformative approach to change the course of the future of the U.S. labour movement after the split of Change to Win (CTW) from AFL-CIO in 2005:

Such an approach must understand the neoliberal global environment, reexamine who should be in the labour movement (and who is currently excluded), and redefine the role of the union movement in a process of social transformation. We are not interested in perpetuating illusions: the reality is that, absent an alternative transformative trade unionism, the United States will see no labour renewal. Rebuilding the AFL-CIO, or even creating a new federation, will have been an exercise in futility unless we get to the roots of the problems facing organized labour. (p. xii)

A similar argument could be applied to the Canadian context. At the 2008 CLC Tri-annual Convention attended by over 2000 delegates from its 50 affiliated unions, a motion was adopted for CLC to conduct a structural review on the relevancy of its existing structure given the dramatic changes to unions over the last 50 years. It is laudable that in March 2010, the CLC hosted a national leadership forum attended by close to 150 leadership representatives from all the affiliated unions to envision a new structure that would enhance the work of organized labour as a whole. However, it did not frame this structural review in the broader political and economic context of global neoliberal agenda in order to ask some fundamental questions on the future directions of the movement; this amounts to an “exercise in futility” as referred by Fletcher and Gapasin (2008). It is a missed opportunity and it speaks to the huge gap between the leadership and the daily realities that workers experience on a daily basis.

What would it take to shake the collective leadership of the movement out of their complacency, and burst the bubble of illusion? A structural review that focuses on image enhancement and communications strategy improvement as the way to counter the onslaught of the corporate neoliberal agenda is incredulous and disheartening. The challenge is to find a progressive vision and the courage to be bold in addressing the root problems of organized labour and in transforming it into a movement of which the next generation of trade unionists will be proud.

***The Impact of the Neo-Liberal Agenda on  
Aboriginal Workers and Workers of Colour***

***Racialization of Poverty***

Studies have shown that Aboriginal workers and workers of colour, even in good economic times, face severe discrimination compared to their White counterparts with similar education and qualifications (Galabuzi, 2006; Ornstein, 2000; Pendakur & Pendakur, 1998). The unequal access to employment despite higher educational attainments among racialized groups has resulted in under-representation in high-income groups and over-representation in low-income groups (Galabuzi, 2006, p. 53). The persistent pattern of racial discrimination in employment, for example, can be illustrated in the participation of workers of colour in federal government 15 years after the implementation of the federal employment equity legislation. The Federal government's own task force report (2000) reveals that racialized workers make up less than 5% of the public services compared to their 11% representation in the total population. Aboriginal workers are grossly underrepresented in all private and public sector employment. They are excluded from the municipal, provincial, and

federal sectors with the exception of the federal department of Indian affairs and northern development (CLC, 1997, p. 25).

The impact of the neo-liberal agenda and the recession of 2009 have further deepened these inequalities based on race, gender, and class. The disproportionately larger representation of Aboriginal workers and workers of colour in precarious employment is not a new or an unusual phenomenon as astutely observed by Tanya Das Gupta (2008, p. 143). Instead, it is a manifestation of their precarious status in the larger society:

For Aboriginal peoples, people of colour, and immigrant workers the precarious labour market conditions in which they worked were an extension of their precarious condition in society at large, where they were socially constructed as dependants, as non-citizens, and as non workers, those deemed to be “others” in relation to employed white male citizens. Their otherness was marked by the colour of their skin, their “strange” customs and languages, their immigration status, and their lack of citizenship rights. (p. 144)

The succession of trade agreements and economic recessions has exacerbated this growing inequality. Studies have well documented the feminization and racialization of labour and the rise of precarious employment for immigrant women workers (Ornstein, 2000; Vosko, 2009). In the context of gender discrimination and racism, women workers particularly women of colour have been the early casualties and the collateral damage of this new global economic order. According to the Toronto Vital Signs Report 2009, recent immigrants are more than three times likelier than their Canadian-born colleagues to have lost jobs in the economic downturn. The unemployment rate for recent immigrants is double that of Canadian-born workers.

The neoliberal restructuring of Canada’s economy and labour market towards flexible labour markets has increasingly stratified labour markets along racial lines, with the disproportionate representation of racialized group members in low-income sectors and low-end occupations, and under-representation in

high-income sectors and occupations. It is these broader labour market processes that are responsible for the emergence of the phenomenon of the racialization of poverty in the late 20th century. (Galabuzi, 2008, p. 87)

Racialized groups and Aboriginal peoples are twice as likely to be poor as other Canadians because of the social and economic exploitation they suffer (Galabuzi, 2008). One of the most staggering statistics that has demonstrated the impact of racialization of poverty comes from the United Way of Toronto Report, *Poverty by Postal Code* (2008). It highlights the fact that between 1981 and 2000, while the poverty rate dropped by 28% for others, it jumped by 361% for members of racialized communities. Such a widening gap of economic and social inequalities has been a persistent form of exploitation experienced by Aboriginal workers and workers of colour on a daily basis. It is also in this context that we review the relationship between Aboriginal workers and workers of colour with the labour movement.

### ***Brief Overview on Labour Movement's Anti-Racism Agenda***

Throughout the twentieth century, the labour movement has unquestionably offered workers an alternative vision, a discourse with which to critique existing arrangements, and resources with which to improve their lives and make better sense of their world. For women, however, unionism has presented its own set of contradictions and dilemmas...Indeed the history of women and organized labour is largely one of contradictions. It is a history of workers' struggles to sort through the resulting dilemmas. (Sugiman, 1994, p. 4)

The ambivalent and contradictory relationships between women workers and organized labour as revealed in Sugiman's research on the gender politics of autoworkers in Canada over the span of 40 years (from 1937–1979) can also be applied to describe the relationship between organized labour and Aboriginal workers and workers of colour. In fact,

as Das Gupta contends that much as the movement has come a long way from blatant exclusionism practiced in the early 20th century, “they have been slower in acknowledging racism within their own organizations despite being in the forefront of advocating for equity and combating racism, sexism, and various other discriminatory practices in the larger society” (2008, p. 154). It is in such a context that we will briefly review labour initiatives on an anti-racism agenda.

### ***Advocacy for Human Rights Legislation***

The active engagement of the labour movement south of the border in the American civil rights movement and the momentous achievement of desegregation policies had a direct and positive impact in raising the issue of racism within Canada. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the Canadian labour movement played a key role in the drive for human rights legislation, particularly against discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, creed, and nationality in housing and services. However, after human rights legislation had been passed and administrations established across the country, many labour councils’ human rights committees ceased to be active (Hill & Schiff, 1990). At the heels of the mobilizing of the women’s movement, labour focused its attention on women’s rights. In 1978 the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), the provincial central labour body, at its 22nd Convention, adopted the policy paper entitled “A Women’s Place is in Her Union.” The paper advanced the much-needed call for economic equality for women. Yet at no place within the document was there recognition of the economic realities of Aboriginal women, immigrant women, and women workers of colour (Ng, 1995).

### ***OFL Racism Hurts Everyone Campaign***

In 1979, two significant incidents pertaining to racism happened in Toronto. The police killing of an unarmed Black man with mental health issue, Albert Johnson, during a domestic dispute call drew loud public outcry. The other was a CTV-W5 segment that portrayed Canadian universities being taken over by foreign students when the five Asian students whom the program targeted were actually Canadian born or landed immigrants. It galvanized people of colour communities to mobilize and protest and propelled organized labour to take a stand (Ng, 1995). The first public institutional recognition of racism from labour came in 1981 at the OFL Convention when the first policy statement to launch a province wide campaign, “Racism Hurts Everyone,” was adopted.

Trade unionists are not new to the ugliness of prejudice. Nor are unionists unfamiliar with discrimination-the overt acting out of prejudiced attitudes-which denies persons or groups their rights...we realize that racism, by its very nature is anti-labour. Think of the most insulting term one unionist can call another. It would have to be the word scab. A racist is very much like a scab – dividing working people and creating artificial barriers that undermine solidarity. Because racism pits one worker against another, it prevents us all from working together to reach our full potential. To combat racism in all its manifestations the labour movement must exert a massive sustained effort and the necessary time and resources to educate ourselves as well as the general public. (OFL Convention Policy Paper, 1981, p. 3)

The OFL campaign with its educational program created a space for Aboriginal workers and workers of colour to come together, to voice and share their experiences of racism.

With the adoption of an anti-racism policy statement in Ontario leading the way, different unions and provincial labour federations began to follow suit and adopt anti-racism and human rights policies. The “Racism Hurts Everyone” campaign also laid the foundation for workers of colour and Aboriginal workers to strategize on inequalities in employment.

### ***Challenging Racism: Going Beyond Recommendations***

In the early 1990s, the CLC made a groundbreaking move by putting gender equity seats for women at the national executive council. In 1996, equity seats for workers of colour, people with disabilities, Aboriginal workers, youth and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-gendered (LGBT) were added to ensure representation and voices from the diverse equity seeking groups. This historic initiative helped create more organizing space through caucusing and, at the same time, raised the aspiration for equity group members to seek elected positions.

The next milestone came with the release of the CLC Anti-Racism Task Force Report, “*Challenging Racism, Going Beyond Recommendations*” in 1997 after a 3-year vigorous consultation across the country. The comprehensive report made a total of 104 recommendations in areas on employment, immigration, education, and the labour movement itself. It clearly articulates the sentiments of union activists from Aboriginal Peoples and Peoples of Colour communities:

Overall, the gains the labour movement has made on their issues have been small. In particular, after years of passing policy statements and resolutions, writing reports, and giving speeches about the need to fight racism, there is still a huge gap between union principles and the actions of union members and leaders. That gap is most pronounced where it really counts: in union structures, which, like the structures of many other organizations in society, harbour systemic racism. (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997, p. 8)

The urgency of the Report was grounded in the vision that racism “weakens our solidarity and robs the labour movement of the energies, ideas and skills of union members from Aboriginal Peoples and People of Colour communities” (p. 1). Thirteen years later, many of its recommendations are still relevant and have not been implemented. Scholars through their more current research, continue to echo the sentiment of the 1997 Report and identify

the reluctance among the trade unions in acknowledging racism within their own organizations (Das Gupta, 2008, p. 154). There is also the leadership deficit when it comes to advancing the equity agenda as identified by Foley (2009, p. 6). In addition to major weaknesses in union structures and cultures in marginalizing members' interests, Foley also astutely points to the outmoded view that the membership is one homogeneous mass due to in part, union's lack of documentation on their own changing membership profile. As a result, leadership can remain oblivious to the growing diversity within their ranks and unaccountable to the needs of a diverse membership.

### ***The Reluctant Partner for Employment Equity***

In 1984, Judge Rosalie Abella as the Federal Royal Commissioner on Equality in Employment released the historic report, "Employment Now." Her report coined the concept of "employment equity" as a new strategy to reduce the systemic barriers in employment faced by women, Aboriginal peoples, visible minorities, and persons with disabilities.

It is not that individuals in the designated groups are inherently unable to achieve equality on their own; it is that the obstacles in their way are so formidable and self-perpetuating that they cannot be overcome without intervention. It is both intolerable and insensitive if we simply wait and hope that the barriers will disappear with time. Equality in employment will not happen unless we make it happen. (p. 12)

The call for pro-active government intervention to end employment discrimination provided great impetus for coalition building and mobilizing among equity seeking groups for a shared purpose. As a result, throughout the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Aboriginal workers, workers of colour, people with disabilities, and women formed the Alliance for Employment Equity and advocated for mandatory employment equity legislation. Over the course of a decade of mobilizing, activists experienced the euphoria of witnessing the

enactment of mandatory employment equity legislation by the NDP government as well as the crushing sense of defeat and betrayal when Harris conservative government repealed the same legislation within the first 100 days of coming to power in 1995. Through it all, the support and attitude of organized labour, particularly the White male leadership, ranged from hostile to ambivalent.

### ***Gains Through Self-Organizing and Agitation***

It is important to note that self-organizing among Aboriginal workers and workers of colour is not a contemporary development. Even during the height of organized labour's exclusionary practices and discrimination in the early 20th century workers did not acquiesce and began forming organizations of their own, including unions, relying on their ethnic, racial, and kin networks (Creese, 1991; Ward, 1978). To counter the racist exclusion by the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees, Black porters employed by the Canadian National Railways formed the Order of Sleeping Car Porters (Calliste, 1987). The Amalgamated Association of Japanese Fishermen organized and fought against the government's proposal to reduce Japanese fishing licenses, and was successfully in eliminating them over time (Das Gupta, 1998). Muszynski (1996) documents how the Native Brotherhood of British Columbia negotiated the first agreement with employers on behalf of Aboriginal fish workers. The Chinese workers struck for higher wages, better working conditions and against discrimination in the contracting system (Creese, 1991). These are acts of active resistance and self-organizing as Das Gupta asserts:

Many of these organizations exerted pressure on the labour movement, on government, and on other institutions to remove the racial bar against workers of colour. These groups were simultaneously fighting for labour rights as well as social justice, specifically against racism and exclusion. (2008, p. 145)

In that regard, the same intensity of activism and mobilizing continues within the context of the current labour movement. In a similar vein, constituency groups such as women, workers of colour, Aboriginal workers, workers with disabilities, lesbians, gay, bisexual, and transgendered peoples have organized “in response to the male and White domination; patriarchal, racist, and homophobic cultures; and hierarchical and undemocratic organizational practices in unions” (Briskin, 2009, p. 138).

For the past decade, the Ontario Federation of Labour has an active Aboriginal Caucus comprised of Aboriginal activists from different unions. A number of the public sector unions such as Public Services Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) have implemented their own national and local Aboriginal circle networks. Within the workers of colour community, in addition to the establishment of human rights and/or workers of colour standing committees within most of the unions, workers of colour activists have initiated self-organizing efforts to form three separate equity constituency groups within the labour movement.

The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) was started in the early 1980s by a group of Black, Chinese, and South Asian unionists who were greatly inspired by the organizing efforts of anti-racism activists in England under the united front of Black as the colour of the oppressed. Later on, with the increased participation of Black activists and the parallel self-organizing initiative among African American trade unionists, CBTU became the Ontario Chapter affiliated with the U.S.-based CBTU with full delegate representation at the International CBTU Convention. The Asian Canadian Labour Alliance (ACLA), modeled after the American Asian & Pacific Labour Alliance (APALA), was founded in 2000. ACLA maintains its own independence and is not affiliated with its American counterpart. The third

constituency group, Latin American Trade Unionists Coalition (LATUC) was formed in September 2009, with the founding convention to take place in September 2010.

These self-organizing initiatives have demonstrated a clear desire among workers of colour for more meaningful participation and space within the labour movement. Such mobilizing also provides an alternate space and training ground for potential leadership and advocacy for equity agenda. In that regard, CBTU has led some successful organizing through caucusing and convention floor strategies to make organized labour more accountable. The success of the CBTU in releasing a report card on the various unions on their hiring of people of colour as union staff to coincide with the Ontario Federation of Labour Convention was a brilliant move to force the issue and take the leadership to task. As a result of such public embarrassment, a number of Black activists were recruited into some key unions. The role of constituency group caucusing cannot be underestimated as that is the space where one can speak without reprisal. Subsequently, the victory for two equity seats for workers of colour on CLC Executive Council in 1992 Convention and OFL Executive Board respectively, came after a courageous Black worker, Dory Smith, ran against the White slate and received over 1,000 votes in the 1990 CLC Convention (Das Gupta, 2006). CBTU activists and other anti-racism activists strategized and caucused to advance the adoption of having two equity seats instead of one.

The success in advancing anti-racism policies and agenda depends on the activism and vigilance of workers of colour and other anti-racism supporters inside and outside the union (Calliste, 1996; Das Gupta, 2009). Two high profile cases help illustrate the strength of such agitation from within and the combined forces between anti-racist activists from labour and community. One case involved seven Black nurses of Northwestern Hospital who filed

human rights complaint about systemic racism and received no support from their union, the Ontario Nurses Association (ONA). It was only when the Congress of Black Women got involved and launched a public campaign to expose the hospital's discriminatory practices, did ONA come on board (Das Gupta, 2009). The other case was the Wei Fu complaint in the mid-1980s. Wei Fu, a Queen's Park security guard of Chinese descent, filed a human rights complaint against his supervisor and employer for racial slurs and indirect harassment in the workplace. His union, Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), came to Wei Fu's defense only after 39 labour and community groups came together to form a coalition, staged demonstrations, and exerted public pressure over a 4-year period in support of his cause (Ng, 1995).

### ***Organizing Without Meaningful Integration***

Current literature on labour renewal has identified a number of key strategies adopted by the unions. Among them, organizational restructuring, organizing the unorganized, campaign engagement to promote grassroots member activism, and coalition building with community and social justice partners (Kumar & Schenk, 2006, p. 36). Over the years, feminist labour activists, workers of colour, LGBT, workers with disabilities, and Aboriginal workers have taken advantage of some of these tensions and made some solid gains on equity front. However, it also illustrates some of the underlying issues on the limitation of such strategies. As a former union organizer, I will use the organizing component to highlight my point.

Labour scholars have focused on new organizing, particularly among women, workers of colour, and Aboriginal workers who are concentrated in the low-wage service sector (Fairbrother & Yates, 2003; Kumar, 2003; Milkman, 1997). However, given the

histories of exclusion that trade unions had engaged in, in the past as illustrated in the previous section and its current ambivalence towards equity agenda, such recognition is merely addressing the symptoms and not the source of the problem. What is missing is a critical analysis and the historical context of the concentration of immigrant workers, workers of colour in these low wage sectors, and the race and class context of the shaping of such an underclass in the context of globalization. As Marable et al. (2006) note:

Racism is paradoxically as endemic in a multicultural capitalistic system as is the democratic struggle to eliminate racial injustice. In this sense, racism and antiracism, inequality and equality are two combative, ubiquitous tendencies that play out every day in places of work...Driven by the insatiable quest for global profits, from Wall Street brokerage houses to Wal-Mart, from Kodak to Coke, workers of colour have been locked in difficult, decades-old battles for racial justice on the job. (p. 4)

In the context of a long entrenched racial division in workplaces and by extension, within the labour movement, a call for more organizing void of a vision and strategies to address the system of racial and class oppression will at best be just a short-term solution rather than real transformative change.

The notion of labour renewal begs a question: Renew to what? The sentiment of renewal implies a return to a time of working class solidarity in the good old days. That is problematic for workers of colour and Aboriginal workers when the history of our involvement and blatant involuntary non-involvement has been so racially motivated and checkered.

While it is critical to put priority on new organizing to counter the demise of unionization particularly in the private sector, it begs the question: Is it enough to rebuild the movement and capture the heart and soul of union members? No doubt unions have to

increase numbers in membership for survival and for the pragmatic reason of having more bargaining power, and I am not arguing against it. But is this enough to give new members, particularly racialized workers, a sense of belonging and turn them into activists? Something is amiss when we see newly organized members who were active in the drive begin to disengage themselves after a while. The intensity of attention that they were accustomed to during the card-signing period has but all dissipated. The type of frustration shared by newly organized members during the first contract period is often easily seized and exploited by employers as a golden opportunity to get rid of the union, particularly when they have the government's decertification provision on their side. In that sense, the number of members does not tell the whole story if the union becomes a revolving door for workers who feel ignored and unwelcome.

My line of reasoning is further echoed by Fletcher and Hurd (2002) who question whether organizing alone is enough and characterizes this standard quantitative approach of organizing as “the narrow conceptualization of unions as bargaining agents that has dominated and limited the U.S. labour movement for the past 50 years” (p. 65).

### ***Disturbing Trend on Equity Representation***

At the CLC National leadership forum convened in March 2010, each union could send three representatives. According to the estimate of one of the attendees, out of the 145 representatives from the various affiliates, there were only six workers of colour and around 35 women in the room (from Interview notes, April 22, 2010). It is a chilling reminder of those who were not present in the room.

The CLC Leadership Forum on Structural Review document (2010) entitled *Canadian Unions Moving Forward*, recommends a new model for equity representation in the proposed Canadian Council structure comprised of a large group of 155 representatives from its affiliates and federations:

Equity Representation

a. At least 14 representatives on the Canadian Council would be from designated equity groups-workers of colour, aboriginal workers, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered workers and workers with disabilities.

The largest 6 public sector unions and the largest 6 private sector unions and the largest two building trade unions are entitled to another additional representative who must be from one of the designated equity groups. (CLC, 2010, p. 25)

Potentially, out of this new proposed body of 155, there could be at least 14 representatives (9%) from the different equity groups. However, the Report is silent on the mechanism to ensure an equitable representation and participation of Aboriginal activists or workers of colour activists at the Council. Will this proposed arrangement create unnecessary competition among equity group members or enhance the diverse voices and perspectives at such a large table? What role will the different equity caucuses play in future conventions when vice presidents from each designated group will no longer be elected from their respective caucuses and be appointed and therefore, beholden to their home affiliates? A possible scenario will be that the constituency caucus's role and profile will be much reduced. While much is still up for debate, the fact that such a proposal has emerged signals a disturbing trend on how dispensable and precarious the equity representation and anti-racism agenda can be within the labour movement. It also reflects arrogance among the White male leadership to assume that they are entitled to pick the spokespersons on behalf of the equity groups.

### *Labour Movement and Aboriginal Peoples*

In December 2006, Canada joined the United States, Australia, and New Zealand in blocking the passage of the historic UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The fact that the status of the Declaration is still in limbo after the world's Indigenous communities have for the last 24 years steadfastly navigated through the bureaucratic and political minefields speaks volumes to the dominance of Eurocentric worldview and the unequal power relations around the globe. The active role that Canada took in countering the adoption of the draft declaration is one of shame and hypocrisy. In recounting the drafting process of the declaration, Chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Victoria Tauli Corpuz (2006) refers to Canada as the biggest disappointment in its actions from pushing for postponement to outright exclusion of Indigenous representatives from participating as equal partners with government representatives.<sup>8</sup>

Within the Canadian political arena, the labour movement with its broad principle of social justice and equality is a natural ally to the cause and collective dream of Indigenous peoples in asserting their right to self-determination. The establishment of a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was a direct response to the events of Kanahesatake (also known as "Oka Crisis") in the summer of 1990 (Restoule, 2004). In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) released its historic report in four volumes and over 400 recommendations for a renewed relationship between Canadian government and Aboriginal Peoples. Fourteen years later, Aboriginal communities across the country remain marginalized and with limited access to clean water, electricity, and decent standard housing.

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<sup>8</sup> Victoria Tauli Corpuz (2006), The UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples & the Programme of the Second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People, Phillippines: Tebtebba Foundation. Page iv

The RCAP Report (1996) considers the employment problem as immense. It estimates more than 80,000 jobs are needed just to raise Aboriginal Peoples' employment rate to the overall Canadian rate. It further projects that with the growing Aboriginal population under 24 years of age (56% compared to 34% of all Canadians), an additional 225,000 jobs will have to be found in the next 20 years to put these Aboriginal youth to work. A 10-year plan on training, an employment equity initiative, and support measures such as culturally appropriate and affordable childcare were recommended. Very little of the recommendations were implemented; instead, we see a rise in the dependency on government transfer as the primary source of income.

In 1998, CLC as the national umbrella labour body signed a partnership agreement with the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP) outlining areas of commitment and cooperation to build solidarity. A decade later, it is timely to review the progress and assess the challenges for the tasks ahead in making this partnership agreement beyond a symbolic document.

Over the years, trade unions and Aboriginal groups have taken joint initiatives to ensure that Aboriginal workers can gain access to full time employment and that their cultural and traditional practices will be accommodated. Various collective agreement language, letters of intent, and policy on the hiring of Aboriginal Peoples have created some model language and practices in the area of employment equity and human rights.

One of the key issues that members of equity seeking groups often raise as a major barrier to employment is the seniority system entrenched within unionized workplaces. The core principle of "first hired, last fired" is instituted to protect the employment of older workers from getting terminated prior their retirement age. To ensure that union seniority is

not seen as a systemic barrier to Aboriginal workers gaining access to employment or maintain the position in times of layoff, the agreement between United Steelworkers (USW) Local 925 and the United Keno Hill Mines Limited has negotiated some groundbreaking language:

Despite the provisions of Article 16 or any other provisions of this Collective Agreement, in all cases involving the filling of vacancies, promotions, selections for training, transfers, layoffs, and recalls from layoff, the Company and the Union agree that the Company shall be entitled to give preference to First Nations or Native employees regardless of their seniority. (CLC Aboriginal Rights Resource Tool Kit, 2003, p. 5.5)

Another example is the work agreement between International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 2034 and Manitoba Hydro to promote the hiring of Aboriginals and local northern residents:

The parties agree to work cooperatively to identify and remove systemic barriers to employment in order to facilitate equitable participation of qualified Aboriginal people and minorities in Manitoba Hydro's workforce, in stable long-term employment....IBEW 2034 not only has an obligation. We are committed to working with Manitoba Hydro to remove these systemic barriers and obtain equitable representation. Letter of Intent (LOI) #4/2000. (CLC Aboriginal Rights Resource Tool Kit, 2003, p. 5.19)

In the collective agreement between Anvil Range Mining Corporation and the United Steelworkers of America (USWA-Local 1051) the section on First Nations Employment Opportunities recognizes the traditions and cultural practices of the Aboriginal members.

The Company and the Union commit themselves to removing work rules which constitute a barrier to allowing First Nations employees of the Company to engage in their traditional economic activities and lifestyles, including hunting and fishing, and their traditional religious observances, while maintaining continuing employment with the Company. Accordingly, the Company and the Union agree that the Company may afford each First Nations employee with a First Nations Leave of Absence (hereinafter "FNLOA"), without pay but without loss of accumulated seniority. (CLC Aboriginal Rights Tool Kit, 2003, p. 5.7)

In the recent years, various union organizing initiatives have emerged among on- and off-reserve Aboriginal services agencies and among employees of band councils throughout Canada. The labour movement sees itself as a class-based organization to assist workers to shift the imbalance of the unequal power relations in workplaces and encourage workers to develop collective class-consciousness. Trade unions have argued forcefully that the right to have a union is enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

In their dual roles as both employers and Aboriginal leaders, band council chiefs have repeatedly challenged the legitimacy of applying the labour codes of Federal or provincial governments on the principle of self-government and self-determination. The contestation from the Aboriginal leadership over the right to organize has emerged as one of the key contentions between organized labour and Aboriginal communities.<sup>9</sup> Numerous challenges have been filed by band leadership whenever an application for certification comes before a provincial labour relations board on the ground that the application of either the Federal or provincial labour code will be an interference of the inherent right of self-government, an infringement on the rights and treaties of the Aboriginal Peoples. Yet, at the same time, Article 17 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes the

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<sup>9</sup> From the precedent setting case before the Supreme Court of Canada, *Four B. Manufacturing v. United Garment Workers of America* in 1980 to the most recent decision by B.C. Labour Relations Board on *NIL/TU,O Child and Family Services Society v. B.C. Government and Service Employees Union* (March 2006), numerous challenges have been filed by band leadership whenever an application for certification comes before a provincial labour relations board. In reviewing some of these cases, there seems to be a recurring pattern of employer's resistance. The ground for challenge is based on the following three premises:

all matters occurred in the Band council and on reserve including labour relation issues are out of the bound of the provincial jurisdiction. In accordance with the s. 91(24) of the Constitution Act, 1867, they have jurisdiction over "Indians and Lands Reserved for Indians"

The application of either the Federal or provincial labour code will be an interference of the inherent right of self government, an infringement on the rights and treaties of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada

The First Nations Right to regulate labour relations and establish their own labour code and standards.

universality of workers' rights to organize, regardless of race, creed, and heritage. It also upholds the accountability and transparency of workplaces to be freed of unfair practices.

Discriminatory and exploitative employment conditions can take place in any given workplace on reserve or off reserve, by an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal employer. The intersectionality of race, class, and gender is complicated when union organizing happens in a workplace on reserve. As a trade unionist and an anti-racist activist, if I retreat from pursuing a union organizing path that will redress the workplace injustices in order to comply or to be seen as following the notion of self-determination, am I not perpetuating systemic colonial practices by holding Aboriginal employers to a different standard? Just as holding a union membership card does not automatically give someone a strong dosage of working class consciousness, the experience of being colonized as Aboriginal Peoples or any other marginalized groups does not give them the ethics and awareness to conduct themselves as employers respectful of workers' rights. Here the internalized colonial mindset and the capitalist ideology work in tandem and are so entrenched that it will take generations to unpack.

I share the line of questioning posed by Brock Pitawanakwat: "Is participating in a union or developing class awareness incompatible with being an Indigenous person?" Why is protection of workers' rights "un-Indigenous"? In retracing the source of the rise and fall of one Canadian union's organizing effort at a First Nation Casino in Saskatchewan, Pitawanakwat (2006) confronts the internalized nature of colonialism among the band chiefs:

The chiefs have used this false front of nationalism as a red herring to maintain their power over labour relations in Indigenous institutions. This form of red herring is a classic divide- and-conquer technique to prevent marginalized people from organizing to confront their oppressors. Indian reserves in Canada are rife with oppression that replicate the colonial order,

and band councils are a classic example of indirect colonial rule... the emerging capitalist class in Indigenous communities has exploited the ongoing and deep-seated feats of assimilation amongst our people. Indigenous organizations have used a nationalist and xenophobic propaganda campaign to oppose labour unions. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, pp. 32-33)

The fear of retaliation was a major factor for some of the rise and fall of organizing efforts among affiliates. The internal divisions within Indigenous communities is a reflection of the long history of colonial rule which through the enactment of Indian Act, replaced the traditional forms of governance with the band council system. Not unlike many non-Aboriginal establishments and institutions (unions included), Aboriginal communities also confront the issues of nepotism, self-interest and legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> When excessive power is vested in a small group of leaders without due process of accountability and transparency, the internal democratic practices and workers' protection with the community suffers.

In the next chapter, I will turn my attention to selected scholarship on hegemony, racism, anti-racism, and anti-colonialism that I feel can shed some new light on the persistent dilemmas for labour outlined in this chapter. These ideas form the theoretical foundations of the research presented in the remainder of the thesis.

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<sup>10</sup> The section on economic development further elaborates the internal organizational challenges within band council system, which is another topic of discussion and research.

### **Chapter Three: Theoretical Groundings**

#### ***Unpacking the Systemic and the Invisible***

The grounding of this study in an anti-colonial discursive framework provides a specific entry point to help locate the challenges of doing anti-racism work within organized labour in both a larger historical and contemporary contexts on the building of this nation which has been based on an ongoing project of colonization of Aboriginal Peoples and the discriminatory policies and practices against a succession of immigrants and in particular people of colour. Such a theoretical frame also acknowledges that trade unions as a microcosm of the larger society, also has its share of complicities in reinforcing colonial and hegemonic relations that go beyond the non engagement of race and equity. By highlighting some concrete examples through key moments in the history of Canada, the following sections will begin to unpack the systemic and invisible relations of ruling.

The following quote by Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, in his July 24, 2006, address to the Canada-United Kingdom Chamber of Commerce, in London, England illustrates how the deeply entrenched colonial mindset has remained intransigent despite the passing of time.

But seriously and truthfully, much of what Canada is today we can trace to our origins as a colony of the British Empire. Now I know it's unfashionable to refer to colonialism in anything other than negative terms. And certainly, no part of the world is unscarred by excesses of empires. But in the Canadian context, the actions of the British Empire were largely benign and occasionally brilliant...and the treaties negotiated with the Aboriginal inhabitants of our country, while far from perfect, were some of the fairest and most generous of the period. (para. 33-36)

For Prime Minister Harper to articulate his view so brazenly in an international event speaks to the unconscionable arrogance of the colonizer when history can be recounted, reframed, or erased with such ease. To refer to the historical pillage and the ongoing subjugation of Indigenous Peoples, as Prime Minister Harper has, as “largely benign and occasionally brilliant” is a chilling reminder of how daunting the task of anti-racism education is in challenging such prevailing norm and practices. American Aboriginal writer, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, suggests that these acts of reframing are a delusion of the imagination (1996).

In fact, when one reveals the daily normalcy of dominance in knowledge production and power relations, one will wholeheartedly agree with George Dei that, “Colonialism is not dead. Indeed, colonialism and recolonizing projects today manifest themselves in variegated ways” (2006, p. 2). By contextualizing the anti-racism work within organized labour against the backdrop of deeply entrenched colonial mindset and recolonizing projects, the anti-colonial discursive framework provides a theoretical grounding for our resistance as marginalized workers as Dei and Asgharzadeh (2001, p. 300) have stated,

The anti-colonial discursive framework is an epistemology of the colonized anchored in the Indigenous sense of collective and common colonial consciousness. Colonial in this sense is conceptualized not simply as foreign or alien, but rather as imposed and dominating. Its goal is to question, interrogate, and challenge the foundations of institutionalized power and privilege and the accompanying rationale for dominance in social relations. The anti-colonial discursive framework emphasizes the saliency of colonialism and imperialism and their continuing efforts on the marginalized communities.

In framing this research as a political and academic project under the anti-colonial lens, what resonates with me is the critical role of resistance in exposing the old colonial formation and reimagining new sites of empowerment. It also offers a broad frame within

which we can critically examine the intersection of race and class in this globalized economy, the interconnectedness between global North and global South in the political, social, and economic contexts of corporate globalization as manifested in the pattern of labour market restructuring, the fluidity of capital, and migration of people as *just-in-time* labour. In that context, the personal and collective agency among labour activists generates practices of solidarity and acts of resistance.

The anti-colonial challenges any form of economic, cultural, political and spiritual dominance. It is about identifying and countering all forms of colonial domination as manifested in everyday practices, including individual and collective social practices, as well as global interactions. An anti-colonial perspective seeks to subvert the dominant relations of knowledge production that sustain hierarchies and systems of power. It challenges the colonizer's sense of reason, authority and control. (Dei, 2006, p. 5)

The anti-colonial frame as prescribed by Dei provides a reflective journey for Aboriginal workers and workers of colour in their daily resistance from colonization in the production of social knowledge and dominance. Such resistance is the beginning of our own and collective de-colonization project of the mind. According to bell hooks, "Whenever those of us who are members of exploited or oppressed groups dare to continually interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization" (1990, p. 295).

Through reclaiming our voices and knowledge production from a position as subject, the decolonizing of the mind is about "resistance to domination of the past, contamination of the present and the stealing of a people's future" (Dei, 2006, p. 11). In Canada, the ongoing resistance of First Peoples against the legalized pillage of their lands, cultures, and people, and their stance for sovereignty rights is a testimony of their resilience and commitment to a decolonizing project.

### *On Hegemony and Power of Dominance*

While the anti-colonial perspective provides the much-needed theoretical grounding for this inquiry, Gramsci's provocative theoretical writing on hegemony and power facilitates the unpacking of the universalization of the dominant. Gramsci asserts:

The supremacy of a social group is manifested in two ways: as "domination" and as intellectual and moral leadership. A social group is dominant over those antagonistic groups it wants to "liquidate" or to subdue even with armed force, and it is leading with respect to those groups that are associated and allied with it. (as cited in Fontana, 1993, p. 141)

When a dominant group can articulate and proliferate its own particular knowledge and value system to such an extent that it is universally accepted by the general public (i.e., the subordinate or the dominated), the group has achieved in creating the hegemony of dominance. Through moral, cultural, and ideological filters, the dominant group imposes its own belief system and transforms the consciousness of the general population.

Such consolidation and transformation of the rule and norm cannot be secured and maintained by force alone. Gramsci defined hegemony as a dialectic between force and consent (1971, p. 57) and it is that tension of two opposing approaches that hegemony is entrenched as a balancing act carried out by the dominant. This double nature of power and state enables a dominant group, or class to "acquire an ethical content that transforms its repressive, class nature into one perceived as moral and universal. In that context, the Gramscian state cannot rest on pure force; violence and coercion must always be mediated by the legitimating moments of consent and persuasion" (Fontana, 1993, p. 144). In that context, the normalcy of a capitalist ruling class is accepted by the workers and the proletariat, and contained through the threat of force in the name of public safety and security should

resistance occur. It is also instructive to take into account Gramsci's stance on agency, that is the subordination without taking away the agency away from the subordinated (Wink, 2005, p. 95). Gramsci's notion of the common sense of populist practices and ideas become a constant evolving process that permeates throughout the societal institutions in order to generate the consent necessary for the consolidation of the hegemony. Within the class context, as workers protest and fight for living wage, a fractional increase in the minimum wage employment standard will be deemed as a populist practice to generate consent.

In Canada, the hegemony of White European dominance and ongoing project of colonization experienced by Aboriginal Peoples on a daily basis is a history-making process. One major change over time has been the historical shift from the brutal overt force of imperialist rule to more "democratic" forms of hegemony. The mass genocide and expulsion of Indigenous peoples from their own land was mitigated and legitimated by land treaties between First Nations and the Crown. The reservation system and forced separation of Indigenous children from their families into the residential school system were legitimized by the enactment of the 1857 Act to Encourage the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes, followed by the Indian Act in 1876. Simultaneously, through educational, cultural and other intellectualizing projects, Indigenous peoples as the colonized were portrayed as savages that required the salvation of Eurocentric Christian values and belief system.

The devastating trauma and impact of residential school on individuals, families, and cultures are still felt on a daily basis. It was not until 2009 that the Government issued a public apology for the residential school system. Now the general public can breathe a sign of relief on their collective guilt and regain a sense of righteousness while turning a blind eye on the appalling living conditions and health conditions in the Aboriginal communities. This

collective gated mentality of racism and colonialism is rooted in a sense of superiority that has become thoroughly ingrained over the last 500 years of colonization. The sense of indignation shared among Aboriginal Peoples is palpable in the words of Matthew Coon Come, the former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations:

There is an ongoing crisis right here in this land, a slow grinding and devastating human crisis that is overtaking our First Nations people, right in Canada's own backyard... the root causes of this Canadian human catastrophe are not acts of God. They are not the result of a sudden great flood or earthquake. They are the result of the deliberate policies and laws, practices and actions of governments, and of the courts, and even of ordinary women and men. (2001, para. 25)

The hegemony that evolved over the years is premised on a paternalistic colonial value and belief system that is well ingrained in the psyche of non-Aboriginal Canadians. Hegemony obliterates what is left untold, what is not deemed historically significant, and what is not considered to be knowledge. By the same extension, the racist hierarchical order of such hegemony of dominance has also been well manifested in Canada's immigration policies and practices. The following historical examples are but a sampling of the exclusionary practices that illustrate and prove wrong our Canadian smugness about being more egalitarian and fair minded than Americans.

It is not commonly known that slavery was prevalent and the slave trade was actively practiced in Canada from the mid-1600s to 1833. The preferred immigrants (Whites) from Western Europe and the United States were deemed as 'pioneers,' many of whom brought along enslaved Africans (Das Gupta, 2009; Henry & Tator, 2006). Black loyalists arriving in Nova Scotia as 'free persons,' expecting to receive equal treatment as White loyalists in land contracts, were bitterly disappointed. While the British promised all Black and White

Loyalists settling in Canada hundred-acre lots, Blacks received either no land at all or were given barren one-acre lots on the fringes of White loyalist townships (Henry & Tator, 2006).

While preferred White immigrants were offered free parcels of land, Chinese immigrants were deterred from coming through the imposition of head tax beginning in 1896 to an outright ban from 1923 to 1947 through the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (Das Gupta, 2009). The internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War has been widely known as another shameful chapter of Canadian history. However, few Canadians are aware that school segregation existed for Chinese and Japanese Canadian children. They were forbidden to attend the public schools in British Columbia (B.C.) due to the social stigma attached to Asians as undesirable citizens and unwelcome workers (Li, 1988). Chinese Canadians did not receive the right to vote in federal elections until 1947, and Japanese Canadians a year later.

The South Asian presence in B.C. was viewed as a ‘Hindu invasion’ even though citizens originally from India were British subjects; the B.C. government disenfranchised them in 1907, thereby barring them access to professions such as education, law, and pharmacy. It was not until 1947 that South Asian Canadians were given the right to vote (Das Gupta, 2009).

The above examples serve well to illustrate Sunera Thobani’s assertion (2007) that the founding of Canada as a nation was predicated upon a narrative of racial supremacy as national superiority, and was accomplished through the simultaneous ejection of Aboriginal Peoples and the exclusion of most people of colour from full citizenship. In her research on the “exalted subjects” of Canadian nationalism, Thobani makes the following astute argument:

I have defined exaltation as the political process that constitutes the national subject as belonging to a higher order of humanity. In the case of settler societies like Canada, the triangulated relationship between Whites, Aboriginal peoples and immigrants, organized through juridical order and the institution of citizenship, has sustained the reproduction of the colonial hierarchies underpinning White supremacy...The common humanity that could shape the social relations among nationals, Aboriginal peoples, and immigrants is implicitly denied by such exaltations. (p. 248)

With this inherent shift in policies on immigration and citizenship to a more liberalized approach in the 1970s, the consent which was proliferated has been one of Canada's liberal and egalitarian ideals. In that regard, such acts of open door policies reflects Gramsci's notion of democratic control; to achieve hegemony, the state sometimes may even adopt stances or policies that reflect the key interests of the subordinated groups and run contrary or explicit disadvantage to that of the dominant group (Omi & Winant, 1994). In that regard, the hegemony is forever shifting, adjusting and evolving to ensure that the entrenchment of core values, power and privilege of the dominant group remains intact.

The post-911 era has once again changed the landscape of hegemonic control and consent. In the name of 'homeland' security and following in the footsteps of the United States, Canada introduced its own Anti-Terrorism Act. Hundreds, if not thousands, were detained in the United States and Canada as security threats (Das Gupta, 2009; Thobani, 2007). In 2002, Mehar Arar, the Syrian Canadian returning home to Canada via John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City was deported by the U.S. to Syria, where he was detained and tortured in prison for almost a year. This high profile case is but one example to illustrate how citizenship can be rendered meaningless and the fragile façade of tolerance can be so easily trumped in the name of national security. The categorization of

Muslim people, or people of colour who look like Muslims, or people who possess a name resembling a Muslim name are, in many instances, considered potentially dangerous.

Such a perverse mindset also carries severe economic consequences for groups being racially profiled. In a 2006 study conducted by a Toronto women's advocacy group, Women Working with Immigrant Women (WWIW), professional actors were used to apply for employment wearing *hijab*. Results showed that women wearing *hijab* received three times fewer job offers than women who did not wear it. The applicants had similar qualifications and so physical appearance becomes the sole determinant of their economic well-being.

In recent years, the state has apologized for its historical acts of racism on the internment of Japanese Canadians, the Chinese Head Tax redress, and more recently, the residential school system. These represent further attempts to nurture public consent and identification with the egalitarian image with no substantive change to the well-being of the communities, in particular the Aboriginal community.

To a great extent, such expression of acknowledgement of past wrongdoings in words without substance are used to erase the guilt and discomfort among the general public for our complicity and for the implication of the lyrics of the national anthem: "Our home and native land". The questions that require more collective probing are: "Whose homes?" and "What does it mean for all of us as immigrants and refugees, or descendants of immigrants and refugees, to be on native land?"

As an ordinary non-Aboriginal, an immigrant in this land, I am mindful of the complicit role that we fall prey to on a daily basis in reinforcing and accepting the normalcy of social inequities within the dominant system. At the same time, I also find myself

navigating through the daily realities of being a racialized Other. Such experiences have led me to struggle with Thobani's assertion on the complicity of our role as people of colour.

As people of colour achieved inclusion in the Canadian citizenship, they did so at the cost of becoming complicit in the further marginalization of Aboriginal populations. The inclusion of people of colour has been accommodated more as an afterthought than as a fundamental reworking of the institution of citizenship. Their complicity in fathering colonial projects remains inevitable without a fundamental transformation of the institution itself. (2007, p. 249)

Her claim is an important reminder on the ongoing colonial project of Aboriginal Peoples but it seems to overlook some of the complexities and realities of people of colour in this land. The inclusion in Canadian citizenship remains a rhetorical illusion designed by the state rather than reflecting the harsh realities of people of colour who experience exclusion on a daily basis. Very often, the possession of the Canadian citizenship status comes at the price of precarious employment, unemployment, and the constant state of rootlessness. Then there are the political realities of people of colour who are forced exiles from their countries of origin out of no choice of their own including those who are descendants of slave labour. The neoliberal agenda has displaced and uprooted people in global South and turned them into vulnerable migrant labour in the more affluent countries. I can vividly remember the outcry of a live-in caregiver at a public forum on migrant labour: "We are here because you are there!" Therefore, to refer to people of colour as partners in "fathering colonial projects" seems to equate a leveling of power relations with the dominant which is unfortunately far from the historical and current realities of most of the workers of colour. Dei (2010) offers a different and compelling perspective that is instructive for workers of colour in the process of critical self-reflection:

In decolonizing anti-racism, it is important for the discourse to acknowledge the ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples everywhere and to uncover the ways that diaspora identities are implicated in multiple projects of colonization and settlement on Indigenous lands. (p. 11)

As an anti-racism activist, it is critical that the challenge of anti-racism work does not become another project of the ongoing colonization of the Aboriginal Peoples of the Americas as originally posed by Dua and Lawrence (2005) and reinforced by Dei (2010). Simultaneously, we also need to be vigilant to ensure that we are not lured into the divide and conquer tactics used by the dominant to block the genuine engagement of learning required to build solidarity between workers of colour and Aboriginal Peoples.

What I have attempted to do is to shed light on how these larger relationships have ended up playing themselves out in the labour movement. The theoretical grounding offers a very instructive perspective on the colonial mindset and resistance among the dominant against equity agenda both within and outside the labour movement. It also allows anti-racism labour activists to examine labour's complicities from a historical perspective and see their own activism as part of the ongoing process of decolonization, a political project of resistance.

### ***Labour's Complicities***

Historically, the intense systemic discrimination and exclusionary practices from the public was well translated into labour policies and actions. There were no denouncements by labour unions on the residential school system when it was first implemented. In response to the influx of Chinese and other Asian workers who came as indentured labour, the White unionists considered them as threats and adopted a strategy of exclusionism (Creese, 1992; Das Gupta, 1999). They spearheaded such groups as the Anti-Chinese Union, the Asiatic

Exclusion League, and the White Canada Association (Das Gupta, 2008). They lobbied to restrict the entry of non-White workers to Canada and instigated some of the anti-Chinese riot in Victoria and Vancouver in 1908. In fact, most labour councils in B.C. stipulated in their constitutions the banning of Asian workers from entering. The founding of sleeping car porters by African Canadian workers in the 1930s was part of the response to a segregated labour movement.

It is also in the context of an anti-colonial framework that exposes the hegemony of racial dominance that I offer my critique on much of the labour renewal literature in the United States and Canada. Most labour scholars offer thoughtful and critical recommendations on organizing, on community labour coalition building and on inclusion and diversity to revitalize the labour movement. However, these recommendations are often made without acknowledging the historical and current realities of privilege and unequal balance of power. The lexicon of ‘inclusion’ implies there is still a dominant group who will continue to act as gatekeepers. Most workers of colour can see through the pretense, transparency, and empty symbolism of appointing a few people of colour to leadership positions.

***Everyday Racism:  
Moving From Overt to Democratic Racism***

The discourses of equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusiveness may have opened the doors of labour leadership to racialized and Indigenous activists. However, these limited openings have not changed the culture of Whiteness: the cultural values, norms and practices of the hegemonic power structures within institutions of labour that consistently put predominantly White members in a position of power. In the absence of a comprehensive

approach to address some of the systemic barriers, most labour unions continue to be insulated from a full commitment on anti-racism and equity agenda.

The manifestation of racism remains complexly articulated, deeply embedded, and subtly intertwined with seemingly neutral or innocent social phenomena....Discrimination is less a problem of prejudice and stereotyping and more a problem of power –power that enables the dominant group to oppress through a myriad of social, economic and political institutions as well as in countless and daily episodes of interpersonal behaviour. That certain groups are oppressed is of course strongly resisted in a society that is officially egalitarian. Denial is central to how privilege is maintained in liberal democracies. (Essed, 2002, p. 4)

This quote by Essed on everyday racism points to the invisibility and embeddedness of race as a construct within the social working of our society. At times, it is the benign sense of innocence among Canadians as if racism only happens south of the border that leaves one bewildered. One of Canada's leading poets of Afro-Caribbean descent, Dionne Brand, puts in poignantly:

Unlike the United States, where there is at least an admission of the fact that racism exists and has a history, in this country one is faced with a stupefying innocence. We have a deeper problem. It is this 'innocence' that causes people of colour to modify their claims to words such as 'access', 'representation' and 'inclusion' instead of *entitlement* [my italics]. (1991, p. 178)

Essed's concept of everyday racism also points to the two levels at which racism as ideology operates: one at the level of daily actions and interpretations; and at another level in the refusal to take responsibility for it. It helps to shed light on the seamless nature of the shift from overt to the covert everyday practices of racism.

While overt racism is based on the claims of biological inferiority, a more covert practice of domination is encoded in the assumption of cultural or acquired inferiority. In the culturalization of racism, 'we speak more of cultural and ethnic differences and less of race

and class exploitation and oppression. Culture differences are used to explain oppression; the prevailing attitude is that if these differences could somehow be taken in to account, oppression would disappear. In the Canadian context, as Razack (1998) poignantly observes in the Canadian multicultural context, minorities are invited to keep their culture but enjoy no greater access to power and resources (p. 61).

While there may be a public outcry against overt racism, there is a collective denial of the insidious ways that whiteness endows power. Henry and Tator's (2006) term, "democratic racism" appropriately describes the conflicting tension between how the covert racist mass belief system and the egalitarian values of liberalism, equality, justice, and fairness that Canada espouses to uphold.

The conflict between the ideology of democratic liberalism and the racist ideology resented in the collective belief system of the dominant culture is reflected in the racist discourse that operates in the schools, the media, the courts, law enforcement agencies, arts organizations and cultural institutions, human services, government bureaucracies, and political authorities ... Within these discursive spaces, controlled mainly by a dominant White culture, there exists a constant moral tension: the everyday experiences of people of colour, [and Aboriginal Peoples] juxtaposed with the perceptions and responses of those who have the power to redefine that reality. (p. 23)

I find this conceptual frame appropriate in critically examining trade unions as one such discursive space. As the leading and probably the only populist organization within the Canadian historical and current context, labour has taken great risks and militant stance in the pursuit of economic justice on behalf of working people, and yet, on a daily basis continues to be oblivious of its own Euro-Canadian privilege and carries on its deep-seated racial bias as gatekeeper of such space. This may help to explain why we have beautiful policies and posters on equity and anti-racism on the shelves and on the wall, and tepid

action or only a sliver of the door cracked within the labour movement for workers of colour and Aboriginal workers.

This might also explain the strong and massive resistance towards employment equity initiatives in the public policy realm and within union settings because they are unwilling to examine how power and privilege are constructed in relation to cultural and racial differences. For trade unionists who pride themselves as being progressive and open-minded, such admission will require a self-reflection on the complicity of their own role in, and even more importantly, their responsibility in dismantling the systemic project of racial exclusion, a critical journey which few are prepared to take.

### ***Privilege of Whiteness and the Salience of Race***

In similar ways that everyday racism permeates throughout ordinary everyday actions, language, and belief, the privilege of Whiteness is reinforced and normalized through institutional dominance. Peggy McIntosh in her classic work, “Unpacking the White Knapsack” (1988) describes White privilege as akin to a currency (political, material, and economic). In the Canadian context, this may help to explain why Canadian families of diverse European heritage, largely consider themselves to be White, as astutely observed by Dei (2006). In the post colonial and globalized economic climate, the mantra of White is beautiful is also alive and well through the advance of media technology, popular culture and dominant images. Such currency is tangible and helps maintain a steady grip on recolonizing the supposedly decolonized. Here the issue of internalized racism, which will be elaborated in later sections, remains as one of the key planks in propping up this system of White dominance, and persists as a major challenge in the work of decolonizing of the mind.

I agree with Kobayashi (2009) that Whiteness means the construction of dominant discourses and the mobilization of power according to standards set within a White cultural framework, and that it often takes forms that are benevolent, patronizing, or condescending. It is not always direct discrimination, but the creation of difference by subtle cultural means that are every bit as excluding as restrictive covenants. Yee and Dumbrill (2003) in their exploration of race in Canadian social work practice, remind us as activists committed to social change, “not to underestimate the extent and degree of the power of Whiteness to reconstitute itself continually in order that its own structures and power are never dismantled” (p. 114).

In essentializing Whiteness as a social construct in the racialization project, it is important to acknowledge that Whites, similar to workers of colour and Indigenous peoples are not a homogenous group, each with their own complex and multiple social identities, such as gender, class, language, religion, sexual orientation and so on. Under the anti-colonial framework grounded in the principle of making visible the invisible system of White supremacy and dismantling the colonial practices, Whites are implicated to take their responsibility, not only to be there to support workers of colour and Indigenous peoples, but more importantly to do the critical work of self-examination and unpacking the “knapsack” in a context which Dei astutely refers to as “the site from which we oppress is the site on which we least cast our gaze” (2006, p.11).

While I do not embrace the essentialist notion that one social construct is more important than others and that race takes precedence in a hierarchy of oppressions, I have chosen to foreground race in my study. Anti-racism and Marxist analysis of class and feminism have always been the entry points to my work within labour and the broader

community. In giving race its prominence, the purpose of my study is to highlight both the importance and urgency to integrate anti-racism into everything that we do in the labour movement.

George Dei's Integrative Anti-Racism theory (1996), in which the saliency of race is used to interrogate how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect in addressing the issue of power relations, provides the frame to unpack the underlying complexity of union solidarity. Dei and Calliste's (2000) strong stance on the importance of foregrounding race provides much clarity and courage:

A genuine anti-racist project demands space for race to be analyzed outside of class and gender – so that race is reduced to neither class nor gender. Distinguishing race, class and gender as separate analytical categories (albeit interconnected) is an important step in unraveling the ideological effects of specific racialized material processes and structures. (p. 15)

While the interlocking framework is important in understanding how power and powerlessness operate and overlaps, the saliency of race remains at the centre of my research focus.

### ***Race and Class Matter***

To begin the process of unpacking the complexity of solidarity is to recognize that trade unions are a microcosm of the larger political and socio-economic context of Canada as a nation. The nation building of Canada that is grounded on the notion of a White-settler colony, the privileging of some groups and the exclusion of others through established government policies and programs on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, and class have been well documented (Galabuzi, 2006; Li, 1988; Porter, 1965; Thobani, 2007). The Indian Act of 1876, the shameful legacy of residential school system, and the arrogance and disregard

among the dominant power as shown in Oka crisis in early 1990s to the more recent land dispute in Caledonia are but part of the pattern of systemic destruction of Indigenous peoples.

As an activist within the labour movement, I see labour as a natural ally to the collective goal of Indigenous peoples of their right to self-determination, and yet, our actions at best are sporadic and inconsequential.

For racialized workers, the idea of Canada as a “White nation” is demonstrated through the succession of immigration and labour market policies that have led to the social and economic marginalization of racialized workers and maintained them as the “reserve army of labour” as prescribed in the Marxist analysis on the notion of under-class. Galabuzi (2006) in his seminal work on the social exclusion of racialized workers in Canada has graphically and powerfully described these divides as Canada’s “economic apartheid,” akin to the historical condition of racialized structural inequality in South Africa:

In this case, it reflects the structuring of the Canadian economy, which is evolving a segregated labour market that consigns racialized group members to particular types of work, occupations, and sectors of the economy. The resulting system of racialized exploitation depends on the racialized undervaluing of human capital, under-compensation for labour, and racialized income inequalities to benefit capital accumulation. The growing social exclusion...extends to other spheres of life as segregation in housing and neighbourhood selections, racialization of poverty, above-average contact with the law, and lower health status. All of these factors contribute to the characterization of “separate development” or “apartheid.” (p. xiv)

Galabuzi’s analysis on the structuring of the Canadian economy provides the useful context within which trade unions operate, and very often, the treacherous terrains on which union activists carry out the onerous anti-racism work with the movement. The same type of oblivion is shared among many union activists in smaller communities in northern Canada who assume racism exists only in large urban centres with influx of immigration without

ever acknowledging the existence of First Nations communities right next to them. It is an ongoing challenge to make the invisible visible: the invisibility of White privilege, the invisibility of systemic discrimination, and the invisibility of Otherness.

When union leaders decry “a worker is a worker is a worker” as their operative mode, as if they are gender or colour blind, they have failed to see the complexities of capitalism where race, and other forms of social constructs are used to divide and weaken the working class, so aptly described by Hall:

Capital reproduces the class. It dominates the divided class, in part, through that internal division which has racism as one of its effects. It contains and disables representative class institutions by neutralizing them – confining them to strategies and struggles, which are race-specific, which do not surmount its limits, its barriers. Through racism, it is able to defeat the attempts to construct alternative means of representation which could more adequately represent the class as a whole- against capitalism, against racism. The sectional struggles, articulated through race, instead, continue to appear as the necessary defensive strategies of a class divided against itself, face-to-face with capital. They are, therefore, also the site of capital’s continuing hegemony over it. (2002, p. 63)

This is further reinforced by Bill Fletcher and Fernando Gapasin (2008) in their critique of the American labour movement that has relied on a “linear or overly economic view of class to create an illusion of unity.”

Reducing workers’ experience to their economic reality in the workplace or, for that matter, in the street can conceal the impact of other oppressions on their consciousness and reality. Workers can come to believe that by ignoring those other realities; they can all march off together. Such a view, as we have seen throughout the US history, is disastrous. The union movement largely ignores the fact that capitalism engenders competition and that the system promotes and absorbs divisions such as race and gender as a means of maintaining social control. (p. 181)

Fletcher and Gapasin further pinpoint that the reason why the labour leadership has failed to confront this reality is because of their awareness of the consequences of addressing it:

“leaders have a deep-seated fear that addressing the all-too-apparent divisions will antagonize Whites or men” (2008, p. 182). A similar fear is shared by most of the labour leadership here in Canada as well. It is certainly much easier to pass motions and resolutions that have expressed the sentiment of equity without having to dedicate the resources, implement the corresponding actions and programs to make them real. In the meantime, the frustrations of equity-seeking group members mount and the divisions on race and gender lines become all too apparent.

A case in point is at the CLC Tri-annual Convention in May 2005 where a resolution calling on all affiliates to conduct an equity audit was placed on the floor for debate. Aside from several speakers from equity seeking groups speaking eloquently in support of the motion, none of the leadership spoke. The collective silence of a predominately White male delegation of over 1,500 was both sobering and deafening. It can be seen as a form of disengagement as it does not pose any real threat to the leadership’s own power base. In the pretense to be seen as progressive or politically correct, the real debate did not take place. The motion was adopted without any expressive commitment to resources or how it would positively advance the equality agenda within the labour movement.

Another worrisome trend is that the internal bleeding of membership continues as the recession worsens. As newer employees, young workers, women, and workers of colour, who are often lower on the seniority list, will end up to be the first ones to be laid off. Many workers from the second tiered leadership are among those who have joined the unemployment line because of plant closures or permanent layoffs.

With the rise of female membership, women union activists have strategized, mobilized and confronted the systemic nature of gender discrimination within the movement.

A number of researchers have documented some of the major successes and setbacks (Briskin, 2006; Davidson, 1998; Pocock, 1997). From the workers of colour perspective, researchers who work on organizing and workplace equity (Chong, 2007; Das Gupta, 2008; Slamet, 2007) have highlighted the invisibility of privilege and power as reflected in the established union practices.

### *Solidarity as Interracial Working Class Consciousness*

The relations of power, privilege and dominance of the colonial system permeates throughout the system. The dominant view holds prominence and renders the other dominated others. Stuart Hall (1986, p. 23) writes: “ideologies are not transformed or changed by replacing one, whole, already formed, conception of the world with another, so much as by “renovating and making critical an already existing activity.”

If we are to transform the labour movement that is grounded in working class consciousness, Hall’s stance on ‘renovating and making critical an already existing activity’ provides a different way of challenging and examining the relations of race and class. Very often, race and class are posed as a dichotomy, as if race and class are mutually exclusive. Marable et al. (2006) observe that most labour scholars view race matters as either subordinate to class matters, or tertiary at best, based on the frequency of analysis in the literature; and at the same time, there are race theorists who would premise their approach on a classless analysis.

It is my assertion that racial and class dominations are inextricably linked. In examining the emergence of an inter-racial working class movement in Hawai’i in the postwar era, Moon-Kei Jung (2006) points out that while the traditional sociological and

historical literatures will explain it as a result of class unity and thereby erasing race, his analysis illustrates a position that counters such a narrative of “sudden deracialization whereby class effaced and replaced race” (p. 9).

Race was transformed, rather than negated, through its re-articulation with class, rendering the workers’ struggles for racial and class justice coincident and mutually reinforcing. The resultant interracial working class ideology was thereby an ideology of class that transformed and was transformed by race. It was through race, not its erasure, that Hawai’i interracial working class was made. (p. 192)

I find Jung’s concept of inter-racial working class ideology illuminating as it represents a more integrative approach to race and class. It is, in fact, the harsh discrimination experienced by Filipino workers as indentured labour and the racialization of Japanese American workers during the Second World War that prompted their identification with working class consciousness and subsequent activism in the trade union movement.

In a similar vein, Ruth Milkman (2006) in her research on the success of immigrant worker organizing experiences in the Los Angeles area in the last two decades, particularly the Justice for Janitor Campaign, also makes the same astute observation:

Reinforced by rapidly growing class inequalities and formidable obstacles to immigrant social mobility, ethnic identities can be effectively channeled into a working-class political identity – even among immigrants whose background is not working-class. Thus, Latino immigrants who might have professional or other relatively privileged jobs in their native countries but were blocked from securing those jobs in the United States may assume leadership roles in unions embrace a working class political orientation. Latino ethnic identity forged in the context of a hostile host society generates collective action in which class fuses with - rather than trumps - ethnicity. (p. 138)

Milkman’s notion of “class fuses with-rather than trumps-ethnicity” is aptly illustrated in Amy Foerster’s research (2004) on exploring the struggle for solidarity within a union local with diverse membership in New York City. The foresight of the local leadership

who are predominately African Americans and their commitment to creating a new identity for the union as a response to the influx of diverse membership is most encouraging. By integrating race and class analysis and embracing the cultures of newcomers, the union has been able to transform itself into a meaningful and relevant site to all members.

It is based on the lived experience of workers sharing a collective struggle; it is also an embodiment of oppositional practices and meanings. To be oppositional in this context means that one is willing to stand up to managers and for fellow workers, to fight against racism and injustice, and to continue the legacy of the beloved community; in other words, it is both a class and race-based fight. (p. 404)

This example demonstrates that a new concept of interracial working class solidarity is not only important, but it is also achievable in practice.

In the Canadian trade union context, labour scholars have put forth the centrality of equity agenda as the prerequisite to labour renewal (Foley, 2009; Kumer & Schenk, 2006). Linda Briskin (2009) refers to cross constituency organizing as a form of coalition building within a union and it is one way to develop institutional and political practices to address multiple and competing identities, and to build inclusive solidarity that takes account of difference, privilege, and power. In her study on the various models of cross constituency structures, Briskin concludes that cross constituency organizing within one union or across unions will enhance the building of a culture and practice of alliances in order to overcome the outmoded structures and exclusionary cultures:

The capacity of union movements to reinvent themselves is critical to challenging the restructuring and defeating of the neo-liberal agenda. In the current context of increased competition among workers, coalition building inside unions and across unions, with social movements and across borders, is a vital aspect of that revisioning. As a vehicle for building solidarities across identities and advancing equity organizing in Canadian unions that supports, at one and the same time, union renewal and the union equity project. (p. 151)

The realization of such a vision will require workers of colour and Aboriginal workers to be central actors, taking on the transformational, catalytic role within this massive class movement.

### *The Issue of Class from an Indigenous Perspective*

#### *When Race and Class Intersect*

Within the historical context of Aboriginal workers in United States and Canada, the intersection of race and class can be best illustrated through the succession of state policies with the aim to turn the Aboriginal population into a reserved army of surplus labour. The research of Alice Littlefield (1996) on Aboriginal education in Michigan during the industrial era (1893–1930) documents that the mandate of the American Indian school during the industrial era was to produce a ready-made supply of cheap labourers and to train them to behave according to the whims and policy changes of the state. As an example, when the federal policy under the New deal focused on developing new economic programs on reserves, these labourers were no longer required in the cities and were sent back to the reserves. As Deborah Jackson (2002) demonstrates in her research on the identity of urban American Indians, in the 1950s when the government abandoned its New Deal policies on strengthening tribal economies on reserves, they were forced, once again, to return to urban centres to look for factory work. Then in 1960, when the demand for labourers waned in cities, the policy was once again reversed.

The government policy shift (Littlefield contends) was not motivated from a humanitarian impulse based on what might be best for American Indian people and communities. Rather, it was economically motivated – the Indians were no longer needed as cheap labour for (European American/White) farmers and owners of mines and timber stands, and therefore it was best to

get them back onto the reservations where they would not be competing with other Americans for jobs. (D. Jackson, 2002, p. 86)

Within the Canadian context, the same pattern is revealed in the state policies behind the reservation school system. In addition to the systematic cultural obliteration, it was also economically driven (Satzewich & Wotherspoon, 2000, 2003; York, 1992).

Ryerson and other representatives of parochial institutions developed industrial labour schools for Aboriginal children based on principles of basic education, hard work, and religious devotion, values that were held sacred by the Euro-Canadian middle class. The order of the manual labour school was the principle of “half-day” in which the student would be exposed to academics in the morning and would spend the rest of the day acquiring the practical labour skills – farming and mechanics for boys and domestic skills for girls – that would allow them to exist in an industrialized world. (Satzewich & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 43)

The system of free child and youth labour as a form of indentured labour proved to be so profitable and vital to local communities that they lobbied aggressively to have schools established in their areas in the 1890s. Their lobbying efforts led to the compulsory attendance of Aboriginal children in residential schools in 1895 with an amendment of the Indian Act that gave Indian agents the authority of law to remove Indian children under the age of 16 from their families and to force them to go to school outside their reserve (Miller, 1996).

One of the legacies of the residential school system in Canada is that “limited education” has been used as a “weapon of class oppression” with the explicit and combined forces of the church and state (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997, p. 62). It is in this historical context that we examine the applicability of Jung’s vision of interracial working class consciousness among Aboriginal workers particularly in urban centres. Here I find the research of Jean Paul Restoule (2004) on the identity of Aboriginal youth in urban centres to

be particularly instructive in dispelling some of my own stereotypes about the difference between urban and rural Aboriginal population:

The split between urban and rural is not a static rupture. When the issues speak to all “Indians” the urban and rural natives can put aside differences. Aboriginal identities are always shifting, responding fluidly to challenges and situation. They are grounded in particular values that have remained constant for generations. (p. 244)

Despite differences in realities and experiences, some of the core values are fundamental and go back to the root of being Indigenous.

John Brown Childs (2003) envisions a concept of transcommunalism where activists fighting for social change from diverse cultural and community groups can work together across class, race, and gender without diminishing the important distinctions that we all ascribe to ourselves as individuals and specific communities. As an Indigenous scholar and sociologist, he aptly points to the distinction between labour, progressive leftists, and Indigenous activists through their respective frames of reference and their connection to the land. For Indigenous activists who are struggling for sovereignty of their ancestral territory and the cultural survival of a people, standing up against transnational corporations on resource or land rights is more than just a fight for social and economic justice. According to Childs, for many Indigenous communities and peoples, the “cultural justice” which embraces a deeply rooted ecological, political and spiritual relationship with the land, would be more accurate as the rallying cry (p. 28).

In quoting Guillermo Delgado’s writing about Indigenous community activism in Latin America, Childs (2003) observes:

Many leftist “popular” movements emphasize the centrality of the urban/working class, but often marginalize and miss the salience that land,

autonomy, dignity and spiritual perspective can have for many Native peoples: “From an Indigenous point of reference, Indigenous peoples’ histories remain colonial when reduced to class. Class is not everything... Indigenous histories are not just about exclusion; above all they are about land.” (p. 52)

When one reflects on the above stance, I cannot help but be reminded of the courageous uprising the Mayan Zapatistas-led movement on January 1, 1994, the first day when NAFTA took effect. It was about taking a collective stand against free trade as a new form of expansion of colonialism and the unrelenting pace of the neo-liberal agenda. Undoubtedly it is about class, but it is about much more than class. While this movement represents a strong resistance against global capitalism, its organizing is premised on an Indigenous emphasis on sovereignty, culture, and the spiritual. Once again, land is both material and spiritual. Childs argues that we need to move from the politics of conversion to the ethics of deep respect. I find Childs’ transcommunal approach to movement building encompassing and inclusive.

From a transcommunal perspective, the task is not for one group or person to say which vantage point is more “accurate” in an abstract universalistic sense, but rather to determine how partisans of such fundamentally distinct outlooks can work together in mutual respect. Such cooperation will require leftist partisans to accept that what they view as the significance of the urban working class may not be the conceptual centre of gravity for the Indigenous organization, or that the very category of “worker” in shantytown must be viewed from a different angle.

The very language of resistance to global economic destruction that is employed in multiple, distinct emplacements will be quite different. So be it. They can still potentially be of service to each other. Indigenous activist confronting giant corporations can incorporate salient elements from a broad range of what Arif Dirlik (1996a) calls Marxist “diagnosis”. These elements can illuminate how capitalism increasingly becomes more global and more centralized... Simultaneously, the significance of ancestral land and of spiritual forces that such land entails is also real for many Indigenous peoples, and this will have to be respected by the left activists. (2003, p. 45)

The ethic of deep respect stems from recognizing the differences and the multiple dimensions and identities of what make an individual or a community whole. It also implies that respectful relation building does not reside on us imposing a class analysis as the only vantage point. This does not mean we need to dilute the vision of an interracial working class movement, but rather than imposing and lecturing, we need to find ways to work across the differences and at the same time, hold on to the differences. It also implies that we judge less and use active listening more. It is in such dynamic and open interactions that we will find the moments and possibilities “to learn from each other and cross fertilize one another while respecting their different identities” (Dirlik, as cited in Childs, 2003, p. 25).

For the labour movement, our organizing strategies need to be grounded in a holistic approach and an ethic of respect to engage diverse communities in a process of empowerment, and not just for the pragmatic reason for increasing dues and enhancing membership numbers. Diverse workers and communities carry with them multidimensional identities and the holistic approach will be to treat them as whole, not just during the organizing drive, but throughout their time as union members so through the union, they can be made whole and find belonging.

As part of the intensification of labour market restructuring, employment has become more precarious and increasingly, there are more workers who do not fall within the traditional category of worker in a conventional industrial workplace. Childs’ example of shantytown organizing illustrates that for workers who cannot afford the cost of housing, they are also street persons. Their immediate preoccupation is shelter over working conditions. Potentially, one can argue from a class perspective that the betterment of working

conditions can lead to an improvement of living conditions. The ethic of respect will propel activists and organizers to work with them on both fronts.

Childs' stance on transcommunalism has also prompted me to reflect on the tensions and challenges that our labour movement has in approaching the issue of migrant labour. The aftermath of the work site accident resulting in the tragic deaths of four migrant construction workers and one permanently disabled, reveals the tension. For the labour movement, it has been an outcry on the greater and more pro-active occupational health and safety enforcement and standards, and for the community-based organizations, it has been organizing around immigration and human rights issues. The ongoing gap has resulted in a lack of cohesive force in engaging these precarious workers to push on both fronts. Hegemonic control dominated by White privilege has prevented labour from seeing the migrant workers beyond the class perspective and considering them as whole beings with additional vulnerabilities and challenges due to the precarious nature of their status.

In the following chapters, my personal narrative and the collective voices of Aboriginal activists and activists of colour will reveal some of these ongoing tensions and contradictions as they continue to challenge and claim their rightful spaces.

## **Chapter Four:**

### **Research Methodology**

My research on the concept and practices of solidarity through the lived experiences of racialized union activists is very much a mobilizing project. It is anchored in the belief that the renewal of our labour movement could only come from finding new ways to flatten the hierarchies of existing structures, and to build from the bottom up. In searching for an appropriate design for this research project, I was committed to a research methodology that would incorporate the solidarity principle and bridge the divide between researcher and the researched. As I will show in this chapter, my research design is grounded in the qualitative traditions of participatory action research (PAR) and arts-informed research. At the same time, it is also very much informed by the Indigenous worldview and research paradigm.

I take to heart the stance that Shawn Wilson, an Indigenous scholar and researcher, has taken in defining research as developing relationships with ideas in order to achieve enlightenment and in describing Indigenous research as ceremony.

Relationships don't just shape Indigenous reality, they are our reality. Indigenous research is the ceremony of maintaining accountability to these relationships. For researchers to be accountable to all our relations we must make careful choices in our selection of topics, methods of data collection, forms of analysis and finally in the way we present information. (2009, p. 7)

The process of researching the meaning of solidarity is an opportunity to create something that is different, an experiment, and an incubator project that can demonstrate the practice of an alternate vision and the importance of relationship building.

### ***Participatory Action Research***

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is built on principles of co-creation and action-focus that resonate deeply with me. The active engagement between the researcher and participants in a spiral process of planning, action, and reflection illustrates the collaborative nature of PAR – research with, and not on the people (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PAR’s emphasis on the potential of organizing for change provides the template for a collaborative project where workers of colour and Aboriginal workers within the labour movement are engaged to co-create an alternative. The participatory nature of such an approach to research in itself is empowering and enduring. The community of inquiry is embedded in the community of practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

The fundamental principle of PAR lies in recognition of the power imbalance within the society and the importance of honouring the lived experiences of those who attempt to confront the power structures. The research becomes a co-creation project of the researcher and the participants, and the inquiry process becomes a journey of empowerment where participants move from passive acceptance to active engagement in collective action through constructing their own knowledge. Paulo Freire in his groundbreaking work on the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) refers to such process of meaning making as conscientization, while Orlando Fals-Borda and Muhammed Anisur Rahman (1991) elaborate it as a “process of self-awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection” (p. 16). The participatory action research process is also not neutral as it is based on a critical praxis for emancipatory development (Freire, 1970)

Verna St. Denis (2009) underlines the importance of building healthy human relations within the practice of action research and community based participatory research is “a

community development project” (p. 300). PAR’s significance lies in the actions that will emerge and evolve from this knowledge production and collective consciousness raising process. Another important aspect for PAR is a commitment to genuine collaboration among those who are involved through dialogue. It is through dialogue where the collective reflection evolves, and where all voices are respected and democratic values are practiced, as Reason (2000) aptly put forward:

It is through dialogue that the subject-object relationship of traditional science gives way to a subject-subject one, in which the academic knowledge of formally educated people works in a dialectical tension with the popular knowledge of the people to produce a more profound understanding of the situation. (p. 172)

The context for this research is to locate the labour movement in the community where the values of community connectedness, collective agency, and critical curiosity are at its hub and action research is a visibly political act in which the participants are fellow union activists and comrades. The interconnectedness between agency among participants and their critical examination of the power dynamics can serve as an impetus for social change and movement building. The space created through the research process will mirror a site for democratic practices. The dialogue, the gathering is also very much in tandem with the wisdom of Aboriginal circle where no one is more equal than the others. In positioning the “researched” as equals, PAR’s key principle honours and values the experiences of those who have been traditionally marginalized.

In relying on dialogues as my primary source of research data, I also draw insights from the stance and practice of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005) that treats the understanding of experience as something that emerges through a dialogue between a speaker

who voices her/his experience and a listener or listeners who collaborate in the production of those experiences.

Two stages of dialogue are introduced: the primary dialogue is the conversation in which experiences emerge; the secondary dialogue then emerges as the researcher engages with the material produced in the first dialogue, which is now with other sources, her or his data. In the secondary dialogue the social organization implicit in the language used by the informant bears traces of the institutional forms of coordination that are present in and are organizing the everyday that has become a resource for experiential talk. (p. 145)

In this new interaction, the secondary dialogue, my role as a researcher is to assemble, and to build upon the activists' accounts from their own localities within the movement, and make visible the relations of ruling, which are often embedded or not fully visible.

### ***Arts Informed Research***

In addition to dialogue and personal narratives as strategies of inquiry, I am also drawn to seek an alternate medium of communication as an invigorating way to make connections beyond words and intellect, and deepen the journey of meaning making into the realm of our heart and soul. Cole and Knowles (2007), as pioneers in arts-informed research, describe this form of qualitative research as:

Bringing together the systematic and rigorous qualities of conventional qualitative methodologies with the artistic, disciplined, and imaginative qualities of the arts acknowledges the power of art forms to reach diverse audiences and the importance of diverse languages for gaining insights into the complexities of the human condition. (p. 59)

In the re-imagination of what labour solidarity should look like, I wanted the power of art forms to enable participants to express their visions in the vibrancy and expanse of colours and textures. I am drawn to visual images as a method of inquiry not because I am a visual

artist, but out of a desire to make this research accessible, evocative, and meaningful to the labour community through artful and visual representation. Simultaneously, art making engages participants and researchers beyond the intellectual realm of sense making. In advocating the potential of visual images as an integral component of research processes, Sandra Weber (2008) refers to images as expressions of embodied knowledge with the following observation:

People are not ideas, but flesh and blood beings learning through their senses and responding to images through their embodied experiences. The visual disarms or bypasses the purely intellectual, leading to a more authentic and complete glimpse of what a particular experience is like or of what people think and feel. (p. 46)

The embodied nature of knowledge construction through a collective art making process comes from the place that Maria Campbell refers to as *mom tune ay chi kun*:

In my language, which is Cree, the mind is called mom tune ay chi kun. Mom tune ay chi kun is the sacred place inside each one of us where no one else can go. It is in this place that each of us can dream, imagine, fantasize, create and, yes even talk to the grandfathers and grandmothers. The thoughts and images that come from this place are called mom tune ay chi kuna, which means wisdoms, and they can be given to others in stories, songs, dances and art. (1985, p. 1)

I am deeply inspired by Campbell's stance on this "sacred place" where creativity imagination and passion are unleashed and recovered. Sawchuk (2005) urges us as labour researchers and labour educators, to integrate the collective process of art making as an important building block for activism and the potential for emergence of new activists.

I turn to the inspiring project of Cole and McIntyre (2006), *Living and Dying with Dignity: the Alzheimer Project*, where they presented their research findings to a wider audience beyond the academy through alternate forms of art representation. They took the

exhibit to three cities across Canada to engage the community and continue the dialogue on care giving. In essence, turning the research back to the community is also a way of honouring the work of all the invisible caregivers. It is my hope that in future labour gatherings that the research findings on solidarity building will be presented and displayed in words and images to provoke and generate more reflection, debate, and ultimately more transformative actions to renew the labour movement.

### *Integrating My Own Narrative*

Adhering to the principles of emergent design, this research process has also evolved along the way. Initially, I was not prepared or ready to reveal my personal narrative for fear of being seen as narcissistic or self-absorbed. There was also an element of fear that exposing my own vulnerability would reinforce the perception that this work is done from a victim status, and thus positioning my research as powerless or inconsequential. As the research journey progressed, listening to the lived experiences of this group of activists, their trust and honesty prompted me to reflect on the need for reciprocity, and to add my own experiences as a narrative in this process. I am reminded by the eloquence of Adra Cole's stance: "research from the heart" (2006). Concretely, it means bringing my whole self as well to this collective project of learning.

Writing the self as a methodological feature of this thesis was important for a number of reasons. First, the subjective location through the narrative of self contextualizes my perspective and interpretations of my data. It also follows the Anishinaabe way of knowing by beginning with the self, looking within and learning by doing. Towards the end of the data collection phase, I finally gathered enough courage and asked one of the participants to

interview me utilizing the same set of questions. It was an emotional and empowering moment to articulate what has long been buried and break the silence. That has been part of my own personal transformation in deciding to weave in some of my own personal narrative into this writing.

In that sense, I have been attracted to critical autobiography as a method of inquiry. As a strategy of knowledge construction, Kathryn Church refers critical autobiography as vital intellectual work and stresses the importance to ‘convey not just what the subject is but also who the subject is. In inserting her experiences as a consumer in her mental health study, Church chooses to share her own personal experiences:

Writing about myself is a way of writing about those others and about the worlds which we create/inhabit. The process uses my life, the life of one social being, to penetrate the social relations of “consumer participation”. Because my subjective experience is part of the world, the story, which emerges, is not completely private and idiosyncratic. The issues and arguments raised are significant beyond my life and beyond the field of community mental health. (2007, p. 5)

Church’s compelling stance of academic integrity and honesty has inspired me to take more personal risks in my own journey of looking inward.

### ***Overview of Research Process***

This research process involved four core research activities that took place in three stages. The first stage involved in-depth interviews using one-to-one dialogue with 12 union activists. The second stage was to convene a pilot focus group discussion of 12 Aboriginal women and women of colour activists as a trial run to work through some of the groundwork for a participatory approach to a circle dialogue. The third stage of this research was to bring the group of participants together for a dialogue facilitated in the Aboriginal tradition of a

talking circle where stories are told and retold as oral history. The fourth component was my own personal reflection; most of the narrative was written as part of the ongoing reflection on the research topics.

The multiple research methods were used to compliment each other in deepening the hues and richness of participants' lived experiences. The focus group method in the format of a solidarity circle dialogue supplemented the individual interview by enabling the group to jolt each other's memories and create a more complete picture through the collective sharing. The circle became a space for this group of activists to reflect and engage in genuine conversation, and above all, to strengthen the network of support for each other. At all stages of the research, participants were able to share, reflect, and strategize on ways to build solidarity across difference. The insights from the pilot and the solidarity dialogue, along with participants' interviews, and my own personal reflections, have formed the core of my data. Each stage will be elaborated in more detail in the following section.

### ***Selection of Research Participants***

As I embarked on my study, a good number of activists of colour came forward and volunteered to share their experiences. The trust factor for me as an insider and a fellow activist gave me the advantage and access to a pool of volunteers for my study. From that group, I set a selection criterion that each of my research participants must be a labour activist for more than 5 years. To some, the minimum 5-year criterion might seem somewhat arbitrary. However, I believe it is important to get the insights and experiences from a group of anti-racism activists who have taken root in their own unions, come through the ranks; and have had some institutional history of their respective union's strategies on race and equity issues.

In total, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 participants (4 Aboriginal activists and 8 worker of colour activists). The worker of colour participants came from various Asian, African, Caribbean, and Latin American backgrounds and from diverse public sector to private sector unions. Out of the four Aboriginal activists, only one came from a private sector union. The 12 participants have all attended at least either one convention of either the CLC or the provincial federation of labour. With the exception of two, all ten have been involved in the self-organizing efforts in their constituency groups: the OFL Aboriginal circle, Asian Canadian Labour Alliance (ACLA), Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU), and the newly formed Latin American Trade Unionists Coalition (LATUC).

***Stage One: One-to-One Dialogue***

Stories – well told, with detail and context-allow for texture, subtlety, and multiple interpretations, and they help us to discover the universals among us.

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (2009, p. 16)

In the interviewing process, I was guided by the teaching of Sara Lawrence Lightfoot in delving for the particulars, for it is in the particular that resides the general.

Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings*, points out the subtle but critical distinction between "listening to a story" and "listening for a story" (1983, p. 14). The former is a more non-interactive process where the interviewer plays a passive role in absorbing the information. The latter is a much more engaging process where the interviewer plays a pro-active role in searching for the story and bringing it to light. It is not that she is imposing her own story, or directing how it should unfold. Instead, the interviewer "is willing to enter into a dialogue that reveals part of her own journey, and she is aware of the part she plays as witness in shaping the story's coherence and aesthetic" (Lawrence Lightfoot, 2009, p. 17).

In both the interviews and the circle dialogue in my research, I have employed the approach of “listening for the story,” to listen to the voices of my brothers and sisters, I am listening for the substance and contour of the story to take shape. The powerful imagery of Lawrence Lightfoot in describing her many roles in her research project is both insightful and instructive.

I was the artist, painting the language, drawing their portraits, sketching in the light and the shadows. I was the spider woman, weaving together their life remnants, unsnarling the tangled threads of their stories, casting a net to catch them if they should fall. I was the probing researcher, patiently gathering data, asking the impertinent questions, examining their interpretations with skepticism and deliberation. And I was the fellow traveler, walking beside them, watching their backs, admiring the vistas, avoiding the minefields, and bring my own story to our dialogue. (2007, p. 18)

In that regard, I find my role as a researcher to be deeply engaging in this process to weave a canvas of solidarity in all its brilliance.

In pursuit of this interview process as a one to one dialogue, the conversations were more fluid and organic. The set of questions (see Appendix A) served as a guide for me to listen to their stories. In framing the research on the conditions to create and deepen working class solidarity, I wanted to construct a portrait of how some activists of colour and Aboriginal activists experience solidarity, and how they negotiate the tension between their vision and the daily practice. At the same time, I want to know what has sustained these activists to keep going.

### ***Second Stage: Focus Group / Facilitated Dialogue***

As part of the participatory process to develop a template for the research, I convened a gathering of 12 women activists (2 Aboriginal sisters and 10 women of colour) in August 2007 for a 2-day dialogue. Part of my rationale for a pilot was to draw the strength of a

supportive group of union sisters to investigate the feasibility and shortcomings for such a dialogue.

In an envisioning exercise, participants discussed what solidarity looks like from their own experiences. Through the sharing of personal stories, a slice of untold history of the labour movement was constructed from an anti-racist, feminist perspective. The pain, the fears, the victories, and the challenges of staying on as an activist were gathered. Amidst the tears and laughter, the group's collective desire and hopefulness for a transformative movement was palpable.

The participants were so enthusiastic that they decided to continue to meet on their own and several volunteered to plan the next women gathering. They suggested the broadening of the circle to include male activists of colour and Aboriginal activists.

A number of important lessons were gained from this initial dialogue. First was the small representation of Aboriginal sisters. While it is a reflection of the reality of the membership, more active and targeted outreach needs to be done for the next round to ensure a better representation of Aboriginal members. Second, the gathering was co-facilitated by two sisters of colour. In retrospect, having an Aboriginal sister as a co-facilitator would have been a better alternative to ensure a more equitable representation in the full process. The other critical lesson was a lack of a more direct connection between our experiences within the labour movement and our locations respectively as women of colour and Aboriginal women in the dominance of White privilege and unequal power relations in the current and historical contexts. The participants were so engaged in such an opportunity to share and unload some of their frustrations within the labour movement that there was almost a rush to get to the strategies for change. As a result, a more critical reflection on the power dynamics

and an honest discussion on relation building between Aboriginal sisters and sisters of colour within the movement or even outside the labour movement did not take place. The above learnings from this pilot dialogue became some of my guiding posts in developing the solidarity circle dialogue as the next step. The lessons also provided the impetus to start imagining how the new round of solidarity dialogue could be grounded in a different orientation addressing the matter of the heart.

### *Stage Three: Solidarity Circle Dialogue*

#### *Aboriginal knowledge and the circle dialogue process.*

The Aboriginal tradition's talking circle represents both visually and conceptually a more dynamic and holistic approach to engage activists in a dialogue on solidarity building. Indigenous scholar, Kovach succinctly points out that sharing one's own story is an aspect of co-creating and co-constructing knowledge from an Indigenous perspective (2009, p. 100). In choosing to use the Anishinaabe methodology of sharing circle, I concur with Restoule and Linda Smith that the knowledge produced and shared during the circle is the beginning of an ongoing process of healing and decolonizing.

In her work with Aboriginal women in Manitoba to confront the AIDS crisis, Marjorie Beaucage (2007) refers to the circle as a transformative space, a safe space where we can open our hearts and minds to each other. Beaucage refers to the circle as an organic creation of relations and crystallizes the essence of circle teaching:

A circle has no sides, no dividing lines to line up on  
 A circle has no corners to get stuck in; it is open and welcomes all.  
 A Circle expands easily to make room for one more  
 I move outward, you can come in towards the centre and back again.  
 In the Circle each one has her place, no more, no less.  
 Each one has responsibility: to speak her own truth, to respect others,

To listen to their stories, and learn from each other's experiences.  
 In the Circle, there is no right or wrong, no convincing you of my point of view.  
 In the Circle, my words are not more important than your words  
 because I am older or have letters after my name. (p. 11)

I see the circle as an equalizer where all participants can feel empowered and be free to articulate their experiences and their dreams.

A number of the participants from the initial focus groups volunteered in the co-creation of a solidarity circle dialogue. Over a 2-day retreat, the circle was co-facilitated by a team of four facilitators (two Aboriginal and two non-Aboriginal activists). Twenty participants made a commitment to each other and stayed in the circle for the weekend, in the words of one of the facilitators, "in the Micmac tradition, the only way of sharing is to stay in a circle and that takes discipline."

In 2006, Beaucage designed an educational model to explore the relations and impact of the Indian Act and other federal government policies on the realities of Aboriginal Peoples. I was attracted to this model as it was developed for the Manitoba Federation of Labour Occupational Health Centre as part of their Aboriginal Workers Education and Outreach project. I was interested to see how it would work with a mixed audience with both Aboriginal workers and workers of colour from diverse cultural backgrounds. The vertical and horizontal axes of the Medicine Wheel represent the four directions that include all peoples and cultures. "Medicine Wheel illustrates the necessity of attending to the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of learning and personal development" (Castellano, 2000, p. xiii). This Indian Act Medicine Wheel Circle is grounded in the basic principles of responsibility, relationship, and respect.

Restoule further elaborates that embodied in the method of circle work is a form of respect for others, for voice, for spirit and for culture (2004, p. 77). As a labour educator, my research was also my way to explore the possibility of utilizing Aboriginal circle tradition and the teachings of the Medicine Wheel as a critical education approach to engage labour activists in a deeper and reflective discussion on anti-racism and decolonization. The circle process worked extremely well cross-culturally for this group of activists from various Asian, African, Aboriginal and Latin American backgrounds. In that sense, the research process also became one of the research outcomes. The proposed pedagogy of solidarity through the four evolving stages of recovering/rediscovering, restoring, reimagining and reclaiming was truly inspired by the power of the circle dialogue and the unanimous support of the circle/research participants.

The participatory process of adapting the approach of talking circle for this research was also a collaborative project. The four facilitators navigated through the tension on whether to let the talking circle process unfold organically or to have a more outcome-driven dialogue approach. The following exchange between the Aboriginal facilitators (A1 & A2) and the non-Aboriginal facilitators (C1 & C2) reflects the candidness of the discussion:

C1: We are here from different locations and bring with us different expectation. What do we want to achieve? The circle is meant to be a series of conversation structured partly because of our responsibility to achieve certain goals.

C2: The agenda is participatory and experimental. My dream was for us to sit in a circle, and truly know the power of circle and knowing that the circle welcomes difference.

A1: You have to trust the circle to do the work. It's not like the assembly line. You can't predict how people are going to change.

A2: People have been thru a lot of pain and want some kind of collective responsibilities and strategies. How do we get there?

C1: What I understand is that methodology is secondary, just tools. I don't want to be a burden to you. How do we develop a common understanding of certain reality? The other extreme is passive!

A1: My responsibility is not about content but managing, opening and holding the energy within the circle. Each round of the circle is different. When you pick up the stone, you are talking to it. That's where we teach each other and we learn. (Field notes, June 15, 2009)

This conversation between the four facilitators as part of the pre-workshop planning was revealing. In a respectful and honest way, they navigated through the tensions and arrived at a common understanding of the participatory nature of the talking circle process. For the non-Aboriginal facilitators, it was an enlightening moment acknowledging the need to step back from the roles of a facilitator that were more familiar to us; to trust each other and above all, learn to trust the community and the relations created within the circle. As a result of the collaborative process, the last three rounds of talking circle from Beaucage's original design<sup>11</sup> were adapted to build on the shared experiences of participants within the labour movement.

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The seven rounds from Beaucage's design begins with

Round 1: Gathering from the four directions, taking your place in the circle

Round 2 : Establishing Relations: using season of birth to make connections with your Self and each other, to have an appreciation of another worldview which existed before colonization.

Round 3: Responsibility for History. It is an opportunity to talk for the history of the stone/message that each one is taking responsibility for.

Round 4: Understanding Where You Are, The Indian Act: Body heart Mind Spirit, these message stones deal specifically with the Indian Act and its specific effects in destroying traditional cultural principles

***Physical layout of the room.***

The room was arranged in a full circle. In the middle of the circle, a circle of 24 stones were laid on the floor to replicate the Medicine Wheel. A basket of medicine was placed in the centre of the stone circle. A message card was placed under each of the stones. These cards were divided into four bundles according to the four seasons or directions, and were to be used for the different focus of each round.

For the first round, the two Aboriginal facilitators introduced the talking circle process and invited each person to take their place around the Wheel according to the season of their birth. Within the four directions of the medicine wheel, the spring people in the East, summer to the South, the fall people to the West, and winter participants to the North. It affirmed that each one had a place, a direction and “our belonging in the Circle of Life as equals” (Field notes, June 15, 2009). As a researcher, I also introduced myself and asked for the permission of the group to place a tape recorder set on one side of the circle and I explained that anyone could stop the tape-recorder if they felt the information was confidential. The facilitators then went around and did a sweet-grass cleansing ceremony. The first round of the talking circle began with each of the participants doing a story on where they are in their personal journey.

Round 2 was set up to establish relations. The large group was asked to break into 4 small circles based on the season of birth. This enabled participants to “create a sense of collective identity and create Home place for each direction” (Field notes, June 15, 2009).

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and relationships to the Land. In uncovering the stone, a piece of the history told from the Aboriginal perspective is revealed.

Round 5: Meeting Ground: participants are invited to explore points of intersection, to cross boundaries, to move across the circle and to pick up message stones in other territories.

Round 6: Taking Responsibility: the message stones here talk for current issues, to imagine another way to be in relation to First Nations issues. How you can begin to make a difference

Round 7: Closing Round: Thank each other and thank the ancestors, reflection on their experiences.

Each small group was asked to share how the birth season have influenced their way of seeing and being in the world.

Round 3 was an opportunity to uncover a piece of the history and to understand the Indian Act. Each participant picked up a stone and the message within his/her season and direction. Participants were asked to take a few moments of silence to read and reflect on the history of colonization of this land. It is an opportunity to talk for the history of the stone/message. These message stones dealt specifically with the Indian Act and its specific effects in destroying traditional cultural principles and relationships to the Land. In uncovering the stone, a piece of the history told from the Aboriginal perspective is revealed.

Participants were asked to hold their stone while they shared their reflection and feelings. They would then put the stone back on the floor after finished speaking. One of the Aboriginal facilitators referred to this round as our way to create a new oral history and “understand the impacts on body, mind, heart and spirit” (Field notes, June 15, 2009). It was an emotionally powerful session as participants expressed shock and outrage over these pieces of untold history.

Round 4: Healing circle and integration of heart, mind, and spirit. Participants were asked to move into the circle and uncover another stone within your direction and share with your home group. Then they were asked to cross to boundaries and pick up message stones in other territories. It was an opportunity to see things from different perspectives. This round aimed to uncover the internalized racism. For many in the room who were formerly colonized, it was also a connecting point to articulate their own experiences of colonization.

Round 5: Common Ground: Where we are in the labour movement? Round 5 was facilitated by the two non-Aboriginal facilitators to begin the story telling and sharing of

participants' experiences within the labour movement. What are the common ground and locations? The group went around and a lot more personal and deeper feelings were put forth.

Round 6: Taking responsibility. The message stones here reflected the current issues and stories of resistance. Participants were asked to talk about how they can take responsibility in order to reshape the future relations between Canada and Aboriginal Peoples, "a time to imagine another way to be in relation to First Nations issues, what if Aboriginal Peoples are recognized as Founding Nations, what inherent Aboriginal rights and recognition of sovereign First nations Governments are entrenched in the Constitution? What if claims are settled and lands are returned?" (Field notes, June 16, 2009). What will be our vision of solidarity? The two non-Aboriginal facilitators also got the group to do a role play exercise on a story of resistance as a way of integrating body, mind, and spirit.

Round 7: the Closing round. The last round of the talking circle was first facilitated by the two non Aboriginal facilitators asking participants to work in their season home group to visualize and draw with crayons what solidarity could look like. Then there was a large circle sharing.

The Aboriginal facilitators then asked participants to reflect on their experience, what they have learned and how they were feeling. The circle was closed with giving thanks to the ancestors, and to each other.

### ***Reflection on the Dialogue***

My overall impression was that the solidarity circle dialogue generated a different quality and richness of the discussion. Through those intensely emotional and personal moments of sharing, the circle became a space where solidarity and trust was truly practiced.

It was humbling to see workers of colour activists admitting what they did not know and making a commitment to continue the learning of Aboriginal history. It was also refreshing to hear Aboriginal activists saying that this was the first time they felt being listened to. Their histories were being heard and integrated in the process and their issues were not a last minute addition, which was, too often, the norm.

### ***The Informal Circle Time***

True to the spirit of participatory action research, the participants drove the process. The process was so empowering that discussion on actions to redress individual issues and reclaim space took place in the evening after circle time. Specifically, the group engaged in a discussion to map out the election campaign strategy for one of the participants who decided to run for a leadership position within his local. Another case was over the unjust termination of another participant by her union employer. The group decided to draft a letter and another strategy session ensued. Since then, the participants of the solidarity circle have taken ownership of the process and have met regularly to carry on specific solidarity actions. From the onset, there was a shared desire to harness the sense of momentum, a desire to increase the belief that we were not alone. The trust built through the circle process inspired concrete actions that members of the circle have taken on to support those who dared to challenge the status-quo.

**Chapter Five:**  
**Solidarity in Practice: A Personal Narrative**

*The Act of Talking Back*

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice.

bell hooks (1989, p. 9)

It is in the spirit of bell hooks’s poignant vision of the “liberated voice” that this chapter is both an individual and collective act of “talking back”. The personal and the collective reflection on our experiences in the labour movement revealed in this chapter and Chapter 6 are narratives of resistance in the context of a political project grounded in anti-colonialism and anti-racism frameworks.

By bringing forth my personal narrative, I am making explicit a subjective understanding of the personal and collective social existence – what keeps us going as activists and what makes me/us whole. In the context of colonial and hegemonic relations within the labour movement, to document and reveal one’s own vulnerabilities and to interrogate self is a narrative of resistance. Margo V. Perkins (2000) in her work, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*, contends that history is traditionally written from the vantage point of the victor and the importance of writing one’s life from one’s subjectivity is also a form of protest and a “challenge to the hegemonic history” (p. 11).

Aboriginal scholar, Thomas King (2003, p. 2) poignantly states that “the truth about stories is that’s all we are.” My story reveals my past, present and who I will become. The personal narrative contextualizes my perspective and my interpretations of the study. It is also my way as an activist and a researcher in bringing in my whole self into the realm of knowledge production and sense making. Sara Lawrence Lightfoot draws an analogy of researcher as portraitist and the critical role of self-understanding in deepening the inquiry and knowledge making- “the self of the portraitist emerges as an instrument of inquiry, an eye on perspective-making, an ear that discerns nuances, and a voice that speaks and offers insights” (1997, p. 13).

By turning the researcher’s gaze inward, I have revealed a sense of my values, experiences and the core matters that make me whole. The personal narrative will also provide the context and perspective on how I have interpreted the data collected and weaved the voices and experiences of my fellow labour activists into a collective portrait on the practice of solidarity within the labour movement.

In recognizing the importance of emotional knowing and centering my personal narrative as a critical component of this research, I am reminded by Dei ‘s (2008) observation on the limitations of this research approach. As critical reflection of self is an ongoing inward process, there is a temptation to assume we have full grasp of self-knowledge as referred by Dei as the intellectual arrogance of omnipotence.

The humility of our anti-racist work prevents us from claiming to know about—or prioritize –all oppressions. There is the power of not knowing and allowing oneself to be challenged by multiple knowledges. We do not always know about the nature and extent of our oppressions. Also, sometimes the site from which we oppress is the site that we least cast our gaze. There are no neat boundaries and defining lines between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed.” (p. 76)

Turning our gaze inward is an ongoing process that requires vigilance, critical self-reflection and courage to admit that we do not always know ourselves or have all the answers. In that sense, anti-racism work is a practice of mindfulness. On the other hand, hooks implores us not to get trapped in the silos of identity politics and links this act of self-discovery with knowledge of how we must act politically to change and transform the world (hooks, 1989, p. 117). The reflection in this chapter is, therefore, an exploration of my own colonized self, the why of my activism, and my stance on decolonizing solidarity building within the movement.

My attempt to write, to voice is not just to bear witness or to record my history, but to recognize the importance of rewriting and remembering history from my perspective as a person of colour, as a Chinese Canadian woman, and as a labour and community activist. It is a way to reclaim “a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself...it becomes imperative that we rethink, remember, and utilize our lived relations as a basis of knowledge” (Mohanty, 1991, p. 56).

### ***Interrogating My Own Colonized Self***

Growing up as part of the majority Other in a British colony, and subsequently settling in Canada with all the explicit and implicit circumstances of being considered as Other have provided me with ample opportunities to critically examine the complexity and complicity of systemic racism. Formal education in a colonized society is one of loyalty, submission, and obedience. The orientation, curriculum, and teaching approach was very much grounded in the superiority of the colonizer and a zealousness to make a loyal subject out of us as the colonized. As such, the language of instruction for most schools was English; facts on British history and geography were memorized. From early age on, our school trips

consisted of going to the big soccer stadium to wave the British flag and welcome the members of the Royal Family.

The internalized racism through the colonial relations and structures permeated throughout my daily life. Fanon's work reveals how, over time, colonized populations tend to internalize the derogatory images imposed on them by their colonizer. As a result of this process, the images, along with the structural relations with which they are intertwined, come to be recognized as more or less natural.

As asserted by Memmi (1967), "the colonized mind is transfixed with a duality that both rejects and welcomes the colonizer" (p. 83). Such a paradox of living in dual realities is also poignantly captured by Lina Medaglia (2009) as "passers doing shape shifting":

To do shape-shifting, a successful passer must do two things. She must be acutely aware of the fine points of power and of the gatekeepers of that power, and she must be able to live in a paradox: to gain control of her own life while pretending deference and submission. It is fear that causes us to shape-shift, fear that becomes the great negotiator for belonging and survival. (p. 229)

To me as a colonized subject, the process of internalized colonization, the dance of erasing and shape shifting begins early and unconsciously. Very often, the desire to survive the dance with its full complexities and contradictions comes at a personal cost. It is my own awareness of this paradoxical and painful duality within me, along with two lived experiences—one from a personal injury and the other as a parent watching pain inflicted on my daughter—that have propelled me to engage in anti-racism work, initially within the Chinese Canadian community and later into the broader labour and community social justice movements.

Another example of interrogating my own colonized self comes from my own ignorance and arrogance in failing to acknowledge and include the realities and experiences of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in the context of an ongoing colonial project. As an anti-racism activist, my personal journey in expressing solidarity with Aboriginal Peoples has been one of occasional support, perhaps even only one of convenience. I have participated in rallies supporting Dudley George, signing a petition for the release of Leonard Peltier, and attending blockades in Oka and Caledonia. In anti-racism training, I have referred to the treatment of Aboriginal Peoples as an ultimate example of systemic discrimination. Yet, I have never taken the time to pick up a copy of the Indian Act to fully grasp the extent of the legalized land theft and systematic destruction of First Nations' cultures, communities, and families. I made assumptions about the sameness of the Aboriginal Peoples and their cultures.

By not integrating the struggles of Aboriginal Peoples, I have missed the opportunity of connecting the dots of the various struggles and broadening the power of solidarity. A case in point illustrating my omission is in my 1995 master's thesis on the evolution of Canadian immigration policies. I talk about the treatment of Chinese migrant labourers through the head tax and subsequent Anti-Chinese Exclusion Act where land was freely given to White European settlers as a blatant example of racism. At no point do I acknowledge that the land was stolen from the Aboriginal Peoples in the first place. I assumed that my personal experiences with racism would make me empathetic. In part it did, but this was only a fraction of the whole picture. I had not read the voices of the survivors as portrayed by Isabelle Knockwood (2001) in such a compelling and dignified manner until I returned to the academy in 2006. In short, I did not learn about Aboriginal history with my heart and that is

the core of the matter. In retrospect, my own dismissiveness and blind spots are similar to the criticism we, as anti-racists, have vetted out to White progressives in the movement. Through the process of internalized racism, I have adopted the attitudes and replicated the actions of the dominant group. I wholeheartedly agree with Dei's position on "the most important lesson about decolonization is that, unless we constantly watch our discursive engagements, we run the risk of falling into the trap and becoming complicit in the very things we are contesting" (2010, p. 11).

### ***Personal is Political***

Three personal stories that involved my family members have had a lasting impact in shaping and crystallizing the necessity of anti-racism organizing as embodied knowledge. Those incidents affect us in body, mind, and spirit. In one of those brief moments of encounter, they serve as a rude reminder of the location of self in the hegemony of White power and privilege. It also serves to remind us the ever tentative and omnipresent of the racism and its intersection with class and gender.

In 1981, my 3-year -old daughter who started daycare at the age of 3 months, brought home a picture that she drew at the daycare centre. There was the sun, the house, a tree and in front of the house stood a little person with yellow coloured hair. I asked yaya (my daughter's name) who that little girl was. She said, "Me." I said, "But you don't have yellow hair. Your hair colour is Black like mine and baba's (the Chinese word for "father")." My daughter did not reply. She just stared back at me with a questioning look. This incident prompted me to get involved as a daycare parent in pushing for better representation of children's books that could reflect the range of cultural diversity. It made me realize that the normalcy of White privilege is invisible, yet ever-present.

***“Go back to where you came from!”***

Those are the words spoken to my daughter when she was a young activist giving out leaflets in Chinatown. As a first generation immigrant, I made a personal choice and settled in Toronto and hence have braced myself and was vigilant in confronting some of the outright nastiness. For my children who were born in Women’s College Hospital, they were not afforded with such a choice. As a parent, it hurts even deeper when such ugliness of racism is directed at your child. It took the air out of their sails by starting to second guess their entitlement and stridency by birth. The rage and guilt have stayed with me as motivating forces to integrate an anti-racism perspective into everything that I do. It is a choice I made because I do not have the luxury to do otherwise.

The other story has to do with my mother, a former member of ILGWU. In many ways, my mother’s work life is an example of the adverse impact of the neoliberal agenda on a woman worker. My mother worked as a sample maker for the large British owned conglomerate, the Martel Company that was based in Hong Kong in the late sixties. As a fine dressmaker, she made the sample dresses for Barbie doll and drew a lot of satisfaction from her love of fabrics until the company moved their production to China. My mom then immigrated to Toronto to help care for my children. She worked in an unionized garment factory as a sewing machine operator in the Spadina fashion district. In 1986, at the age of sixty, her manager told her that she was too slow and that she was wasting a machine. Her grievance ended up going nowhere as the factory closed down its Toronto operation and moved offshore not too long afterwards. As a daughter, I watched my mother’s anguish and reticence as an older immigrant woman worker in an industry that epitomized exploitation of its workforce on the multiple intersections of racism, sexism and ageism.

The above are a few key instructive experiences that have shaped the core values and underlying reasons of my own activism in the community and the labour movement. My personal journey of confronting racism and challenging my colonized self has shaped my worldview and as such my being, knowing and doing. By challenging the unequal power relations within the system, we are trying to make the invisibles visible -the invisibility of White privilege, the invisibility of systemic barriers and the invisibility of Others.

### *From Silencing to Voicing*

In the summer of 1971, as a foreign student I worked as a “chambermaid<sup>12</sup>” at Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal as a summer job. The hourly rate then for students was \$1.25 and the number of rooms to finish was 17.<sup>13</sup> It was back breaking work but we were young and this was only for a 4-month period before the new school term started.

Forty years ago, before the days of women’s liberation movement, sexual harassment in the workplace was not an issue of concern. Once you put on your work uniform, for the next 8 working hours that uniform becomes your predominant identity, replacing all your other identities. To the guests, you are a non-entity who is ever ready to clean, scrub, and even to be readily available for other duties. On the other hand, the commoditization of your labour also intersects with race and gender, and renders you an easy target for harassment.

I was propositioned often and had a couple of narrow escapes. Once I was to finish my last room for the day when the guest came back and walked into the bathroom. As I tried to rush off, he called and asked for a roll of toilet paper. I thought I must have forgotten to

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<sup>12</sup> This was the term used then. It is now referred to as room attendant, a more gender neutral reference.

<sup>13</sup> Forty years later, the daily number of rooms that a room attendant is required to complete is still at 15 for unionized workers. For non-unionized workers, it could be even more. The pace of getting the rooms reduced is much too slow.

replenish it. So I naively brought the roll and left it at the bathroom door. He opened the door and exposed himself! I was so shocked that I turned around, slammed the door, and pushed my cart down the hallway as fast as I could. I was so shocked, humiliated, and ashamed that I did not dare to tell anyone. I was so ashamed that it was such a violation but I also considered myself lucky that I was not raped. As a young, powerless woman of colour, I did not even know that I had a right to complaint about the guest. The next day, I reported to work as usual, counting the days to the end of that summer. I buried this deep and had never shared it with anyone for the last 38 years.

It was not until this explorative journey of being reflective of my own activism when posed with the question by one of the participants on what has kept me going. In recounting the incident, I burst into tears. In articulating and confronting this deeply buried secret, I did not anticipate the emotions that it would have unleashed. The acknowledgement and the sharing has been part of the powerful journey of healing. The silence and shame for all these years have operated on two levels. One is the personal shame of being violated, in that sense it is not how serious the sexual attack was, but rather it should not have happened at all. The other is the shame that I did not act, did not complain, I just walked away.

That silence or lack of action is probably the primary and consistent force that has motivated me to become a passionate activist advocating for immigrant women's rights and stay on course for the last three decades, even though at times it has been at a personal cost to my family. In remaining as a strong advocate on women's rights and antiracism issues and working with immigrant women and women of colour, what has kept me going is seeing myself in them. I am trying to compensate what I did not do for myself 38 years ago—the rage has made me a more forceful activist. On the other hand, I am also driven by a sense of

guilt and responsibility that I had the privilege and luxury to escape back to the comfort and safety of a learning environment as a student. Yet for the co-workers that I walked away from, it was and still is very much a lived experience to endure and/or confront the reality of workplace harassment. In that regard, I had a choice not to stay, a choice that many of my co-workers then and most of the workers now cannot afford to make.

In 1996 when I began to work as a union representative/organizer with Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE Local 75), I felt like I had come full circle. The racism in any downtown hotel establishment, the skin colour of staff gets darker as we move from the front to the back of the house (i.e., from the front desk positions to the kitchen, laundry and other housekeeping positions). We worked on the sexual harassment issue experienced by room attendants who had to work alone during the night shift. Because of my own previous experience, I developed a strong rapport and affinity with the room attendants. We mobilized, signed petitions and succeeded in getting the hotels to implement a system for room attendants to work in pairs during the night shift. It was an empowering experience for the immigrant women members and a personal act of redress and making whole.

The self-reflection has been liberating in changing my own mindset and not to be driven by guilt. The revelation, however personal, is also very much political. The silencing as a result of being vulnerable and powerless has had a lasting impact and consequences in our lives. The process of voicing has lifted an emotional burden that I do not have to try so hard and so driven all the time. It has also got me to imagine activism without the shame and guilt factor, to imagine creative ways to counter any violations, creating space and support for healing among workers who are marginalized in workplaces and or the community. From

personal to political, my own healing began when I realized I no longer have to keep chasing and over-compensating in order to ‘right the wrongs’, and that I do not have to be the only one doing the lifting.

### ***From Community to Union Organizing***

The other story came from an incident that I came across as a frontline community worker. It was about a workplace with about a hundred Chinese-speaking immigrant women who worked as sewing machine operators. Every Christmas, the company would host an end of the year party to thank the workers. There was a lucky draw where all the workers would put in their names, and the owner would draw two lucky winners. The prize for these two winners was a 2-week leave from work with wages. The others were cheered and wished they would have better luck next year. The employer had turned the workers’ entitlement under Employment Standard into a trick and a gift only to be bestowed to the fortunate few. The blatant exploitation of this group of vulnerable women workers prompted me to get involved in the organizing of and to become the first Chinese Canadian woman union organizer with the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union in 1977. I was in search of systemic change and solidarity across differences.

### ***Resisting Being a Trophy / Token***

Throughout these years, I became the first Chinese Canadian woman union organizer in 1977 with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. In 1987, I became the first Chinese Canadian woman to conduct research on the occupational health and safety working conditions of Chinese restaurant workers and was branded as a traitor by the local Chinese business community upon the release of the report. In 1993, as the first Chinese Canadian

woman candidate, I ran as the Federal MP candidate for NDP in Trinity Spadina Riding. In 1998, I became the first woman of colour to hold the position of Ontario Regional Director in the history of the CLC.

I listed the above, not to be boastful as if I have made history, but rather to underscore and to question why it had to take so long for some of us as workers of colour to be seen and be at the table. Much as it is special to break some of the systemic barriers and to be the one to keep the door open for others to follow, it is also very tiring at times. The price of being first is that one is placed under close scrutiny. As a woman of colour, the pressure to excel in order not to be perceived as a token is self-driven. At the same time, I am acutely aware that my presence in the various positions has helped add some much needed hues of diversity in these predominately White institutions. I am mindful of how I conduct myself, to resist being used as a trophy on the mantle of the status quo as aptly depicted by Fellow and Razack (1998) by my implicit and/or explicit actions, knowingly or unknowingly. In his work on racial contract, Mills (2009) makes it explicit that Whiteness offers rewards to some people of colour at the expense of others. To continue the imagery of the dance as posed by Madeliga, some passers are more agile than others:

To pass, and to receive the nod of approval, is to appear confident enough to make an unwritten and unspoken promise to the one who can bestow the gift of survival and of belonging. You must give back another gift, one that speaks to the heart, the mind, or the ego of the bestower. This is when the dance begins. (p. 229)

### ***Refusing to Dance to the Same Tune***

Working within the labour movement can be exhilarating and at the same time, exasperating and exhaustive. As expressed by the voices of other activists, the restrictive space and roles that you are expected to perform can only lead you to a certain distance. In

the attempt to step out of the prescribed space and not play by the rules of the dominance, the fear for an activist will be eliminated completely from the dance.

With an egotist, the passer must adhere to rules and order. Egotists wish to test the limits of your resolve, and are prepared to eliminate you from the game the minute you demonstrate a variation in expected conduct. In order to help you, arrogant people must not arrive at their natural state of contemptuousness. The way you repay them is to show respect for their superiority, obey them, and indulge their whims. (Madeliga, 2009, pp. 229-230)

In refusing to dance to the same tune, the passer runs the risk of giving up her seemingly relative comfort in position or privilege.

In 1994, I applied to Metro Labour Education Centre (MLEC), a project of the Toronto & York Region Labour Council, for the position of Labour Studies and Equality Unit Coordinator. I began my involvement with MLEC back in 1981 as a part-time English in the Workplace Program (EWP) instructor and full time as the EWP Coordinator from 1985 to the end of 1990 when I took a leave of absence to work in Queen's Park as the Senior Policy Advisor to the Minister of Citizenship during the NDP Government reign. Prior to my leave to Queens Park, I was the Equality Program Coordinator at the Centre. I was fairly confident that based on my prior experiences and skill set, I would have a good chance of securing the position. I was shocked when I was told by the Executive Director of MLEC that "if this has been the equality program coordinator position, it'd have been different. For this round, Labour Studies was weighed more." An excerpt from my open letter to the Board and staff of Metro Labour Education Centre follows:

Never have I felt more insulted. Should I take the comment to mean that as a minority person, I am only good enough to be in charge of equality program,? Maybe my qualification could be secondary because I've got the right skin colour. But when it comes to the core program of labour studies, then it's a

different matter. Doesn't my 16 years of proven experiences in organizing, in labour education, in developing new initiatives and my credibility in labour movement count for something?

Are we as minority workers being stereotyped and relegated to only speak and work on equality and anti-racism issues? Are we so successful that we are trapped in this one corner designated and defined by others?

Yes, no doubt we are passionate on the issues of race and gender because we can't afford not to. It is so much part of us as we are reminded on a daily basis. But we are more than that. We can be just as articulate, assertive and ardent representatives of labour in arbitration, in research, in negotiation, in leadership if people will only see beyond our skin colour, if we are given the space and confidence. God only knows how hard we try!" (Ng, open letter to labour dated January 26, 1994)

In documenting this, it is not my intent to come across as being negative or self-absorbed.

From my perspective, it is to express the sense of betrayal and disappointment I have experienced.

Over the years, as a survival strategy, I have learned to be more selective in when I lend my voice or when I remain silent in order to continue to play by the rules. Those are the moments that I am not proud of for as much as I try to walk a fine balance, there are times as a worker of colour in a position of relative privilege that you end up retreating to the comfort zone and allow yourself just to follow the leader.

Within the labour movement, members are often told that one has to sing from the same 'hymn book' as the external attacks are so vicious. There is a sense that individuals must not expose the inappropriate conducts or systemic issues to the public in order to protect labour solidarity. Indeed, in recognition of the public attack on unions, do we wish to join such a chorus and provide them with more ammunition? But, in retrospect as workers of colour as anti-racist activists, are we conforming to the norm for some crumbs and not taking

them to task or are we just so tired of having to perform all the time that the passer mentality takes over, when you do not know when the real you begins and the passer ends.

### ***Progress or Advances on Equity Agenda***

There is no doubt that we have made advances that are concrete and measurable, for example, in the number of union policy statements adopted denouncing all forms of systemic discrimination against all equity groups, in the hiring of more staff from diverse racial backgrounds within different union organizations, and in the election of two workers of colour as the top officers of the CLC. These are some fairly significant and symbolic gains. However, does this string of such advances mount up to tangible and lasting progress that can withstand some of the backlashes from the dominant and really transform the union culture?

The fact that Harris government won a majority in Ontario in 1995 and within the first 30 days of office repealed employment equity legislation and dismantled the Anti-Racism Secretariat by the stroke of a pen is a constant reminder to activists on how precarious equity gains could be and how entrenched the hegemony of White male dominance. By the same token, within the labour movement various ways to insert and advance equity agenda can often be individually driven rather than on an institutional commitment. During my 8 years as the Ontario Region Director of the CLC, utilizing my relative privilege and influence within the institutional structures, I initiated a number of new equity initiatives to integrate equity and anti-racism into the work of the Region. It was quite disheartening to see how quickly some of the policies and programs disappeared or reversed once I took leave of absence in 2006. The institutional support evaporated and the fear of change set in.

One particular example has to do a policy on assigning union activist-instructors for the weeklong union educational school that the CLC organized in different parts of the province. When I assumed the position in 1998, I noticed that instructors were predominately White and there was an unspoken practice that certain instructors have held ownership or privilege for instructing certain courses. While I can understand some of the rationale, I also saw it as keeping the perks for a selected or chosen group of activists. From an administrative and organizing point, it required less work and everything just ran like a well-oiled machine. Yet from an equity perspective, there was virtually no room for someone new to do the instruction. It was particularly contradictory that at every weeklong school, we were training activists to become instructors. The following year, I introduced a new guideline stipulating that for future weeklong schools, 25% of the instructors would be experienced instructors who are new to the school. We would adhere to gender parity in the selection of co-facilitators and as much as possible, the instructor team would reflect the diverse representation of the membership. There was some strong reaction and words exchanged as a few instructors challenged me on such change. I stood my ground and forged ahead. As a result, over the 8 years, there was a better representation of instructors from the diverse equity seeking groups and enrolment of women members, workers of colour as participants also grew. It is my impression that this now has become a practice of the past.

Then other initiative was the summer youth union training program called Solidarity Works which offered youth, particularly youth of colour a 2-week orientation and work experience within the labour movement. After 6 years of successful implementation, it had been permanently shelved and put on review under the pretext of budgetary constraint. These

are but a couple of examples to illustrate the vulnerability of initiatives when there is a absence of leaders willing to take up the cause and challenge the status quo.

The precariousness of an equity agenda helps illustrate Gramsci's notion of hegemony as dialectic between force and consent. Grassroots mobilizing and acts of resistance can create pressure and relative consent for the dominant to concede to an opening of space and privilege. Such concession of power only comes when the agitation is too visible to be suppressed by force or coercion. There is a constant shifting and balancing act for the leadership to be seen as leading the equity agenda without losing their traditional base of support for the next round of election. It is the minimalist approach to an equity agenda or more specifically an anti-racism agenda, and that is what is the least that we could do to keep labour peace and unity. The commitment to an equity agenda becomes a strategic move for political expediency. The fundamental premise of advancing an equity agenda becomes a pragmatic strategic for growth rather than a personal commitment for justice.

### ***Is Labour Movement Home?***

The very process of constructing a narrative for oneself- of telling a story- imposes a certain linearity and coherence that is never entirely there. That is the lesson, perhaps, especially for immigrants and migrants: that home, community and identity all fit somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities, and friendships.

Chandra Mohanty (2006, p. 136)

Mohanty's clarity in defining home echoes my own journey. Following this path as a foreign student, later as a landed immigrant in the 1970s and as a naturalized Canadian citizen after the birth of my two children in the early 1980s, citizenship was more of a legal issue for me than a matter of identity. The home and the circle I define as my comfort zone

comes from the choices I have made throughout the years. In that sense, the labour movement is a 'home' or site for my activism and ideology as an anti-racist feminist with a Marxist perspective. Therefore, my site of practice is also where I make sense of the world around me.

The space and comradeship within the labour movement sustains my being and at the same time, it has given me a sense of identity within the social fabric of the society where racism is so invisible and entrenched. This home offers a reassurance that I belong somewhere outside the traditional perimeters of home. In expanding the space, my community involvement with social justice and anti-racism stems from the same desire to be part of something larger, something that goes beyond the predictability of daily survival. To be part of the movement is to engage in a political and social sphere that I can engage in progressive politics and part of the social movement building.

However, this home, while offering a channel of expression, is not without its fault lines. Sometimes, it can also be false comfort. The fault line comes at times when you least expect it. When you are reminded once again of your omnipresent status of being an immigrant, a woman, and a person of colour, you cannot help but realize that labour movement is not home.

It is coalition that Bernice Reagan refers to as a way of survival in an emotional sense. Her stance that "insistence on breaking out of barred rooms and struggling for coalition is a recognition of the importance, indeed the inevitable necessity of wars of positions" (as cited in Mohanty, 2006, p. 117). In exploring to create a dialogue of solidarity, it is very instructive to recognize that identifying survival, rather than shared oppression as the ground of coalition. As much as recognizing the commonality, the pattern of colonization

shared by Aboriginal Peoples of this land and people of colour, it would be presumptuous to focus on the shared-ness of the histories and experiences of oppression. It has been an issue I have struggled with. It is not the sameness of oppression, and consequently, the sameness in our struggles. The shared oppression will equate to an appropriation of one's history and fallen into the trap of gazing into someone's pain again and again as so poignantly described by Razack. The process of identifying survival requires the analysis of the operatives, the position, and the effects of power and the shared need to create alternatives in order to survive. In attempting to "walk the talk," I wish to be brutally honest with myself; it is a journey of learning and unlearning. As a colonized self, the work of decolonizing my internal self is an ongoing process. Decolonization involves profound work on self, community, and governance structures.

In this regard, coalition is not home; the labour movement is not home. It is a premature solidarity that is built on the sandcastles of workers unity. Such unity, much as it is seeded, needs to be watered, pruned, and nurtured before it can take root. The possession of a union membership card, does not automatically change one's consciousness and sense of identity. In romanticizing the worker class solidarity prematurely, we do a disservice to the building of a greater movement and miss an opportunity to raise the collective consciousness of union members.

## **Chapter Six:**

### **The Collective Narrative**

The voices and experiences of the research participants woven into a collective narrative reflect the embodied knowledge of activists as racialized members of the labour movement grounded in the principles of solidarity and social justice. In bringing this collective portrait to life, I am cognizant of my responsibility and privilege to research from the inside. Cole cautions us about the paradox of telling “insiders” stories with the associated privilege and responsibility.

By virtue of my position as an insider I have been privileged to hear and hold these stories. By virtue of my position as an insider I am hyper vigilant about the potential impact of the telling of these stories on the lives of the participants and on the lives of other...it is a heavy responsibility to research from the inside. Insider privilege makes it possible; the responsibilities associated with insider privilege must be felt and honoured. (2001, p. 166)

I have used fictitious names and concealed other details to maintain the confidentiality of individual identities. In a further attempt to minimize the risk of disclosing any personal identities given the fairly small number of human rights and anti-racism activists within the movement, I have only provided a sketchy background of each participant as the context for the richness of their experiences.

#### ***“Why am I left behind?”***

We have union organizations...not a labour movement! (Interview transcript C101, March 1, 2009)

Sandra, the sister who made this claim during the interview, speaks with such emotion and candidness. As an activist of Latin American descent who has moved up

through the ranks, she has seen how some immigrant members have become so disenchanted. Her assessment of the labour unions' treatment of racialized workers is brutally honest:

For immigrant workers, workers of colour, the system doesn't receive them as equals, not as warriors, not as the heart of the movement... the members stop caring in order to protect themselves. Once the union gets the contract, the education stops, the mobilizing stops. They just want us as numbers, not as thinking people. (Interview transcript C101, March 1, 2009)

A similar sentiment is echoed by Richard, a long time rank-and-file activist of colour who has volunteered with his union in a number of unionization drives with immigrant workers in the service sector. He has been increasingly discouraged by his union's organizing approach, one that treats immigrant workers solely as dues-paying members. The intensity of attention during an organizing drive dissipates instantaneously once a vote is won and there is little about membership and solidarity building.

It seems sometimes, when we talk about organizing, there is so much solidarity message, what the movement can offer. Then once they are in, 2 years later, it is not there anymore. It is as if we become the employer and make people feel different from when we knock the door to talk about solidarity, we forget what we represent. What went wrong that all of a sudden we pretend that they are nobody? (Interview transcript C103, December 20, 2009).

Richard's sense of frustration is shared by Ray, an activist of colour who sits on the equity committee of his union. According to Ray, the leadership of his union has operated its services like a business and is constantly preoccupied with balancing the books. The impact of the current recession on the manufacturing sector has brought the weakness of the

business unionism model to the forefront. This activist's words were filled with cynicism over what it is and what it could be.

Given the growth of global capital, workers are playing into the hands of the enemy. How do we reactivate the dialogue among workers at the local level. The workers begin to blame the union leaders, the shop stewards are not almighty. Right now within my union, there are more opportunists than activists. That's the disease. The opportunists speak very sweetly and are busy figuring out whom they should establish a relationship with in order to keep their jobs. I've been an activist for a long time, I've never seen it so bad. It pains me to see the concession after concession that we're swallowing. It is so sad to see the state that our movement is in. We are like insurance agencies and we have leaders who proudly refer themselves as the CEO of the labour movement. (Interview transcript C102, March 15, 2009)

The notion that unions are seen more as insurance companies and leadership as CEO, has prompted another activist, Jay, a younger activist from a public sector union to raise one of the fundamental questions that every generation of activists has grappled with.

Are you in it for the same reason as I'm? [The labour movement] is not a campaign, it's my life! How do we better the movement when people you work with treat you like crap? If we're supposed to walk side by side, *why am I being left behind?* Should I just walk away and feel like a loser? (Interview transcript C106, December 20, 2009)

The indignation expressed in the question, "*Why am I being left behind?*" is a powerful and vivid image of solidarity being selective and is not truly there for all. The question – solidarity for whom? – becomes an exasperating search for a different answer. These quotes from a number of participants also speak to the shift how unions are run and priorities are set. The following observation made by Dawn, an Aboriginal activist in a

private sector union speaks to the limited space for democratic practices and a healthy nurturing of younger and newer activists. The tight control and bureaucratization of business unionism very often, is enough to turn any new activists away.

I sort of got a sense that solidarity meant to me that we are working for common cause, we all have the same goal and we are all willing to stand up for one and another. There are rules and democratic process, you know Roberts rules of order. There weren't really any democratic elections. When you try to have democratic election, there is fallout. Whoever that is in power, they want to stay there. Unless somebody agrees that they were going to move over for the next person, there is no real democracy. (Interview transcript A104, April 21, 2009)

Dawn's sentiment is echoed by this exchange between Jay and another Aboriginal activist, Sam who are both from the same private service sector union in the circle dialogue.

Jay: One of the challenges over the years, the youth involvement is very tokenistic. There is a lot of competition among us for that limited space. I was a dolphin and then I became a shark. We are replicating the dominant players' game.

Sam: Solidarity shouldn't be divided, differential treatment, just to cover up the fact that we are not together. We should not be used as trophies. How long can we get away with that division? Sometimes, it makes me doubt whether it's real. Solidarity is when we come together honestly, not only when it suits us. (Transcript from focus group discussion, June 16, 2009)

In speaking about the competition for limited space, activists have astutely pointed to the artificial silos created for different equity groups within the movement. Such one-dimensional division does not take into account the multiple identities of activists; it also

speaks to the choices activists end up having to make to fit into a prescribed space. Then within that space, the notion of being treated as “trophy” echoes a similar strand in my own personal narrative. There is a keen observation in that brief exchange that we are used as trophies just to cover up a unity that is not there. It is in this dance of propping up the façade of solidarity that one can easily be trapped into accepting certain roles in order to stay in the game of the dominant, returning a gift “that speaks to the heart, the mind, or the ego of the bestower” (Medaglia, 2009, p. 229).

The fierce competition within the limited space that the youth activist refers to is a real challenge of activists who, for example, seek a leadership position within different equity caucuses. In engaging in such a dance, the members of each equity constituency group end up playing by the rules of competition prescribed by the dominant and very often, attacking those who are in the same constituency group, the ones that are closest to you, to vie for their special spot of display. At a time when the organized labour is in such dire need of new blood and the next generation of leaders to reinvigorate the movement, it is sobering to learn from the above quotes how our institutional structures and practices are turning potential activists from dolphins to sharks.

### *Sense of Betrayal about the Leadership and the Equity Agenda*

The sense of disappointment becomes even more palpable when asked about their assessment of union leadership and commitment to an equity agenda. In interview after interview with activists, a similar pattern of practices emerges among the many labour organizations. They will tolerate equity for as long as it makes them look inclusive. However, such willingness will only go so far as long as they do not offend their traditional

base of support. The fine balancing act becomes a frustrating game of hide-and-seek when Aboriginal workers and workers of colour put in their earnest efforts to participate and advance the equity agenda. When the questioning is perceived as criticism, a challenge or even worse, a sign of disloyalty, one runs the risk of being deemed as ‘carrying a chip on your shoulder’ or considered as an outcast. The following voices from Aboriginal workers and workers of colour reveal their deep sense of disappointment in the current leadership to equity and anti-racism agenda.

To be honest with you, I used to feel that the leadership was genuine in supporting our cause. But they would use the divide and rule tactics, the colonization strategies. *They would promise you a bridge even when there is no water!* Something never change, same shit different way. The leadership at times would do whatever it takes for their survival. They would do everything even if they have to trample us. They would use their discretionary power to take care one of their own kind, their own base. But when it comes to our communities, they would say that their hands are tied. They are politicians; they will just leave us stranded. As long as you are towing the line, you’re ok. When you ask questions, you just disappear.

After 911, I want to make it a better place for my grandkids, now I’m not so sure. When it comes to equity issues, it’s just lip service. The leadership would do everything to keep the forces calm. (Interview transcript C104, April 23, 2009)

Tam’s vivid imagery of “promising a bridge even when there is no water” is such a perfect description of the extent that leadership will so do in order to maintain their power and privilege within the union. “Paying lip service”, “keeping the forces calm and making sure everyone will “toe the line” seem to be the prevailing institutional practices to keep the

power base of the dominant. The differential treatment of taking care of one of their own, and leaving others stranded speaks to the choices leadership will make and whom they would consider to be dispensable. It is a reality that in an institutional setting when numbers count, the level of respectability bestowed upon you by the leadership is often determined by the strength you carry (i.e. the number of votes you can deliver). It also speaks to the importance of building a critical mass of activists on anti-racism struggles.

In probing deeper into institutional practices, the insights of Linda, an activist of colour who experienced plant closure in the private sector and consider herself fortunate to find a unionized clerical work in the broader public sector, underscore some of the inherent structural challenges posed for equity seeking group members even when they wish to advance the equity agenda.

Equity issues get twisted. Underlying support is not in place. The degree of influence is not in place. The issue of accessibility, the structure of the union has not changed. The sense of entitlement is very much present. No one is challenging to break down these barriers. Anywhere where there is a locus of power, workers of colour have a difficult time getting elected. Power is guarded. There is no turnover at the senior level. (Interview transcript C107, June 6, 2009)

The issue of inaccessibility comes in concrete examples of activists blocked from getting elected to gaining enough support for their own union's convention delegate status, or being sent to a human rights conference or an educational training because everything has to get adopted at the union local executive level. If there is a well-established cliché of leadership and his/her key supporters, the sense of entitlement as mentioned in the above quote is very much entrenched and rarely challenged. If one tows the line, the rewards will be

given sparingly and selectively. Most national leadership can do little to change it in the name of respecting the local's autonomy. Without a critical mass of like-minded activists, no influence or pressure can be exerted and as a result, equity issues become matters of optics to be trotted out at the convenience of the leadership.

One of the most fundamental differences between Aboriginal activists and workers of colour and the dominant White leadership perhaps comes in the critical comment made by Kim, an Aboriginal activist in a public sector union in relating her story of solidarity:

There is some solidarity destroying attitudes. I remember during one of the anti-globalization demonstration, I was chastised for not making my organization more at the front of the parade. Solidarity becomes optics! There is leadership who do not come from within (the heart), it becomes a learned behaviour. When it comes from that place, it reveals itself that something are done and something are left undone. They can pick and choose. Things that you and I would take for granted would be done they have to be reminded.  
(Interview transcript A102, April 23, 2009)

The last sentence of the quote says it all. As Aboriginal workers and workers of colour whose lived experiences are so steeped in the realities of White hegemony, unlike the White and often male leadership we do not have the luxury of picking and choosing whether to get involved in anti-racism and decolonizing struggles within the labour movement, in the workplaces and the broader society. Not unlike my personal narrative, activism stems from experiences of injustice. Equity and anti-racism is not a project of optics but rather, a project of resistance and that is where the heart of the matter lies.

The common theme from the above voices has been a lack of real progress on equity agenda. Solidarity becomes optics and access to leadership positions as rewards to be given

to reinforce the power of the bestower. In that process of passing, of shape-shifting, we are dancing to the tune of the dominant and performing for fear of not being included. It is exhausting to be caught in a paradox on a daily basis to do at times to the detriment of our own well-being. The next section helps to illustrate that even the constant dance of shape shifting has its breaking point.

***“Am I Just a One Trick Pony?”***

Most of the workers of colour and Aboriginal workers get active in their union through equity issues. Yet at a certain point in their activism in the labour movement, many feel trapped and blocked. What happens to activists when the prescribed space is both limited and limiting? If the glass ceiling is the limitation for women accessing leadership, then it is *be steel case wall for racialized workers*.

The reflection by Tim, the Aboriginal activist in a private sector union, offers a glimpse of the self-doubt and frustration on how to navigate through this terrain of systemic barriers to counter the dominance.

Just because we are involved in equity issues, we're seen as lightweight! But then where else can I start? When are people going to see beyond my colour? They train us to come up through the rank, good for the union, but when push comes to shove, there is no place. When you try to come for those jobs, you are somehow seen as not tolling the line. It's the idea who is going to lead is already figured out. When we are ready to move forward, there is no place for us. They already have their succession plan and it does not include the people who are in the equity positions.

So I'm starting to wonder how we have ghettoized ourselves...whether we are taken seriously is the question. I watch my friend, an outright fearless and

smart activist who got promoted to be a staff. He just doesn't get anywhere now; he is being seen as *a one trick pony*! That means he can only talk equity. I can see through my observation, now that he's a staff, you can see that they suddenly don't respect him 'cause he hasn't got any power. (Interview transcript A101, November 9, 2009)

The Aboriginal activist's insightful comments have helped to illustrate a roadmap to active engagement and leadership that are marked by "man-made" dead-ends and road-blocks. The questions on whether we have ghettoized ourselves and whether we are being taken seriously speak volumes about the ambivalence and predicament that activists of colour and Aboriginal activists find themselves in quite often by accident and not by design. To continue the analogy of the dance, when the joyful movements of a dance have been reduced to running around in circles, one begins to question the purpose of it all.

The powerful image of a one trick pony evokes another image, one of a circus where there are different one trick ponies being tamed by the trainer to perform to the applause of spectators. The hegemony of White dominance and power is omnipresent and manifested in the lack of choices and the tightening of space in body, mind and soul. The recognition of the unequal power dynamics is well articulated by both Jay and Linda during the individual interview.

It's one way to go forward, claim your space in terms of the equity position, but when you try to agitate for some real power, you are pretty shut down. It makes me wonder even claiming our space even with equity positions, how much of that is just token by the real power. Unions only mimic the power structure of the country, White male privilege. (Interview transcript C106, September 20, 2009)

No matter how well we think of our unions, and how progressive, at the end of the day, they have to survive in this culture and the culture so far says it's the White males that should have the power. It pisses me off, who's to say that it's written in stone. (Interview transcript C107, April 24, 2009)

The notion of being ghettoized, raised above by Tim, also points to a paradox that we as Aboriginal and worker of colour labour activists find ourselves in. The transition from an activist to a union staff can very much be a double-edged sword for anti-racism activists. While it is critical to have more Aboriginal and worker of colour activists in staff positions as role models, there is also a recognition that such hiring is also a form of silencing and cooptation used by the leadership to reduce the influence and mobilizing power of that particular activist. The irony of the next observation by Ray, who has been promoted to a staff position, draws resonance among a number of racialized activists on the notion of being grateful and being beholden to the bestower.

You are struggling as underpaid workers in your own country, your own workplace, so now you're here, working in the union. You're made to feel that you should be grateful, you should be so lucky that you have come so far. No matter how hard you fight, you don't deserve to go that far. The university rank staff, they don't have to go to workplace to do mobilizing. I pulled you out; you are lucky to be pulled out. When you have no place to go back, then the relationship is changed. Where will this person go? (Interview transcript C102, March 15, 2009)

This gate-keeping mentality by the powerful elite within the labour movement has put workers of colour and Aboriginal activists in a catch-22 position. The leadership welcomes your participation, nurtures you to get more engaged. For women and equity group members, the first step very often, is through the door with the least resistance and that is

the equity constituency group committees or the human rights committee. It is a good training ground as it can hone your activist skills and broader union contacts. This initiation through networking with other equity group members has been instrumental for new activists as it provides a channel for them to apply their agency and mobilizing skills. The comfort to be in the presence of members from the same constituency groups enhances the sense of belonging to which all of us gravitate in the beginning.

However, as you become more engaged and see through some of the pretenses, you begin to be more vocal and that leadership potential has been spotted. The advantage of equity committee work has worked to propel you forward and people have taken notice. Yet at the same time, it has typecast you as the spokesperson for this single issue. From then on end, they do not see beyond your colour.

***Have we been pigeonholed into equity activists so much so that they don't see me for my strength?*** (Interview transcript A101, November 9, 2009)

This quote came from Tim. In his attempt to run for leadership position within his local, the open campaign from the opposition was based on the claim that he lacked 'experience'. The open campaign along with the whispering campaign led to a very poor showing. Another activist recounts her experience in challenging the current leadership and again the lack of right experience is used to cast doubt among the delegates. Or activists who have applied for a staff position and then got turned down because the qualifications are not well rounded. On the other hand, activists are also finding the cracks to insert their presence, "to learn to use equity to their advantage as reflected in the following passage from the interview with Dawn, an Aboriginal activist.

For me, you know what. I've kind of learned to use it to my advantage. If that is the way I'm going to get in then that's the way I'm going to get in. Once I get in there, there is no holding back. Sometimes it gets kind of weary. It's all Aboriginal issues, but I have found a way to make it bigger, like the whole Grassy Narrows issues. There is a much bigger issue, it's a water issue, a human rights issue, a women's issue and international solidarity issues, that's why I'm so passionate. I see that as a vehicle to being able to step outside than just being a person who can talk about Aboriginal stuff. Hard lessons.... A lot of times, I believe that it seems as a added bonus because I don't present myself as Aboriginal person. I have skills and when they find out I'm Aboriginal, oh bonus, now I can check that box... ha that's exactly how I feel... I've learned to use it to my advantage. ***It's kind of sad, I don't want to be that person, but I learn that's how you're going to survive, it gets you at the table.*** (Interview transcript A104, April 21, 2009)

Much as it can be wearisome, the activist is using equity as the stepping-stone to link with broader environmental and human rights issues. When the system of dominance and power is constructed and mobilized within a White cultural framework, workers of colour and Indigenous activists are used as commodities to reflect the diversity of a union. They will attempt to showcase you as one of the trophies on the mantle of equity, and let you play in the prescribed space. Diversity replaces racism, and inclusion not discrimination. As Kobayashi insightfully observes:

It is inclusive and treat everyone as equal- that is, as White. Instead of racism, it speaks of valuing diversity. Instead of anti-racist training, it propounds cross-cultural understanding, as though we all begin at the same starting gate and need only to understand one another to get along. In its worst manifestations, instead of racial slurs, it engages in personality assassination. It is ambitious, smug, self-serving, and insidious. (2009, p. 71)

A new pattern is emerging among progressive unions, particularly those with a large concentration of membership who are workers of colour, in which special efforts are made to engage members from the diverse backgrounds as activists, and to encourage them to take leadership positions. In fact, workers of colour are the ones who will mc or be speakers at the rallies. However, the power that orchestrates such puppetry remains in the hands of the selected few to protect the power and dominance of Whiteness. The selected few might genuinely feel that they are making a commitment to social change without critically reflecting on how they have conducted themselves.

What happens when one begins to challenge the space at times, to the wrath of the leadership? Then the issue of solidarity gets skewed into a question of loyalty, not an unfamiliar refrain posed by Bush in the post-911 era, “you are either with us or you’re against us”! The acts of challenging the status quo and uncovering the insidious systemic actions of the labour movement can render anti-racism and equity activists in precarious position of being vilified, ostracized, and characterized as disloyal. The backlash is real. If the fight is taken to a public realm, the repercussion is doubly severe. Below is Kim’s story when she supported someone to challenge the existing leadership.

I just believed everything that I was being told, what I read, and I bought that solidarity forever hook line and sinker. Then I started get more and more involved...then I started to realize that there was no solidarity forever, there was selective solidarity....I started to become more involved and then one of the brothers, he wanted to run against the local president, I tried to talk him out of it. But he wanted to run, he needed somebody to nominate him, so again I thought he is a brother and it’s his right to run, so I nominated him. *The backlash was huge*, and it wasn’t against him. Ha! It was against me! This is a White brother and so it is as if I have encouraged him to run. That totally

shocked me. I couldn't believe it. ...Then the worst is that brother was brought to be the VP for the local. He also turned against me. That's the worst betrayal. He started to attack him. We got into a huge screaming match one day, he verbally attacked me, I was in shock. We shared meals together. I supported you and this is what you would do to me! (Interview transcript A102, April 21, 2009)

The backlash as expressed in the above quote is real and can be vicious. The fallacy of an inclusion model (Razack, 1998) implies that if only we can remain as “innocent subjects standing outside of the hierarchical social relations who are not accountable for the past or implicated in the present”, if only we allow “the colonizer’s own complicity to remain masked” (p. 11), we can each continue on our façade of getting along. Most workers of colour or Indigenous workers see through the insincerity, the superficialness, and the manipulation that goes on for the organization to be seen as culturally hip, and doing their equity agenda. The reactions are often weighted and determined by the level of risks involved, the personal confidence and agency, and last but not the least, their own economic realities when one is beholden to the organization for employment. The consequences of voicing, exposing and challenging the status quo can be costly.

When one tries to break this mould or casting, the retaliation can be fierce and vicious because the institution is so oblivious to the racialized effects that when challenged, it often reacts with offence or in defense of the status quo (Kobayashi, 2009, p. 71). The challenge becomes personalized, and you are seen either as uncontrollable or too ambitious. It is the same type of responses and mentality expressed by racist paternalistic employers during organizing drives. In those situations, it is the class interest that motivates employers to use the classic divides and rule tactics to diffuse the potential solidarity built through the drives

among workers. In the union context where the traditional leadership is challenged, it is the interest of protecting their own White and often, male privilege and dominance that will prevail and racialization will come to the foreground. Simultaneously, the union as an employer can also be apt in deploying the divide and rule tactics, to isolate and ostracize such individuals. One typical response is to try as much as possible to blend in with the dominant.

To be part of the group, you have to throw away your belief and play the game. Most of us come out as leaders fighting for our belief, now we are actors. How can we go out to push solidarity that set us back, when we don't even have it among ourselves. You are not real. They don't feel it. (Interview transcript C101, March 1, 2009)

In the union, all the things we go out to tell the workers to stand up for, we don't get it ourselves. That is not solidarity. You don't have a stable environment that you work. You are only good enough to move to certain level. Equality issues become your clutch, but for everything else, the White folk will come before it. It really breaks my heart when we don't walk the talk. (Interview transcript C102, March 15, 2009)

The above insights of Sandra and Ray underscore the contradictions that activists are subjected to. The stance and passion of empowered workers unfortunately is very often perceived as a threat to the existing leadership. Instead of recognizing their potential and giving credence to their own activist building, they retreat to the old mode of closing ranks and doing whatever it takes to be rid of the critical voices.

### *The Sense of Woundedness*

I'm one of those wounded. I was happy that my workplace was organized. I have the ongoing contradiction working with the bureaucracy of my union. I need support. When we started working as an equity caucus, we were

managed. The boss was in and out. If you used honey we will get more. If you use vinegar, you'll get less...I can't be what you are trying to make me. I'm not going to go away. But I'm paying a personal price, I can't sleep thinking about it. (Transcript from Circle dialogue, June 15, 2009)

Being wounded, broken, it's about my survival. The union is an imperfect organization. It's a pact with the devil. My task is to find the space. The moment when the space is not there, I'll leave. If you don't find the space to do what you have to do, fleeing is an option. That's why I never stay in one union for too long. I've made that decision. That's how I've protected myself. If you run for leadership, you fail. Then you get up for another day. We call ourselves run away slaves. We are always running towards somewhere. Some of us are more vulnerable and the devil is right beside us. What we can do individually, will be different. We all pick our moments. (Transcript from Circle dialogue, June 15, 2009)

Through the stories shared in the interviews with activists, there emerged a shared sense of woundedness and the revelation of different coping strategies. What is intriguing to me is the different choices that activists have made. As illustrated in the above two quotes, one activist chooses to fight even at a cost to her personal health, while the other considers himself as a runaway slave – not to be chained and not to be controlled. So in that sense, taking flight becomes a strategic retreat.

Then there are those to whom I refer to as the walking wounded, with the invisible hurt and disappointment of being marginalized, being isolated. Yet there are very few employment alternatives available to break this cycle. This is particularly prevalent among the group of activists who have moved up the ranks, shown their leadership, and put in a staff position within their home union or recruited by other unions. Some of their experiences are

no different from that of workers in other types of workplaces: you endure in silence, put on a façade of normalcy, and keep on going.

I feel angry, in a way isolated because the more anger that I have, the more I refuse to be quiet. If you have found me a voice as a leader, suddenly [as a staff] I become a prisoner, I don't want it. It makes me angry when I see them [the White lead staff] disrespecting a co-worker, I speak up but nobody else want to, and so you became the scapegoat. I continue to speak up, the more you do that, the more people move away from you. (Interview transcript C101, March 1, 2009)

Sandra's rage at being isolated, imprisoned, disrespected and ostracized reminds me of Dei's stance that racism and oppression leaves scars on bodies, emotional and psychological injuries (2008, p. 75). He stresses that there is a spiritual and emotional violence when one's ideas and ways of knowing are constantly devalued, easily dismissed and misunderstood. When such scars and injuries are left unattended, Ray's depiction on the dimming of the fire speaks to the sense of brokenness and the resignation.

When I'm fighting my workplace, I know whom I'm fighting. I did it, I could do anything with the support of the union. I lost all that solidarity. I better go back to the workplace before I lose all my respect for the union. If I stay any longer, I would hate the union. I came out with this fire, they are putting a cover on the fire, the energy is dimming, the fire is going. It's not that I'm afraid. It's just it's so sad. (Interview transcript C102, March 15, 2009)

The issue of being wounded has often been glossed over by activists of colour as a price you pay. One does not linger or wallow in pain. Rather we move on to another urgent task at hand and keep some of those frustration and hurtfulness buried so you have the sanity to cope with the more pressing issues on a daily basis. The separation between the heart and

the mind requires a fierce discipline and can also put a toll on our own personal and collective psyche. Yet is such separation healthy for the spirit, the mind and body?

The sense of woundedness shared by participants highlights our collective desire to be made whole, a common catch all phrase used in grievance form to ensure no redress is amiss. The notion of making whole evokes a profound need to be restored. One of the participants, Pam shared her perspective of what keeps her going is seeing what her parents as non-English-speaking immigrant workers have gone through to raise the family. That sense of addressing the injustice can be a powerful driving force in organizing campaigns because it is more than a personal gain, but the well-being of a family, a community that is at stake.

When I interact with workers of colour, I feel like I'm dealing with my parents whom I have the greatest respect, they have gone through so much and they want to do the best for their children. The labour union can do wonders for workers like them who are really marginalized. I see other immigrants like themselves, in so much better working condition...everyone should have that right to enjoy the benefits of being unionized. Everyone should have that including my parents. (Interview transcript C108, October 17, 2009)

As activists of colour and Aboriginal activists, making whole represents a deeper sense of engagement and yearning that moves us beyond the constraint of being typecast as others or self-identify as victims. It is to reclaim the wholeness of our lives, so it is uplifting and invigorating to engage and participate as equal and that we are part of something bigger. The sense of woundedness that stems from experiences of disempowerment and the need for a sense of belonging also stems from the sense of internalized colonization.

*Uncovering the Internalized Colonization*

I came into the world, imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.

Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into non-being, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant: I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self.

Franz Fanon (1967, p. 135)

Fanon's powerful imagery, "a chemical solution is fixed by a dye" serves as a sobering reminder of how little it takes to unravel the sense of identification among the colonized with the colonizer. The sense of the emergence of a fragmented self speaks to the contradictions and complexity of internalized colonization that Aboriginal workers and workers of colour experience and wrestle with. The indignation, the confusion, and the rude awakening are very much reflected in this activist of colour's experience on the challenges to build solidarity among racialized workers.

Our members have no clue what they should challenge. Our hands are tied and nothing happens. Building solidarity under such circumstance becomes an impossible task, There is solidarity when we meet together, but the moment we leave the room, the chapter is closed. The White people are not going to groom you... we do what we can to mentor and to coach. Yet within our own groups, the hierarchy of oppression, the internalized racism is alive and well. Until we can get rid of that, we'll have difficulty getting there. We're all fighting for the same thing, but we're going in different directions. The jealousy, the taunting, the animosity that happens within our own communities is what is killing us. (Interview transcript C104, April 23, 2009)

Tam's thoughtful reflection highlights the importance of cross constituency solidarity building among workers of colour and solidarity building between workers of colour and Aboriginal workers within the labour movement. It speaks to the importance of caucusing and finding space for mentoring, coaching, and decolonizing of our mindset to take place. This activist has also astutely pointed out due to the limited space prescribed by the dominant, we have fallen prey to the divide and rule tactics and the animosity created among us is exactly the outcome that the dominant has anticipated. We are so busy fighting among ourselves that we have left them off the hook. On the other hand, the painful moments of recognizing that you are caught in the vortex of an ongoing colonizing project can leave one bewildered as revealed in the litany of questions posed by this younger Aboriginal activist.

Whose experiences are valued more? Whose knowledge is more valid? Are we moving ahead or just treading water on the same spot? Why are we self-censoring, self-limiting ourselves? The process of decolonization is very painful. There is resistance among us. How much of whom I am has been shaped by identity, by others? Who the hell am I? The fight is also within us. I was "white-washed." (Interview transcript A103, May 4, 2009)

As former colonized subjects, the shredding of the values and belief of the dominant is a constant self-reflexive project. It is so entrenched that one ends up doing a lot of self-censoring and self-silencing, and still is totally oblivious of the actions and consequences. In the daily interactions with others, much as I attempt to be self-vigilant and take responsibility for my words and deeds; at times, it just sneaks up on you and like an involuntary response. You repeat the words and actions of the privileged and the colonizer. Over time, when such acts of self-censoring become the normal response, you are so conditioned that you have perfected the art of internalizing. The masking of our self, the silencing of our voice is one of

the rules we are supposed to follow if we wish to stay within the limited space in the sandbox as prescribed by the dominant.

In this sense, silencing becomes a form of violence, a form of isolation, self-inflicted or otherwise. On the other hand, when we confront the inappropriate behaviour or pattern of racism, we are constantly being accused of being oversensitive and carrying a chip on our shoulders. Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2004) have astutely pointed out that as racially oppressed, we are always perceived to tread a fine line between consciousness and oversensitivity (p. 174). It is as if we have created the problem by raising it. The blaming the victim syndrome has been such a convenient discourse for the debate between real and imagined violations or violence, and diverts the spotlight from the propping up of a hierarchy that thrives on the unequal power and privilege relations.

The deeply seeded nature of racism constitutes our bodies, minds and souls and so at the core of our experience, we are disciplined to accept our oppression and to live it in relations to the lives of those with privilege. In other words, we live, breathe, work and struggle in moments that are beyond the White ability to experience, imagine or reconstruct. (Dei, 2004, p. 171)

This quote is instructive as we contemplate and explore ways to build solidarity across the diverse membership within the labour movement. In recognizing the two distinct realities of being between White and racialized activists, it will be wistful thinking on our part to believe that racism can be jettisoned out of people's thinking. To paraphrase Audre Lorde, the dismantling of the master's house will require ongoing dialogue and political practice. The deconstructing of the internalized racism and colonization is active work of resistance and above all, a form of self-healing that requires support and solidarity from those who share some of the lived experiences and reality.

A number of key themes have emerged through this collective narrative on how selective solidarity can be, on the disappointment of the pace of the equity agenda, the frustration of being typecast as a “one trick pony,” and their sense of woundedness. These emerging themes based on their lived experiences echo forcefully the prevailing sentiment expressed 13 years ago in the CLC Anti-Racism Task Force Report: Challenging Racism that “racism weakens our solidarity and robs the labour movement of the energies and skills of union members from Aboriginal Peoples and people of colour communities” (1997, p. 1). Unfortunately, very little has changed.

Yet, emerging from the collective narrative is a sense of collective strength and outrage, and refused to be treated as victims. Robin Kelley (2002) implores us to move beyond a narrative of oppression. It is in the spirit of resistance narrative to counter the hegemonic history that we turn to the next chapter and engage in a process of envisioning on the essence of solidarity that inspires and moves us to action.

## **Chapter Seven:**

### **Envisioning Solidarity**

#### ***Introduction***

The lived experiences shared in the previous chapter reflect a deep sense of indignation and exasperation. There is also a profound sense of impatience that we cannot afford to continue at such a snail's pace on equity agenda. The question of why we are being left behind or dismissed as one trick ponies reveals a widening rift between what union solidarity could be and how it is being practiced. At the same time, we are acutely aware of the external political environment that has made it abundantly clear that there are powerful forces trying to repress and dismantle the trade union movement.

The membership of trade unions is diverse. In unionized workplaces where the rule of closed shop applies, union membership is mandatory. Voluntary participation occurs when workers in a non-unionized workplace engage in an organizing drive or when members decided to get involved in their union. To me, this is one of the significant differences between trade unions and other voluntary organizations. One wise brother of colour once told me, "we don't get to choose whom we work with; it is the employers who hire." By extension, we do not get to choose who our union brothers and sisters are. Therefore, it is false hope to expect an instantaneous transformation, a cosmic solidarity connection as soon as the member receives his or her membership card.

Given the historical and complex contours of where the labour movement is located, unpacking the layers of the notion of solidarity from an anti-colonial and anti-racism perspective can be akin to peeling the skin of an onion. In recognizing that the development of trade unions is a reflection of the broader society, this exercise of un-layering becomes a

journey to critically examine and expose what is deeply ingrained as normal practices within the labour movement. It is also an exploration to make visible the intrinsic and transformative values of solidarity that have often been buried in the myriad bureaucratic structures and practices of exclusion. In short, the values that we seek are the same values and qualities that have given the labour movement some of its finest moments.

In the following sections, I will draw on the work of labour scholars, social movement theorists, and Indigenous scholars to provide a more holistic and organic approach to the theoretical framing and envisioning of solidarity. Simultaneously, I will integrate here the diverse voices and experiences of Aboriginal activists and activists of colour who participated in the research project to reflect on how solidarity is practiced and experienced. This integrative approach of theory and practice allows for a deeper appreciation of the daily realities of trade union activists who are often invisible in the visibility of the multiple identities that make them whole.

### *Solidarity as the Spirit of the Labour Movement*

Fantasia and Voss (2004) refer to the notion of solidarity as the metaphysic of labour, and state that the collective strength and efficacy of the labour movement depends to a considerable degree, on its capacity to invoke something larger than itself.

A successful labour movement must have the capacity to rise above its corporeal or institutional form through a kind of sacred narrative, or myth, and solidarity has been a cornerstone of the foundational myth of labour movements everywhere. Solidarity represents a potent mythic theme that carries remarkably transcendent qualities. Under certain conditions and at certain moments, demonstrations of solidarity can summon powerful spiritual forces in the social world (in groups, in collective activities, and in organizational forms) that are capable of producing extraordinary degrees of selflessness and of collective identification. (p. 107)

It is this “sacred narrative” that can invoke a transformative experience and a sense of belonging for rank and file membership in their belief and commitment to collective strength. As we have seen in the history of labour struggles, the agency of this collective force comes alive when provoked, when the powerless act and resist. These empowering stories feed and reinforce the metaphysics of the movement.

For workers in collective struggles against oppression and exploitation, the solidarity extended and felt among each other goes some place deeper; it is an expression of the human spirit to stand against injustice. When Fantasia refers to solidarity as the metaphysics, it carries a mythical quality on the ‘sacredness’ of the collective narrative. There is an uncanny resemblance between this metaphysics called solidarity and the notion of spirituality as defined by Palmer: “the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos, a quest for connectedness with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of nature, and with the mystery of being alive”(1999, p. 45). Using the examples of uprisings around the globe, Palmer further poses the question of how such “powerless” people managed to foment far-reaching social change:

By drawing upon and deploying the only power of the human soul, the human spirit, the human heart. Far from being socially and politically regressive, “heart and soul” language, rightly understood is one of the most radical rhetoric we have. The invisible power of the human spirit can have at least equal impact on our cultural, individual and collective lives. The simple fact is one that our educational institutions ignore at their-and our peril. (p. 25)

While Palmer’s address was originally directed at educational institutions, I believe the same sentiment is applicable in union settings. As a social institution for the betterment of working people, union organization operates as an equalizer of power through organizing, collective bargaining, and representation in the workplace. This sense of justice and fairness

is embedded in the principles of the labour movement. There is a celebration of activist spirit within the ritual and culture of the labour movement. When we sing “Bread and Roses” to celebrate International Women’s Day, it is also a reminder that while we fight for bread, it is the justice, “the roses we fight for too.” When we form a picket line, or stand up against the boss, there is something that has struck deep in our core and gives us courage to withstand.

To me, this is the heart and soul dimension within the union movement that lifts our spirit and gives us dignity, hope, and a sense of belonging. However, much as we practice solidarity, more often than not, we have not made it visible the matter of the heart and its connection to movement building. Within the labour movement, there is almost a collective disdain to discuss the topics such as the spirit of the movement or even worse, the term spirituality. Here I want to make it very clear that I am not advocating for any faith or religious practices. Spirituality is a loaded word with a variety of definitions and connotations. Instead, I wish to advocate a return to a heart and soul perspective to illuminate the essence of the labour movement; to explore how we can collectively move away from the mindset of keeping our hearts hidden, and therefore making enemies out of each other to the extent that it undermines the strength and solidarity of the movement as a whole. Here I find Dei’s conceptualization of spirituality in the context of unequal social relations of power to be illuminating.

Spirituality is something held within the individual but transcends beyond the self to the collective. It is about knowing the self, the inner environment, and the responsibilities of that knowledge to heal the soul, spirit and the communities to which we belong. Spirituality speaks about the sanctity of life, the acknowledgement of a deep sense of knowing, and the community. (Dei, 2008, p. 74)

For workers of colour and Aboriginal workers who are activists in the labour movement, I find great resonance in Njoki Wane's stance on spirituality as an anti-colonial discourse: "Spirituality may be understood as a process of struggle, a way of self-recovery and the path to follow in order to become whole and liberated. In other words, spirituality lies at the heart of being human" (2006, p. 90).

The matter of heart in the movement is what has kept activists of colour and Aboriginal activists going and not giving up. In that respect, to engage in acts of decolonizing our mindsets and building communities of resistance can be regarded metaphorically as a form of spiritual practice, a way to integrate the wholeness of our complex individual being into a political practice of "an action-oriented, revolutionary spirituality" as Dei passionately puts forth.

This approach will move beyond the liberal focus on compassion, humility and caring to discussing how we can evoke spirituality and spiritual knowledge to transform society and to challenge oppressive systems and structures. This approach thus focuses on questions of power and domination and the role of spirituality in strengthening and empowering the self and the collective, in order to resist marginality. (2008, p. 75)

Within a culture of dominance, there is no room and recognition for alternate ways of knowing. For Aboriginal workers who are subjects of an ongoing colonization project and workers of colour, often from colonized nations, attention to nurturing the heart and spirit is an active form of decolonizing our own mindset, a form of active resistance. In this lifelong project of decolonizing our own individual and collective psyche, we draw on our deepest and core resource: the sense of our own being and spirit. That inner fortress is often the most durable and resilient to the forces of the dominant and the colonizer, and therefore, it is also our own sanctuary. The spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of the labour movement speak

to an emotive energy, an invisible force that motivates people to march in unison. The interconnectedness among members is a formidable force to be reckoned with.

My union CUPE Local 59 went on strike in the winter of 1980. We were all requested to be on picket line to order to collect strike pay. I don't want to be seen on the street with the signs in my hand, so I asked to be assigned for other duties. I delivered donuts and coffee to the outlying areas. After a month, there was a big rally. Reluctantly I went there. In came busloads of people, food and coffee. My first reaction was how we were going to pay for all these buses and food. I went to speak to my chair and asked. He told me these were members from Regina and elsewhere who came to show their support. This is solidarity... when we are in trouble; we help each other in our fight. I was so moved that it almost brought tears to my eyes. Afterwards, I took the responsibility of picket captain, and held every position in the local. Solidarity is brotherhood and sisterhood, an injury to one is an injury to all. In time of need, we need to support each other and band together. That to me is solidarity and we will fight till our last drop. (Interview transcript C104, April 23, 2009)

The transformation of Tam from being just a reluctant striking member to a strike captain and then later on to holding every position in the local, is an empowering tale and a reminder of the strength in numbers. The powerful sense of solidarity that moved this towering man to tears is echoed by the recounting of another picket line experience by Pam. The sense of solidarity felt on the picket line has been replicated and magnified a thousand fold as this activist continues to walk the talk.

When we had the lockout in Holiday Inn on King, a few workers picketing, CUPE was having their convention at the Convention Centre and it was arranged that they would come by. When the time came, they were delayed. The media were there and we were anxious that they have not showed. I

remember all of a sudden hearing the echo way down the street as the group coming up. At that moment, I cried. It was seeing the faces of the workers from different parts of Canada and knowing that they are there as one to support my union and the strikers. At that moment, you feel you belong to something bigger. *It is different unions but we are union.* (Interview transcript C108, October 17, 2009)

This is what motivates us to do more and what sustains us. Below is Kim's narrative on how she got involved.

I came to the labour movement through the back door, through my passion for folk music, heard Pete Seeger in a folk festival and through the music found an affinity, and got hooked on union history. When I first got involved, I thought the union and activism came as one package. That wasn't the case that was a shock. It took a while for me to recognize and accept that the worldview is not shared.

Solidarity means that it is not about individuals. We care for each other by doing so. We recognize the different experiences that each of us brings in when we can totally abandon the sense of individualism. It is a struggle getting involved in the labour movement in this "Me" decade. I am an adopted child with 3 other sisters and they don't share the same value. I often wonder that *it might be bred in the bone!* (Interview transcript A102, April 23, 2009)

The following narrative, an analogy of trade unionism as faith, from an Ugandan trade union leader speaks to the sense of solidarity as mythical matter.<sup>14</sup> To be in the company of this orator recounting his union stories is akin to a spiritual experience.

Trade union solidarity is really where an injury to one is an injury to all; and a benefit to one should be a benefit to all. Trade unionism has been elevated to a

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<sup>14</sup> I met Brother Joseph, the African Region Coordinator of ICTU at the World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya.

level of faith, I believe in it so much. From an ordinary mechanic, I've been trained, nurtured by resources contributed by others (my father passed away at the age of 9). I've been arrested, tortured, and detained, I remain faithful to the labour movement.

There is one practical example of solidarity that I would always remember. In 1987, when corruption was its highest, I was the chief shop steward of a group of 1700 bus company workers. The company's manager defrauded and tried to blame it on the leadership of the union. On that particular afternoon at 4.45 pm, we as the leadership of the union were arrested on a concocted story of fraud. At 5.15 pm, there was a countrywide strike. This shocked the company president.

We were in police cell for 21 days and the workers kept vigil day and night outside the police station. They were shouting, "I won't leave without my shop steward." When the management tried to order them back to work, they would say, "You've cut our head off, we don't have ears to hear!" When the Company finally dropped the charges, the workers ordered a bus procession to pick all the leaders up. We sang solidarity forever and we went around the city before we went back to work.

The arrest solidified the union. I used to address them every week to mold the family feeling. When workers have the union at work, they know what to do. The members pushed for a union office in the workplace. They decided to put 5 shillings each week to the union office. At the end of 2 months, we raised enough money to put up the office. They got to work and it was ready in 2 weeks...painted with our logo. I still remember the day of the official opening, with all the music and festivities, no one including the management could miss it. People were so proud that they continued the deduction for the hiring of a secretary. We had enough money to deal with the complaints. Workers demanded intercom and got it. You could feel the worker power.

Everything to them was not impossible. There was a feeling of togetherness, a level of belief and commitment. Sharing creates solidarity. When workers are

powerful, they can do everything...and they are doing it with love and volunteerism. There is a strong sense that 'you're now home. You're in the Union!' Trade unionism is like faith. I can't abandon it. You cannot defeat trade unionists. (Interview transcript, January 27, 2007)

To recover what is lost is to reclaim a space that welcomes the heart and soul, and recognizes its role in building trust and solidarity. Within the labour movement, it is in the marches, on the picket line that we feel the rhythm of the march and the fierce spirit of the labour movement.

The spirit of the labour movement is what my mother has once told me driving across the Burlington Skyway: ***When we march, we are stepping on the heads of our oppressors; and when we sing as one, we are drowning out the voice of our oppressors. It is the rhythm of our march that will break the bridge!***" (Ita Sadhu)<sup>15</sup>

To me, it is this indomitable human spirit that will continue to rise above the daily challenges in search of 'the rhythm of the march' that is so empowering. It is in such transformative experiences that ordinary people experience transformation propelling them to take extraordinary actions.

### ***Solidarity as Consciousness in Action***

In his earlier work exploring the cultures of solidarity through industrial actions and strikes, Fantasia (1988) refers to solidarity as 'consciousness-in-association':

Solidarity is created and expressed by the process of mutual association...although workers may not be poised to make revolution, they may in certain activities express a consciousness that, though short of the will

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<sup>15</sup>

Storyteller and community activist, Interview done on January 18, 2010.

or capability to make revolution, represents a transformative associational bonding that can shape class relations in significant ways. (p. 11)

In this respect, solidarity is not measured in individual workers' own response or attitudes towards working class consciousness, but through participation and interactions in collective actions that have the potential to transform and create something larger and revolutionary. Grounded in Marxist analysis, Fantasia asserts that for workers to break away from the isolation and alienation imposed by the capitalist society and engage in a conscious collective action is itself "a most revolutionary act for it changes both the reality and the workers themselves. He further argues that the transformation of workers from individual to collective subjectivity underpins the revolutionary potential. Fantasia also observes that the emergence of solidarity among workers occurs when their relative degree of independence within the workplace structure designed to control them is disrupted and undermined:

A routine, bureaucratic system has been imposed to channel conflict and sharply limit worker solidarity, and cultures of solidarity will thus tend to emerge only when workers or employers circumvent routine channels and workers seek, or are forced to rely on their mutual solidarity as the basis for their power. (p. 238)

It is almost instinctive that once workers feel that their rights or job security have been unjustly violated, they break their usual norm of interactions and seek out allies. I am reminded of a powerful slogan and graphic depiction of a serpent on the famous Canadian Postal Workers Union (CUPW) T shirt: ***"When provoked, we will strike!"***

In North American labour history, there are inspiring examples of working class solidarity as expressed through strikes, protests, and demonstrations to resist the oppression and demand social justice. For example, the origin of May 1st as International Workers Day

was introduced to commemorate the eight workers who died in the Haymarket Square in Chicago demanding an 8-hour working day. The march of women workers protesting the death of workers in the Triangle factory fire in 1918 sparked the first women's march that put forward economic justice and gender equality. The song Bread and Roses was inspired by that march and it became the anthem that signifies the women's struggles.

There are many other keystone moments in labour history that have served to inspire workers to mobilize against injustice. In Canada, the 1919 General Strike of Winnipeg was a testimony of workers' collective action and courage to put their tools down. The Trek to Ottawa in the 1930s was initiated and organized by unemployed workers as a desperate response to expose the intolerable conditions in the work camp set up by the government during the recession. The 1980 protest rally of 100,000 workers on the wage and price control in Ottawa was built on that history.

In Ontario, the Harris government came to power in 1995 and within the first 100 days in office, repealed the employment equity legislation, eliminated the automatic certification, and unleashed an anti-labour agenda. Organized labour and community partners in 13 communities across the province staged city and community strikes and protest rallies from February 1996 to September 1996. The inclusion of community partners in these Days of Action was probably the last large scale mobilization in recent Canadian labour history. It is important to note that when an injustice is recognized by a critical mass and mobilizes them to say, "Enough is enough," the actions become the meeting ground for community and labour to join forces and express their outrage.

In the 2009 recession, 2,400 non-unionized auto-parts workers organized a 16-day, 24/7 blockade against the largest employer in the city of Vaughan, Progressive Moulded

Products (PMP). Individually, these non-unionized workers who are predominately immigrant workers and workers of colour would probably never dream that they would ever dare to stand up to the police and the corporate elite. Various unions had attempted organizing drives and lost.<sup>16</sup> However, when the employer circumvented its legal responsibility by filing for bankruptcy protection, and closing down all its facilities suddenly on the Canada Day (July 1) holiday weekend, the workers felt humiliated and violated. Workers were owed an estimated \$30 million in severance and termination pay, They got together outside the plant and responded by taking the drastic action of a blockade without any union backing and resource. This powerful manifestation of consciousness in action emerged as a result of a sudden and secretive plant closure.

The sense that they had nothing to lose served as a liberating catalyst and the basis for their power. The collective agency and militancy was so inspiring that it caught the attention of the media as well as garnered support from the labour movement. The transformation and solidarity among workers on the picket line during those 2 weeks is a testament and a reminder for activists of the incredible capacity for movement building when workers' rage is transformed into action. It is in these moments that I am moved by the spirit of generosity and hope that comes through in the actions of this group of workers. Their actions have become the catalyst for the latest round of changes in the Federal Wage Earning Compensation program where termination and severance will be deemed as part of the compensatory earnings for which workers can file. Even though they themselves will not benefit from such changes, workers who face similar closure situations in March 2009 will be able to access such compensation.

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<sup>16</sup> According to the workers, management would order pizza for workers every time after a union lost the vote. Now looking back, the workers joke about the fact that each of their vote was only worth a slice of pizza.

In building on Fantasia's (1988) culture of solidarity that is based on a collective consciousness in action and an "embodiment of oppositional practices and meanings" (p. 17), it is critical to make explicit the notion of rage in motivating workers to act. The sense of individual and collective agency in particular among non-dominant group members, is a powerful force to reckon with. The worker activists from PMP who took a stand encouraged others to do the same. By their immeasurable strength and collective act of defiance, they created synergy where people came together for a cause and were able to act as one. That is solidarity in action.

The Chinese character of the word rage / anger is pronounced as *luo*, and it is a powerful symbol. The character is made up of two separate words: *slaves* and *the heart*.



Slaves  
(female is embedded in the root)

plus

the Heart / awareness /  
consciousness

**Figure 1. Chinese character for rage / anger.**

Rage is when slaves are aware of their conditions, when their hearts can feel the depth of the oppression, when the conscious self begins to demand change. Rage is that moment of clarity of clenched fists (Merrifield, 2003).

Such rage is different from victimization; rather it is an act of self-love and self-preservation. bell hooks speaks of “constructive healing rage” (2009, p. 92) and considers it as a fundamental component of decolonization. It allows one to intimately understand that rage has not only the potential to destroy but also to reconstruct. Rage can be the catalyst for inspiring actions to challenge the status quo as Dei astutely observes that “change does not happen in moments of comfort and complacency” (Dei, 2008, p. 78).

Rage being part of the catalyst to change the system is also best illustrated in union organizing drives when workers feel their rights and dignity have been violated. When

workers sign a union card during an organizing drive, they are giving active consent to joining a collective challenge against the existing imbalance of power and inequality in their own workplace. It is often out of a sense of rage and indignation. More often than not, their primary concern is not wage increases or other monetary benefits, but to assert their rights, to stop being “treated like second class citizens.” This is particularly true for equity seeking groups who just wish to be treated with respect and dignity, and be able to work in a workplace free of harassment. The concept of solidarity comes from the recognition that there is strength in numbers and in the principle as expressed in the slogan: “*Collectively, we bargain; individually, we beg!*”

One particular organizing drive best illustrates rage as the fuel for collective action by workers. Unicell, an auto part plant of 200 workers was located in a quiet street near Laird and Eglinton Avenues in Toronto. The workforce was predominately made up of two groups: Chinese-speaking refugee workers from Vietnam, and Spanish-speaking refugee workers from Latin America. The Canadian Auto Workers Union (CAW) initiated an organizing drive in the early 1980s and I became involved as a volunteer interpreter. The Company was taking advantage of these immigrant workers by switching labels on the oil drums and all sorts of health and safety violations occurred. The racism in the workplace was rampant. I recall an older and well-respected worker, Mr. Tran sharing the incident that sparked the organizing drive.

One day, after working there for 5 years without a raise, he finally gathered enough courage to go up to the boss to ask for a raise. The owner mockingly said to him in front of all his co-workers, “With your English, you’re worth only a two-cent raise!” Literally, in his next pay-cheque, Mr. Tran received his two-cent raise. He was so enraged and humiliated

that he became one of the most active inside organizers and the first organizing meeting for the Chinese workers took place in his living room. When Mr. Tran was recounting his story, people listened intensely and their body language revealed a shared sense of the injustices. It was a moment of new consciousness-in-action emerged among the workers present when they realized that they were all Mr. Trans and it was up to them to stop this injustice. It transformed the dynamics of the room and erased any ambivalence among the workers about joining a union. From that point forward, the same sentiment was shared and extended to the Spanish-speaking workers. The drive turned into a wild fire and the workers never look back.

Such a collective and often, silent pact among the workers starts with witnessing each other signing union cards before management can find out prematurely is very much an act of solidarity where workers place their trust in each other and share, in an unspoken promise that we will not betray each other. In that regard, solidarity is walking the talk for miles together until we win.

Boswell, Brown, Brueggemann, and Peters, Jr. (2006), writing about the pattern of union organizing drives of the early days of the U.S. labour movement, conclude that,

In a society such as ours – one rooted in a deeply racist past and one that generates ongoing inequalities in the present – interracial solidarity is an uncommon and fragile phenomenon...it only develops when institutional, political, and labour market conditions are all aligned to promote cooperation across racial lines. Once obtained, solidarity is easily disrupted and can be difficult to restore. (p. 196)

They further assert that the formation of interracial solidarity is determined by several diverse factors including the strength of the union, the racist paternalism on the part of the employer and immigration patterns. The unionization drive of Unicell workers and the conditions under which the interracial class solidarity was formed serves to illustrate this

key insight. The notion of racist paternalism was revealed in the employer's patronizing attitude towards this group of immigrant and refugee workers. The employer would often claim that he made an extra effort to provide additional support and services to members of his staff family such as writing letters to the Department of Immigration in support of workers who were trying to sponsor their family members to come to Canada. The employer considered the unionization drive as a huge betrayal. As a result, the company's retaliation was swift and vicious. The management responses cemented the inter-racial class solidarity that was truly tested during the bargaining process after the organizing victory. The management was so vindictive that the first contract negotiation ended only after a prolonged 10-month strike. Whether it is workers forming a blockade or standing up against racist, paternalistic employers, their action is an expression of a common goal to stand up against economic and racial injustices, an act of solidarity that generates a heightened sense of agency and leaves a lasting imprint among these workers.

### *Solidarity is About All Relations*

We don't have a word for solidarity in Mohawk, we call it the good mind. When we gather together, we are there with our good mind. Solidarity in Iroquois is being in the good mind all the time and being able to make collective decision and act as One. (Interview transcript A101, November 9, 2009)

A different frame for the concept of solidarity comes from an Indigenous world view where we are all related but not all the same. The capacity and desire to act as one by being in "a good mind" is a powerful image of unity, of the collective. The notion of constantly

being in the good mind is the secret weapon. Tim's explanation on solidarity from Mohawk Nation is complimented by that of Dawn who is from Anishnaabe Nation.

There is no specific word for solidarity as it is defined in the English language, however there is a term that means "all things together, everything in existence" (*kaawin piiwitekaataken kitanishinaapemowin*). For Anishnaabe, solidarity is not limited to people which makes perfect sense when you think about it. Everything and everyone is interconnected, each affecting one another. Therefore Anishnaabe's view of "self" ultimately includes all of creation. (Interview transcript A104, April 21, 2009)

These two Aboriginal participants from different heritages illuminate a notion of solidarity and the interconnections and relation building among human beings and nature. The universality of extending the same type of care and compassion to the earth, water, and creatures around us is an expression of solidarity. We are responsible for all and must be good stewards and caretakers. Framing solidarity in the broadest sense possible according to the Anishnaabe' view has the potential to scale back our own sense of self-importance and egos. "Man" is not the centre of the universe when everything and everyone has a place that is recognized and acknowledged (Beaucage, 2009). The nurturing of a renewed sense of humility and collectivity will be instrumental to counter the individualistic and monolithic culture and practices of the neoliberal agenda of homogenization.

The inspiring vision of acting as One not just within one union, but for the whole is poignantly illustrated in the following story, the Three Sisters, as shared by another Aboriginal activist. The collectivity, the interdependence, and the equal sharing of roles and responsibilities are the key ingredients for the richness that can emerge from such solidarity.

### **The Three Sisters**

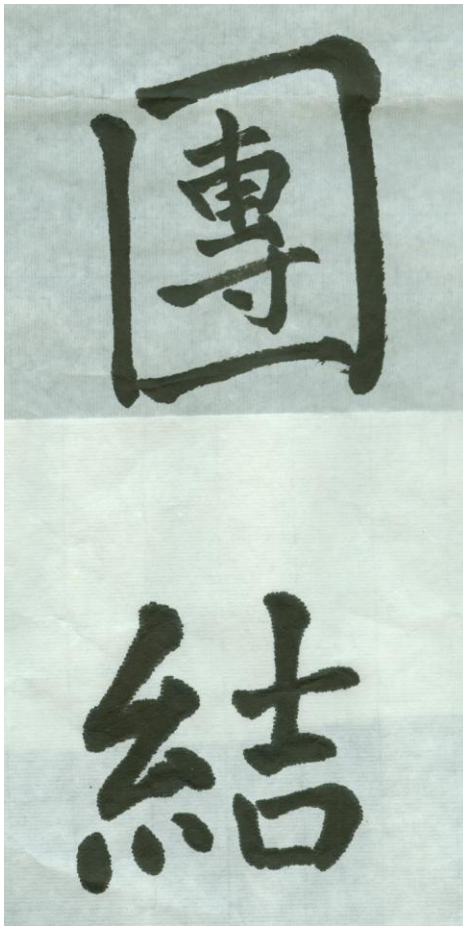
Corn, beans and squash are companions; they help each other by maximizing growing conditions for one another. The corn, tall and firm, grows in the centre of a circular bed and serves as a support for climbing pole beans. The beans fix nitrogen in the soil, important for nitrogen loving, heavy feeding corn. The squash surrounds the corn and beans and covers the ground, serving to hold moisture in the soil, and the prickles on the squash stems act as repellant to pests such as hungry raccoons.

In late spring, we plant the corn and beans and squash. They're not just plants – we call them the “three sisters.” We plant them together, three kinds of seeds in one hole. They want to be together with each other, just as we Indians want to be together with each other. So long as the three sisters are with us, we know we will never starve. The Creator sends them to us each year. We celebrate them now. (Chief Louis Farmer, Onondaga)

In essence, solidarity is about relationships. In referring to the context of global cooperation, Waterman defines solidarity as “an active process of negotiating differences, or creating identity” (2001, p. 236). Given the inequalities within the labour movement and the larger society, there is cause to pause and wonder whether it is really about negotiating differences in order to forge a new identity. Furthermore, recognizing the unequal power relations and the dominance of some over the others, the question is whether such new identity will break down the hierarchies of power distribution. The more appropriate conclusion might be that it is merely an exercise in minimizing differences in order to ensure that the identity of the dominant group will prevail. The challenge of creating new relations is more than a simultaneous process of negotiating differences and forging new identities. The story of the Three Sisters speaks to the interconnectedness of all relations and the potential of abundance when solidarity is truly practiced.

*Solidarity as Transformative Moments*

**Solidarity in Chinese is made up of and expressed in the following two characters:**



Single focus with a protective wall, regiment

Weaving and making knots

**Figure 2. Chinese characters for solidarity.**

Making knots with a single focus is an unbreakable force. Making knots can sometimes take place in large labour industrial actions and sometimes, small acts of solidarity transform a member to an activist. It can be an immigrant woman who has experienced racial harassment from management and wishes to file a grievance, and the shop steward who reaffirms her right to grieve. The knot is made stronger in that moment when someone is finally listening and believing her story. The sense of relief and acknowledgment

will go a long way in building her sense of belonging within the local. She is no longer invisible but is part of a chain of knots.

I have come to see that the notion of solidarity helps with the process of making meaning. It is what gives workers the sense of belonging, the sense of being part of a collectivity. In Robert Penney's (2006) research, he sites two different unionization paths of health workers in two comparable hospitals with similar workplace histories, cultural practices, and institutional structures struggling to cope with the new realities of the health care industry. In the complexity of reclaiming the lost sense of family in the workplace and the moral economy of the workplace, workers see the union as a venue to recreate family. In the organizing campaigns, both union and management were attempting to control the contested terrain of meaning. In one hospital, the union was able to incorporate the family ethos:

Contrasting understandings of solidarity and unionism grew out of a dynamic blend of culture and agency. On the one hand, shared beliefs, historical patterns of relating to others and longstanding ways of conferring meaning on those social relations provided the interpretive resources for rationizing and engaging in collective action. On the other hand, individual agency, discretion, and interpretive work put those resources to work under specific conditions...workers more specifically, bring with them structured experiences and collective stories that shape the contour of what can happen and how events can be understood. Then, participants further shape the debates about collective action through their own deeds. (p. 198)

Solidarity is neither static nor linear with a blue print, but rather a dynamic interplay of structure, culture, and agency in constructing meaning for workers to engage in collective action. What is instructive to the labour movement is that there is no single way of cultivating union solidarity, but what is critical is to create opportunities for coming together, where those moments of consciousness in action can emerge.

In this regard, I will go further than Fantasia by suggesting that it is not just in collective, mass actions such as strikes or industrial actions where solidarity is constructed. Rather, it is in the daily interaction and the practices in the workplace and union that workers can get a glimpse of what is possible and what it means to be part of a union. It is what Elaine Bernard has referred to as the transformative moments:

Unions are something you really need to experience to fully appreciate. And becoming an activist in a union, and learning about the power of collective action and solidarity, is a transformative experience. For the Canadian labour movement to have a future, we need to think about how to make sure that a new generation of Canadian workers gets to experience that transformation. (2006, p. 7)

In framing that powerful sense of solidarity as a transformative experience, Bernard has put forth a challenge for the labour movement. What are the conditions that are required to construct and nurture those moments of transformation, moments that move workers from being just card-carrying members to activists?

In my years of organizing in the community and the labour movement, I have always looked for ways to create those “light-bulb” moments where community or union members can take ownership of an issue and move from a perspective of self-interest to recognition of a collective power to act. There is nothing more inspiring than to hear rank and file members begin to switch from saying “I” to saying “We.” Therein lies the strength of solidarity and the power of the union.

One of those precious moments of transformation happened among a group of downtown hotel room attendants, all women of colour and members of HERE Local 75. As a new representative, I visited the workplace every other day during their lunch hour. On that particular day in early December 2006, as I stepped into the staff cafeteria, I was confronted

by a group of angry room attendants. They had just received a letter from the management advising them of the number of vacation days and vacation pay that they had accumulated to date. To say there was a miscalculation would be the greatest understatement. The workers were enraged that the management was using a new vacation banking system to cheat them of their vacation pay just when they were making their holiday plans. The running themes were “I’ve worked so hard and now that’s how they are going to cheat me. What’s the union going to do about it?” “What am I paying union dues for? For nothing...!” In the midst of the yelling, I reviewed a couple of letters and then turned to the group and said, “What are you going to do? What can we do together to make management know that they have made a mistake? Remember you, the members, are the union. They stared back at me in a brief moment of total silence before the shouting began again. It was a sense of disbelief and deep seated mistrust that nothing was going to happen. I pulled out some grievance forms and started asking people to come forward. That was when the hard work of internal organizing and relation building began.

Over the course of the next few days and several meetings, we ended up filing over 40 individual and group grievances and selected a couple of spokespersons from the group to attend the grievance meeting. When the first step of grievance was denied, the room attendants started saying, “We need to do something else!” They started their internal network by getting some of their co-workers from other departments to support the idea of a picket line. We organized a picket line after work on December 28, 2006, and the *Toronto Star* covered the story. The campaign was gathering momentum and causing embarrassment for the management. At the end, the hotel settled with full monetary compensation 6 months later. Throughout that period, the members started gradually to view the union in a different

light. To sustain their sense of belonging with the union, we proposed the idea of setting up a union choir so workers could get together at the union hall once a week. The idea was so warmly embraced that the women members started to recruit others to join. One of the key spokespersons became the shop steward, and the group became the core members of the HERE Local 75 Choir performing songs of struggles in different union events. To this day, many of the core group members remain strong activists within their hotel.

The instructive piece in that experience is that collectively as a group of room attendants—all women of colour—they took on the management, began to feel more empowered, gained self-respect, and respect from co-workers. In the words of Pam who became a shop steward, agency stemmed from the shared action of breaking the silence:

I was at YYY for 17 years. For a long while, I didn't even understand or feel that there's a union in the place. Going in, struggling to survive the workload, to survive the mean management, seeing the disrespect from management and feeling that we deserve better. It's not ok to do work, getting disrespect, getting crap on and going home feeling crappy...during the time, we had problem with vacation, management was stealing our vacation money. Talking to the people, mobilizing them to fight for that money, I see people's respect for me, and for the union. It got me thinking that it might make sense to get involved.

It wasn't just about getting more money. It is anger that built up and felt beaten up over the years, watching management beating down on co-workers, the anger of knowing that we deserve better. For me, I keep thinking back, back to the time when I was a little girl, I watched my father, how he would fight for neighbours to make sure they were fed. When I'm in the hotel, these are my family. There shouldn't be a day that I'll allow management to disrespect the workers. The silence was broken in the hotel. We started standing up for our rights. (Interview transcript C108, October 17, 2009)

That transformative moment for the workers to turn their rage to action, from silence to voicing, and from I to WE is also very much the motivating force behind the personal and collective mobilizing work against injustice and oppression.

### *Solidarity as Collective Identity*

A union is not simply getting enough workers to stage a strike. A union is building a group with a spirit and an existence all its own...a union must be built around the idea that people must do things by themselves in order to help themselves.

Cesar Chavez (as cited in Ganz, 2009, p. 121)

The clarity in Chavez's statement is in his belief in the power of the people to build, to lead, and to be accountable to each other. The union becomes a site of practice in democracy and solidarity building. It is in the collective working where individuals exercise their right as full participating members with voice and vote, and merge to form something new and different. In recounting the Great Delano Grape strike of 1977, Ganz encapsulates the transformative changes for both individual and collective identities:

The depth of commitment of the individuals who chose this collective enterprise – to each other, to their goals, and to their own values- inspired a new understanding of who they were, what they would be, and where they were going. The striker community became crucible of cultural change in which all was in flux. Old identities melted down and merged into new individual and collective identities. (2009, p. 165)

The new collective identity is what gives life and purpose in the union organization and its membership. It is the merging of individual selves that provides the impetus for something more meaningful, democratic, and authentic.

Pateman in her 1970 classic work on participatory theory of democracy draws on the analysis of workers' participation in different industrial settings, and concludes that the more

individuals participate, the more they develop their sense of political efficacy which will enable them to further engage in other levels of the decision-making process and the wider political sphere. The participatory environment becomes a sphere of socialization, not only enhancing individual's sense of efficacy to participate, but also reinforcing that of others in the group. Through that process of reciprocity, the structure might also be effective in diminishing tendencies toward non-democratic attitudes in the individual.

The more we can create a participatory union environment, the more members will participate. It becomes a transformative process that will generate a deeper sense of efficacy and belonging. The union local becomes the community of practice and place where most of the informal learning for members takes place. Informal learning that permeates through osmosis, social interaction, and modeling, is unintentional, unconscious, and often leads to powerful democratic practices.

Unions retain important functions for democracy and have dual roles as both economic and democratic actors within society and the workplace. Workplace democracy and workers' democratic participation rights in the workplace are intrinsically linked to the question of union presence in their workplaces. Unions in industrial democracies are still one of the strongest interest associations where citizens 'bowl together' and this performs an important democratic function (Fairbrother & Yates, 2003). This begs the follow up question, "Who gets to 'bowl together' with whom."

### *Solidarity as an Ethic of Deep Respect*

Mohanty's feminist solidarity model (2006) is instructive as it stresses the importance of mutuality and co-responsibility in framing the fundamental of solidarity rather than the

physical or geographical borders that we need to cross. She argues against a hastily derived notion of “universal sisterhood” (p. 120) that assumes a commonality of gender experience across race and national lines:

I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here –to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances. (p. 7)

Mohanty’s definition of solidarity is grounded in a political and an ethical goal of mutuality and recognition of common interests. The same parallel on labour solidarity that assumes a commonality of class experience across race, gender, and national lines is equally problematic. In the labour movement, where the common bond among members is based on the sameness of experiences with the employer, the assumption of universality of worker solidarity erases the historical experiences, location, and struggles of women and racialized workers. The complexity of our historical and positional differences in the context of colonization and dominance needs to be taken into account.

By giving attention to power, each historical experience illuminates the experiences of the others. Thus, the focus is not just the intersections of race, class, gender, nation and sexuality in different communities of women but on the mutuality and co-implication on the individual and collective experiences of oppression and exploitations and of struggles and resistance. (2006, p. 242)

Mohanty’s model of mutuality and co-implication is hard work that requires ongoing critical self-reflection, humility and a long-term political vision of dismantling the existing power structures. It is not an add-and-stir approach which is the common approach to diversity and equity issue. The instantaneous notion of such an approach provides a false assumption as if only we could blend it through a quick add-and-stir, the problem itself will

be dissolved. The co-implication model is therefore an examination on the interconnectedness, the links between women from different spheres and locations of power. If we apply this approach to the labour movement and broader social movement building, the key then is not the sameness of our experiences, but recognition of the common struggles and the root causes. Such mutuality and co-implication on each other's struggles is the key to alliances and social movement building. One of the participants, Ana, a woman of colour who began her activism in the feminist movement and later became involved in the labour movement, shared her experiences and insights during a contract negotiation session

True solidarity is being able to look beyond yourself as an individual, being able to work collectively on a goal that is bigger than your own, working alongside, not just togetherness. What we will bring to the work might be different, could be across identities as allies, to think strategically the environment, the timing, the conditions and strategically plan your work, understanding that it doesn't mean one is more important than other. I think about the work crossing labour and women's movements. I think about the trauma first suffered by the women's movement when we wanted to evolve into a more inclusive movement, and then the strength and power that we managed to muster and share even for a little while. Just for that journey, it was very empowering. The solidarity moment came when NAC women and labour women joined force and supported a more integrated approach. It goes back to the notion of competing. We are fighting for a piece of a piece of the pie, it's not even for the whole pie. All of us receive a small portion, rather than looking at the whole pie.

There was a moment [when] I was bargaining in 1997, we received the employer's proposal and one of them was around seniority, that it be waived when representation of diversity is not attained at 30%. In order to maintain a representative workforce, strict seniority will not apply. The Union Rep

perceived it as an attack on trade union values –seniority is sacred and can't be touched. I was being lectured by the Rep our side of the table was not in agreement. It was a wake up moment as this was about barrier free equity representation. The union seniority could be a barrier. I managed to convince the other two bargaining unit members, two White women. One of my arguments was, "What if this is a male dominated workforce? What if you make the analogy of racial domination to the gender domination, should the principle of 'last hired, first fired' apply?" It's almost as if a light goes on and the two sisters were on side. (Interview transcript C105, April 23, 2009)

Her revelation on solidarity as seeing beyond the individual self for the greater good of movement and alliance building is truly inspiring. The strategic alliance and solidarity ethic illuminated in the above examples possesses two ingredients for movement building: honesty and responsibility.

From my experiences working within different community and labour coalitions, movement building is hard work. It takes commitment to stay on course, humility to listen when we disagree, and the grace to share more of our space and less of our egos. It also takes time to nurture and the need to accommodate and forgive each other's idiosyncrasies.

One of the key ingredients is honesty, which comes only with respect for each other. My first experience in coalition building came in the early 1980s when a group of women of colour came together after a series of police shootings targeting Black men, and deportation of Caribbean domestic workers, and the lack of inclusion within the broader women's movement. The idea of a coalition for women of colour began to cement. It was an exciting time in the founding of a coalition of visible minority women on the principle that sexism and racism are wings of the same bird of oppression. We were trying to invite the Aboriginal activists to join or at least we had assumed they would be part of this new coalition. I still

remember vividly what Ivy Chaske, one of the key activists said to the group in one of those early organizing meetings in the early 1980s:

**We are not immigrants or refugees, we are the first people of this land.  
We cannot be part of this coalition, but we will be allies and be there for  
each other.**

The clarity of the message was not lost among all of us. It became a catalyst for a series of workshops led by Ivy and other Aboriginal women activists to share the experiences of colonialism and prompted us also to reflect on our own role.

The other experience of trust and responsibility took place in 2001 during the Quebec Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) summit protest. It was probably one of the most powerful moments of solidarity that I have had the privilege to experience. On the Friday before the big march which was organized by the Quebec host committee which included the Quebec Federation of Labour and other social partners, the students planned to march from the University of Quebec which was at least 10 km away from the downtown core to the secured area where the Summit was taking place. The mile-long barbed wire fence that cordoned off the conference centre was the lightning rod, the line in the sand that symbolized the dividing line that separated the powerful elite, capitalists, and the anti-riot squad from the protesters.

The labour contingent of approximately 4,000 marched out from the big tent. We coordinated with the student contingent. As we came to the tent, the labour contingent stopped at every intersection, sat on the pavement, chanted, and got up to march another block. Led by the leadership of affiliates and the international guests, it was a high-spirited

march with pedestrians cheering for those brief moments when all other political differences were immaterial.

We timed it so well that the labour and student contingents reached the intersection at the same time. To first hearing students' chanting from a distant murmur to a roaring cry and see them approaching will forever be one of my goose-bump moments, a moment of solidarity building. The two contingents merged, and our voices blended into roaring cheers for each other. I recall standing in that intersection corner and shouting to our labour contingent, "to the left, to the fence." As we watched the labour, student, and community activists marched up the slope in unison despite the risk of tear gas and militia, my heart swelled with pride and love for our collective movement.

The responsibility on our part came as organized labour when several of us stayed behind after the marches to do jail solidarity, to bail out the young student activists who were arrested during the protests throughout the weekend. Going into a jail cell along with the chaplain and an activist of United Steel Workers (USW) to speak to one of the young activists who refused to give her name is one of those memorable and surreal experiences. The co-responsibility also stems from a place of mutual trust that we would not abandon each other and watch each other's back.

In November 2008, when over 1,000 people gathered at the Metro Convention Centre in Toronto for the historic gathering of the Good Jobs for All Summit, in all its diversity, colours, and vibrancy, it was a moment of rekindling and a moment of hope. It represented a different form of coming together for labour and community. It represented a different way of building solidarity and movement building that is grounded on a vision of social and racial justice. It is learning to walk together for the long haul, not just when we as labour need

bodies to show the diversity or our links, or when community groups need us for resources. It is also taking the time to listen to each other, to have the grace and humility to wrestle difficult questions about integrating equality and equity, to have healthy debates knowing that we will come out stronger at the end of the meeting. It requires us to be allies for each other; it also requires us to share less of our egos and more of our space. Coalition building is not an instant noodle soup syndrome, it takes hard work and time to build the trust and respect required to act as one.

In deepening our understanding of solidarity as an ethic, I turn to Childs' (2003) vision of transcommunality that is grounded in an ethic of deep respect. In this regard, solidarity is an ethic of deep respect that will take into account what makes us unique and at the same time, what the communal element is. Within the labour movement, our organizing strategies needs to be grounded in a holistic approach and an ethic of respect to engage diverse communities in a process of empowerment, and not just for the pragmatic reasons of dues and membership enhancement. Diverse workers and communities carry with them multidimensional identities and the holistic approach will be to treat them as whole, not just during the organizing drive, but throughout their time as union members so through the union, they can be made whole and find belonging.

### *Solidarity as an Act of Love*

In conceptualizing solidarity as an expression of love, the notion of community and collectiveness is very much integrated. Within the labour movement, when we address each other as “brothers” and “sisters,” it intimates a sense of family, a sense of community, and a sense of strength. Labour movement in its finest hour is a community of like-minded

individuals who share a deep sense of justice and find purpose in their collective actions.

Implicit in that notion of family and community is a bond of love that is beyond the normal definition of romantic love. In the context of a patriarchal and capitalist system, the image of labour movement is one of toughness and masculinity, and yet paradoxically, the core values of the labour movement are grounded in the essence of justice and the ethics of love.

hooks argues that the only way to foster true solidarity is to return to the love ethic. In claiming love as the common and prevailing essence in earlier liberation movement, she forcefully deepens the connection between love and social justice:

Love is profoundly political. Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth...the transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change...love is the heart of the matter, When all else has fallen away, love sustains. (2001, pp. 16-17)

For hooks, love is what gives people courage to resist, and love ethic for justice is like the thread that weaves the movements together. I draw a lot of strength and inspiration from these two words “*love sustains;*” the concept is powerful and simple. I also recognize the challenges to put this in practice within labour leadership and activists who have been so conditioned to react from a standpoint of rage, and a practice of never examining our own privileges and never showing our vulnerabilities. In the artificial constructing of a community of shared interests as an exploited class, we have expediently glossed over the differences and dominance of race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, religion. We have consciously and inadvertently colluded with the dominant and the elite in scaffolding ‘the pyramid of interconnecting powers. This commitment to solidarity we must be ever vigilant, living as we do in a society where internalized racism and sexism make it a norm for us to treat one another with disrespect.

If we are to dismantle hierarchies and remake solidarity, it will require a conscious shift in our practice and be constantly vigilant in our fight against the inequalities around us. If I critically examine some of my own privileges as an able-bodied, non-Aboriginal person, solidarity action is sometimes a matter of convenience and will be extended as long it does not infringe on my own privilege and material conditions. hooks implores us to recognize that to embrace and practice the love ethic, it will require us to relinquish our aspirations of domination and power. For hooks, love ethic offers a glimpse of transcendent reality that we are all always more than our race, class, sexual orientation, and so forth in our collective struggle for justice.

The act of relinquishing is thus an act of solidarity, a willful act of love and a renewal of spirit that will transform and lift us all. The coming together with a profound sense of love is what gives us courage to resist.

Community as the coming together of a group of individuals who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to ‘rejoice together, mourn together’, and to ‘delight in each other, and make other’s conditions our own. (hooks, 2000, p. 129)

“Making other’s conditions our own” is based on the same sentiment as expressed in the most famous anti-apartheid slogan: “An injury to one is an injury to All” or the British Columbia Federation of Labour’s motto, “What we desire for ourselves, we desire for all.” At the same time, I strongly agree with hooks in outlining the conditions required to make this imagined community a real one in which we can “rejoice and mourn together.” How do we as labour activists unmask our ‘masks of composure’ so we can communicate honestly and develop some genuine commitment?

In the labour movement, it is customary to address each other as “brother” or “sister” thereby implying a sense of community and an extended kin circle in which we will take care of each other. hooks refers to such a community as a loving communion which is life sustaining and where the group can communicate with honesty, respect, and nurturing. Such an ethics of love is revealed in some of the interviewees’ statements about the visual image of solidarity.

Despite the challenges and disappointments that this group of activists has experienced, there is a shared sense of hopefulness and commitment to building a strong movement that is truly moving. This sentiment is palpable in their artistic depictions and descriptions of solidarity. The visualization reflects another realm of reality what is possible radically in their reimagination of the movement.

When I was growing up in school, we drew the solar system with the different planets revolving around each other. You can’t do anything without the other. Solidarity is kind of like the solar system. Each planet has a purpose and everything is protecting each other, not one without the other. (Interview transcript C 103, December 20, 2009)

My visual image of solidarity is DNA strand because it’s full of diverse codes, diverse messages and components that serve different functions, and but coming together, they create a strong, vibrant, alive and healthy being! It moves in a spiral...when something is not healthy, the DNA will try to fix it. We all have a purpose, a different role in fixing it and they are of equal value even though each is different. (Interview transcript C105, April 23, 2009)

Circle of people of different faces, different colour holding hands...to me that’s a symbol of solidarity...with smile on their faces. (Interview transcript C104, April 23, 2009)

My image of solidarity is an empty table with all the chairs that are different, reflecting the different equity groups. The idea is that we have to recognize our differences but at the same time, we have to be around the same table! (Interview transcript A103, May 4, 2009)

It's a huge mass of people walking hand in hand marching down the street, moving together for a common purpose and moving forward. (Interview transcript A102, April 23, 2009)

The notion of making whole is not just to redress individual injustice, but also to find ways, and creative alternatives to put the pieces together so it can be whole.

It would be truly revolutionary within the labour movement if the relinquishing of our aspiration of dominance and privilege were acted upon from a locality of love. Here it is important to make a distinction that the relinquishing is not an act of charity, an act of fear, or an act of political correctness, but rather an act of resistance against dominance, an act of accountability and an act of solidarity. Following this logic, employment equity could then be seen as an act out of our collective desire for justice. Such transformation of making whole applies to the labour movement as a collective entity and from a personal stance. When hooks states love heals and later on, says healing is an act of communion, those statements in essence are the grounding of the solidarity dialogue. I take courage from hooks' clarity on healing from the place of woundedness:

Contrary to what we may have been taught to think, unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us but need not scare us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands... Growing up is, at heart, the process of learning to take responsibility for whatever happens in your life. To choose growth is to embrace a love that heals. (2000, p. 210)

What has been inspiring is the tremendous amount of love that workers of colour and Aboriginal workers demonstrate for a movement which at times considers them as Others. The experiences of woundedness can mark us but we will never let them scare us. In fact, it has strengthened and emboldened us to grow and embrace love not bitterness.

I am an old rock pig and the other day I was at a metallic rock concert. When everybody is happy, there is energy, and my vision of solidarity is a rock show where everyone is happy. When everyone is well fed, happy, feels good, when everyone's mind is focused, the energy, the ecstasy and exhilaration that comes from living in a culture like that, will be like in an eternal rock show where there is no injustice, no exhausting the earth with our craps, and we are not feeling that just because my skin is lighter than yours, that I'm better.  
(Interview transcript A101, November 9, 2009)

The vibrancy and optimism for the movement through their words and visual representation reflects the deep commitment to the ideal of justice and equality and a vision of a labour movement that also belongs to workers of colour and Aboriginal Peoples. It speaks to the yearning for the wholeness of a movement, a transformative process that we will continue to engage. In the process of making the labour movement whole, we will continue the project of recovering our voices, reclaiming our space, and remaking solidarity.

### *Solidarity as an Act of Hopefulness*

The struggle for hope is permanent and it becomes intensified when one realizes it is not a solitary struggle. It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite. On this level, the struggle for hope means the denunciation, in no uncertain terms, of all abuses, schemes, and omissions. As we denounce them, we awaken in others and ourselves the need, and also the taste for hope.

Paulo Freire (1997, p. 106)

Freire's stance on hope is most invigorating. In positioning struggle for hope as a site to resist all abuses, schemes, and omissions, he acknowledges that such struggle is an ongoing and collective process. Hope gives us courage of imagination and freedom in our hearts and minds to look at what is possible and not just what is probable. Solidarity is grounded on acts of hopefulness as activists gather to strategize and to resist. Freire further characterizes educators who are not hopeful as "men and women without address, and without a destination" (p. 110). Following the rationale of such a poignant depiction, I would argue that this group of Aboriginal activists and activists of colour who participated in the study are men and women with a specific address and a clear destination. The hopefulness is reflected in abundance in their thoughtful envisioning on the future of the labour movement.

In spite of all the practices of exclusion as revealed in their stories, it is remarkably inspiring to hear these activists talking about the future of the labour movement as part of the broader base organizing of a working class movement. In connecting the two, the space for Aboriginal activists and activists of colour as leaders and central actors become more boundless and less confining. As activists, they have never lost sight of their hope and commitment in reimagining what is possible and that to me, is most empowering.

Sandra, the sister who has early declared that there is no labour movement but just union organizations, warns against labour renewal strategies without fundamental changes, because "*pouring new wine into the barrels of old wine does not work.*" She continues with a metaphor of childbirth on the transformation needed to have 'revolutionary justice.'

We need to start a new phenomenon...there is no new life without pain and bleeding, continue to push for labour community actions. Different dynamics

give different strategies...workers will create, resist and break away from years of torture in the labour movement. We are not the ones who make the policies within our unions. Questions on who leads will be threatening to them. Having some “success stories” does not translate into power for men and women in the workplace and the community? (Interview transcript C101, March 1, 2009)

That sense of a politics of hope and justice is beyond just the tinkering to place a few more racialized workers or Aboriginal worker as trophies on the mantle. It is also beyond having some individual success stories because these pieces, if they are not connected will never address the core of the issue of power. While there is a shared vision and hope that transformation is possible, the variation is on the locality or site of ‘transformative change should take place. Or it could just be a matter of staging from one site to expand to the other.

There is a shared sentiment expressed by several activists who are younger, hopeful and resilient. Their stance is to question whether it is worth their while to get on this train called the labour movement.

As younger sisters and brothers, we don’t want to let go of the movement, but this train because it’s going in a wrong direction, it’s going to be a train wreck! We are not getting on. We’ll build another mode of transportation to get there. We’ll go as the Green line. We have a vested commitment in change. We want to sit on the floor in a circle, not in chairs. Work in the community and home should take priority. (Interview transcript C 106, October 17, 2009)

Tam, a longtime activist of colour speaks passionately about his hopes and dreams for the labour movement during our interview. As a seasoned activist, he holds no illusion for the

current state of the movement to be an effective site to nurture the agency of racialized workers.

For me, my hope and my dream is that we can use the global crisis impact to build a working class movement of people of colour. I see workers of colour as potential being the backbone of the movement, which is cohesive, tangible based on their strength and aspiration. My dream is to see if you put someone who is here and someone who is in South Africa, they can analyze and share the same fundamentals of working class movement whose backbone are workers of colour.

With the lay-offs, workers are back in the community with their years of training and skills from the labour movement. If we can somehow get them to work in their communities to build working class consciousness among their neighbours, we can build pockets of workers of colour with politics and mobilizing skills. The mindset will change if the real power comes from the workers of colour. Mostly, you can't control it. We are not beholden to the labour movement. We will be changing the politics of labour movement where we are dealing with someone else's agenda. We have the number, the expertise, but we can't do it within the labour movement.

*Class consciousness is the glue of the working people.* It's easy to lose it, it's up to workers of colour to bring it up. Our only vehicle is through the labour movement. But we have to build a base before we can change it. I see a movement of our own as a mission not out of choice. (Interview transcript C104, April 24, 2009)

Tam's last sentence is inspiring and layered with commitment and strategic thinking. For the labour movement to take Aboriginal workers and workers of colour membership seriously, we have to organize from the outside, the broader community coalition on issues that affect all workers, so the campaign and the voices are real. The notion of building from the bottom up draws resonance. It is no difference from the field of dreams about this

farmer building a baseball field in the middle of his farmland, when we build, they will come. When we become a force to be reckoned with, organized labour will take notice.

### *The Collective Envisioning of Solidarity Through Art*

It takes courage to strip away our protective masks or gear; it also takes great love – love in our willingness to communicate honestly, to trust each other, and to reimagine alternative visions that are encompassing and empowering. The circle effectively becomes the ‘decolonizing space’ to put solidarity in practice. The circle can be a space for analyzing the cultural productions through which workers of colour and Aboriginal workers have challenged and continue to resist

There is a tremendous sense of hopefulness and optimism that permeates through their visualization in words and representation in art. These creative images are both uplifting and inspiring for the movement to rekindle spirit of solidarity from the heart. By integrating the collective art-making practices into the reimagining, it enables dialogue participants to develop alternative mode of expression and serves as a creative way to expand our capacity to share, to know, to act, and to experience joy. Acampora refers to this creative process as “aesthetic agency”:

Social and political progress requires not only what is traditionally considered intellectual or cognitive development but also expansion of the sensibilities that both sharpens our perceptual capacities and fuel creativity activity. We call this “aesthetic agency”. The core idea of aesthetic agency is that integral to our understanding of the world is our capacity for making and remaking the symbolic forms that supply the frameworks for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. (2007, p. 5)

The visual images co-created by participants in small group during the solidarity dialogue have reinforced what participants articulated during their individual interview

responding to the question on what solidarity looks like. Furthermore, the visual representations as embodied knowledge of participants have provided another entry point for deepening the discussion and meaning making of the complexity of the labour movement.

Each of the visual images will be described in the words of its small group of co-creators/participants. An overall synthesis on insights evoked by these visual images will follow at the end.



**Figure 3. Garden of solidarity.**

### *Garden of Solidarity*

Everything grows in the garden of solidarity...all types of flowers to symbolize the multiracial backgrounds of workers. There is also a wall for

support, rocks for the waterfall to lean on. Rocks are the ancestors, they hold the knowledge, history, and past struggles. Walls can be perceived as barriers. We need the wall to protect us; we can retreat when needed. We need the nucleus germination that the initial foundation can't be shaken. Once it has taken shape, we can move the wall from being divisive. Then there is the watering where the nurturing and targeted growth will take place. (Field notes on reporting back by each group, June 16, 2009)



**Figure 4. Circle of solidarity.**

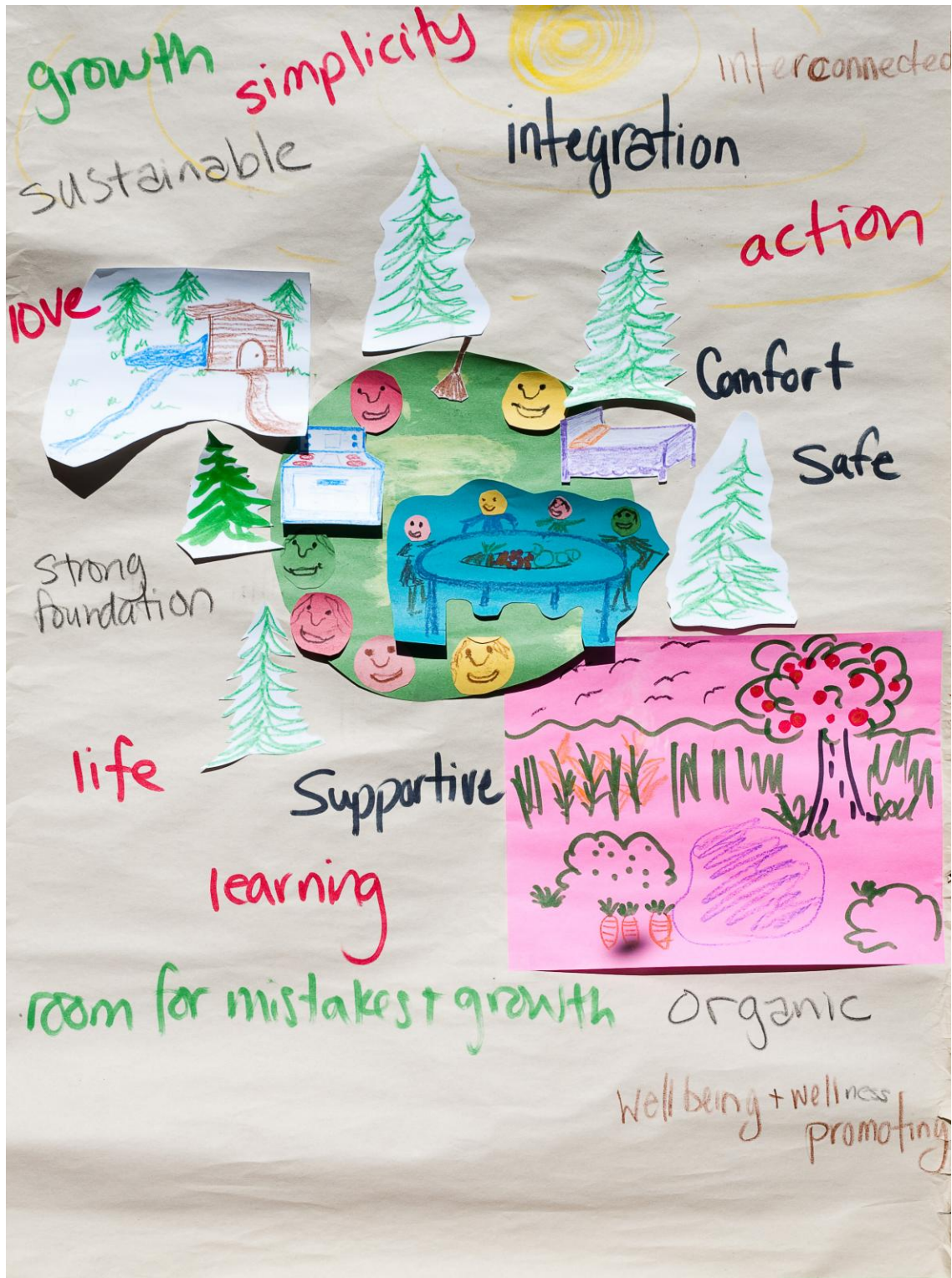
### *Circle of Solidarity*

That it's a village, we share power. The leadership is collective / the possibility of letting go, the open hand concept. Solidarity means sometimes we will make sacrifices for each other. Solidarity should not be one-sided.



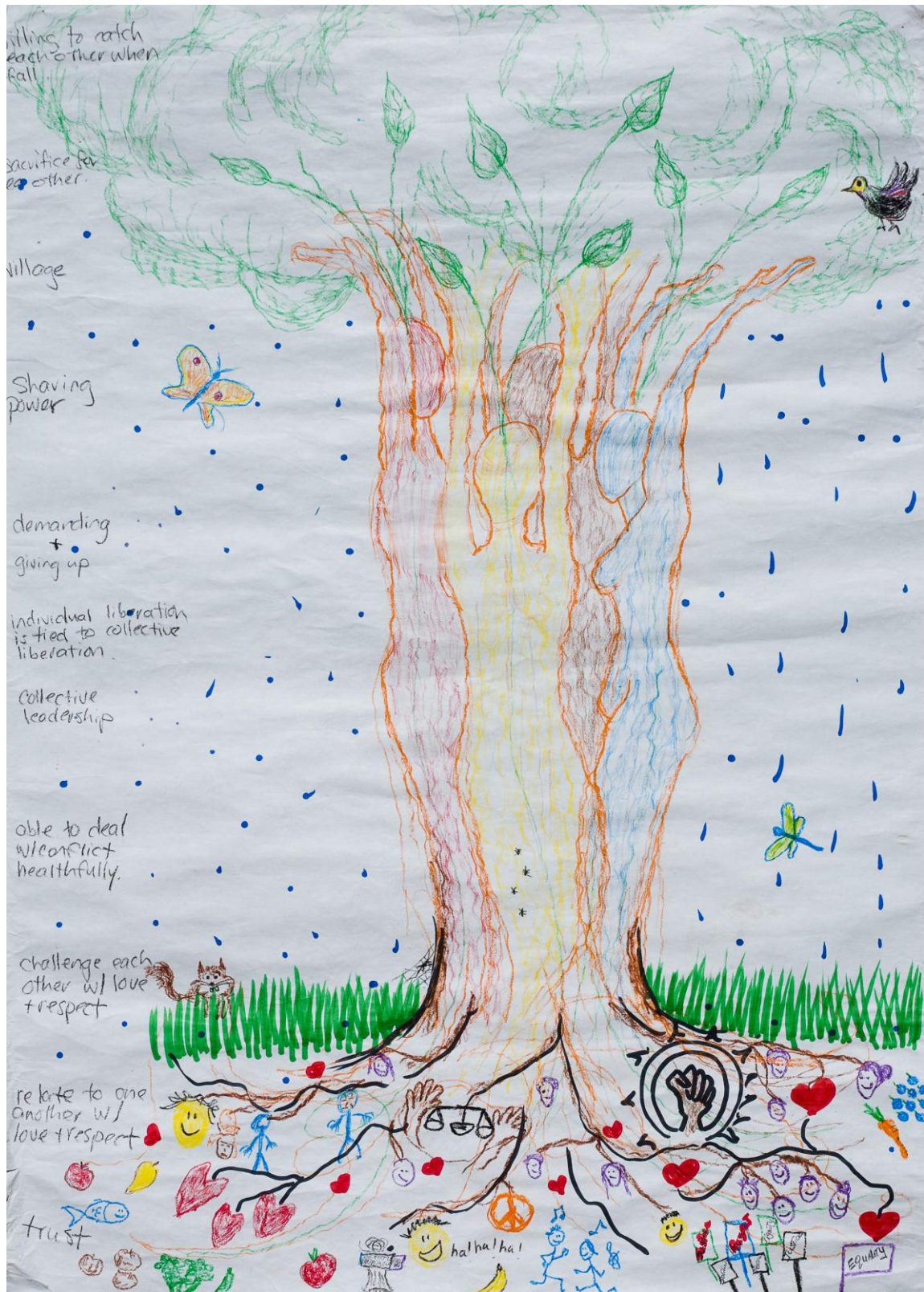
**Figure 5. The collective ownership of the circle.**

The circular model is more encompassing. It is equally demanding and members are equally willing to give up and share. There is accountability shared by everyone in the circle; there will be no knowledge gap and ownership is collective. It also links with the wider community, overlapping and it goes in and out. The circle must be strong enough to withstand the outside attacks and to last for seven generations following the Aboriginal teachings. We need warriors. We need stewards who are willing to stand up. Together we can withstand anything. The formation of geese is our way to express that there is a natural progression. Rotation forces people to grow. Within the collective, we have different skills. Just like the geese, there are times we will step up and times that we'll step back (Field notes on reporting back, June 16, 2009).



**Figure 6.** Real solidarity in words and images.

The concepts of solidarity in words and images are self-explanatory.



**Figure 7. The tree of solidarity.**

### ***The Tree of Solidarity***

The trunk has a group of women (strong base) to hold up the leaders. The togetherness is what fuels the solidarity. The base is the composite of how life is: the nutrients of building solidarity and leadership. It goes back to the earth and regenerates. It's never ending. We keep on generating our vision. The balancing is the symbol of justice with enough energy to nurture it.

The beauty of the tree, the roots itself tell us how well the tree flourishes It is who we are and we stand together and to fight together. Solidarity is knowing that when you fall, someone will be there to catch you. Tree is a very strong symbol in Aboriginal cultures. The roots go out in all directions. They bend but they don't break. That's what life should be! It's opening up! We can withstand the impact of oppression by having a good base. Everything is alive, we are the stewards of the Earth (field notes on reporting back on their visual creation, June 16, 2009)

### ***A Synthesis: Searching for the Goodness in the Labour Movement***

The five visual images shared by the participants are powerful depictions of the depth of these workers' commitment to the labour movement. Their immense sense of love and hopefulness is palpable throughout. Love as the core concept of the labour movement in the Tree of Solidarity (see Figure 7), is depicted as the nutrient that is spread generously and deeply rooted in the soil as the fertile ground for the growth of a healthy tree. In the circle of solidarity, the heart shape drawn in red is hard to miss and in the collectivity of solidarity, love is listed as a key ingredient. In the garden of solidarity, the image that is most embodied and therefore, with hardly any words, love is expressed as in the waterfall and in the vibrant

colours of apples, flowers and all things living. It is quite profound that in artistic creations of the participants in separate groups, how tree and garden are used to symbolize the hopefulness of a strong and vibrant labour movement. At the same time, a garden only thrives when there is a dedicated effort of time, energy and care in daily chores such as watering, seeding, weeding, pruning and other ground clearing activities in addition to the generous assistance of mother earth. One cannot help but ask who the gardeners will be for such a garden of solidarity, a space for labour to grow.

The other common theme is how the house of labour is envisioned and power and leadership represented through the five drawings. Labour is depicted in a circle format. In the Tree of Solidarity (see Figure 7), the powerful image of four persons linking arms and standing in circle serves as the trunk of this majestic tree illustrates the collective sharing and lifting. Likewise, the Elder circle in Collective Circle of solidarity reflects an alternate labour structure that is grounded in the wisdom and teachings of Aboriginal Peoples. In a very profound way, participants' images represent a different way of power sharing and collective leadership. Refusing to get trapped in a hierarchical or pyramid representation, power is conceived and understood differently.

There is an explicit recognition of the structural flaws and power dynamics of the current system. The critique of leadership within labour is expressed in a clear and succinct manner in the Circle of solidarity under the warning sign with Caution as its heading: People who come to do good then stay to do well. The distinction between doing good and doing well highlights the problematic of the current leadership of the movement. Doing good becomes much more secondary when one justifies their stay by doing well in terms of personal performance rather on the collective good of the movement. There is a fine line

between doing good and doing well. Doing well for whom? When and how do we know that we have inadvertently crossed the line? What are the signs and indicators when doing well becomes the sole preoccupation of leaders and activists alike? These are probing questions that require self-vigilance and humility to reflect, to listen and to act.

Another key point is that all five drawings highlight some of the imperfections and challenges of trade unions. They acknowledge the existence of conflict, danger or tension within as well as their shared desire of dealing with it in a constructive and healthy fashion. In the Garden of Solidarity, there is acknowledgement of the existence of walls, both as a protective barrier to keep us from danger or intruders and it offers a safe space for growth. In the tree of solidarity, it is noted as the ability to deal with conflict healthfully, and in the circle of solidarity, having the room for mistakes and growth is a key ingredient for a strong labour movement. This notion echoes the ethics of deep respect explored earlier as part of a key concept of solidarity.

One cannot help but notice in the Garden of Solidarity (see Figure 3) a striking feature of the drawing is the waterfall. This is quite metaphorical, as water represents the essence of life. Within the labour context, the constant flowing of the waterfall may symbolize the participants' hope for a labour movement that is infused by new members, new ideas and activism. It is interesting to note that there is only an archway to the Garden of Solidarity without any gate or door. This symbolizes the voluntary nature of trade union membership and activism. In the group's description, the wall is seen as a transitional strategy to protect the germination and seeding and as it gains strength, there will no longer be a need for walls.

These creative images are both uplifting and inspiring for the movement to rekindle the spirit of solidarity from the heart. However, they are not merely expressions of an idealized portrayal of labour movement focusing only on the positive spin and looking only on the bright side. Instead, they are the results of an envisioning exercise in search of the goodness within the labour movement. Lawrence Lightfoot refers goodness as,

Portraits are not designed to be documents of idealization or celebration. In examining the dimensionality and complexity of goodness there will, of course be ample evidence of vulnerability and weakness. In fact, the counterpoint and contradictions of strength and vulnerability, virtue and evil (and how people, cultures, and organizations negotiate those extremes in an effort to establish the precarious balance between them) are central to the expression of goodness. (1997, p. 9)

The visual images co-created by the participants illustrate a search for the goodness of the movement in the recognition of conflicts and tensions within trade unions and the shared desire for alternate ways of engaging members. “Goodness” also lies in the challenge for these activists to counter and confront the visible and invisible walls of the labour movement with all its complexity and vulnerabilities. One message that has come across strongly through this exercise is that in spite of the imperfection and shortcomings of organized labour, this is also their labour movement, and they are not going to retreat and disappear. Searching for goodness in the labour movement therefore, lies in the strength of the inter-independence and interconnectedness of each other as illustrated abundantly throughout this chapter in words and in visual images.

It is in the spirit of a shared desire for being made whole and the envisioning of labour within a broad social justice movement that we turn to next chapter for an exploration on a pedagogy of solidarity and its implications and potential on the conditions of remaking solidarity.

## **Chapter Eight:**

### **Pedagogy of Solidarity**

#### ***Introduction***

If there is one recurring theme that has emerged from this research on the practices of solidarity experienced by this group of activists, it is the collective desire to deconstruct and reconstruct a democratized working class movement that will integrate the principles of racial and economic justice in both words and actions. Solidarity building is a collective journey of building agency and making whole. Throughout the process, I have been overwhelmed by the courage and the resilience of this group of activists. However, the outcomes of the solidarity circle dialogue have presented potential and possibilities for reimagining how we can develop a critical pedagogy where solidarity is nurtured, felt, and practiced. My rationale for a pedagogy of solidarity stems from my experiences as an activist, labour educator, and as a non-Aboriginal person.

#### ***As an Activist...***

As an activist, such a gathering will be a space where we can strip our masks of composure and engage in meaningful discussion. Such a pedagogy will lead to critical reflection and, at the same time, provide the grounding for cross-border, cross-boundaries, and cross-differences understanding. The collective consciousness in action as referred to by Fantasia (1998) will provide the strength that will overcome inertia, fear, and other inhibitors of action.

Through the research interviews and dialogue discussion, it became obvious that Aboriginal activists and activists of colour pay a personal price, enduring tremendous stress,

to stay active in challenging the systemic barriers of racism. To me, the circle gathering is also a space where we can draw support from each other so that the nurturing and mentoring can also take place. It is a process for self-preservation. As Kim, one of the Aboriginal activists has stated, “Solidarity means being in a good mind” (Interview transcript A103, May 4, 2009). We need to practice to be in a *good mind*, personally and collectively. To paraphrase hooks (1993), staying well is an active form of resistance.

### ***As a Non-Aboriginal Person...***

The learnings of the Indian Act through the circle dialogue have propelled me into wanting to do more as a labour educator and as an activist. I see the urgency for all of us to recognize the ongoing colonization project of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. The dialogue process has also shown us that such critical reflection is possible if it is done from the place of the heart.

If the labour movement is to make a commitment to an equity agenda, then relearning the history of Canada from the perspectives of Aboriginal Peoples is a first step in developing a renewed sense of working class solidarity that is grounded in respect, accountability, and co-responsibility. In the context of the anti-globalization movement, the active resistance of Indigenous Peoples across the globe is a powerful reminder of what is possible. In the context for mobilizing for a green movement with good jobs, equity and social justice, and environmental sustainability, the Indigenous worldview and teaching is a wealth of knowledge and practices that are yet to be integrated.

It is critical to make a clear distinction that an act of solidarity is not an act of sympathy or an act of benevolence. On the contrary, for workers of colour who are racialized

Others, the solidarity extended to and with Aboriginal Peoples will be putting solidarity in practice, exposing the gravity of systematic racism within the broader society and the labour movement. I believe it is critical to engage more activists within the labour movement to begin this daunting and yet necessary work. It will be a different type of relation building, grounded in a deep respect, and above all, a commitment to actions.

***As a Labour Educator...***

If collective bargaining and organizing is the bread and butter issue of the labour movement, then union education is the heart and soul of the movement. The traditional union education approach on anti-racism and equity issues has been problematic on two counts. One is the over-representation of workers of colour and Aboriginal workers in human rights and anti-racism courses and underrepresented in regular, core courses in union education. While such educational opportunities have been invaluable for racialized workers to share, strategize, and network, embedded in the action of the leadership is a very clear message that anti-racism and human rights is solely a workers' of colour or Aboriginal workers' issue. There is an underlying assumption that racism has become a problem because of the presence of Aboriginal Peoples and people of colour, oblivious of the historical and ongoing colonizing project and the nation building of Canada. The other concern is the silos and prescribed space to which Aboriginal activists and activists of workers are assigned. Jackson (2005) puts forth the challenge on a better form of "education for equality" in an exactly opposite way.

That is, members of equity seeking groups would be over-represented in courses on "how to get elected as president of your local," while the members of currently privileged and powerful groups would be over-represented in courses on "how privilege for some and exclusion for others is routinely reproduced in the lift of the union." This would be "education for equality"

designed from the bottom up instead of the top-down. Whose perspective currently “counts” in labour education? (2005, p. 13)

Foley (2009) points out that there is a leadership skill deficit when it comes to advancing the equity agenda. To me, such an equity education deficit is not one that can be spoon-fed or taught. It has to be *experienced and come from the heart*. This is where the power of critical education becomes important. Can we imagine if the leadership of different unions would truly embrace anti-racism as a key priority and take the time to sit and participate in a circle dialogue with Aboriginal members and workers of colour? How enriching this could be for all involved? Just as Bernard (2006) prescribes that members need to feel the presence of their union and experience solidarity as a transformative moment, it would be beneficial and transformative for the leadership to experience a genuine engagement with Aboriginal activists and activists of colour, and envision an alternate way of remaking solidarity. Unfortunately, all too often, the traditional leadership does not consider such an education to be a critical building block for union renewal. They are too busy to commit their time to unlearn and relearn.

These two key concerns reflect the ongoing schism of organized labour towards anti-racism and equity education among its membership. The questions are, “Is it critical?” and “Is it integrated?” Despite some gains on the equity front and a presence of workers of colour in key leadership positions, the White hegemony remains entrenched. Anti-racism education within labour is still seen as a separate silo and not integrated as part of the regular, core courses to which most members gravitate. No doubt there have been some progressive initiatives among affiliates on integrating anti-racism. However, because these initiatives are not broadly integrated into the culture and practices of the institutions, they are also much

more vulnerable to cuts and attacks. Among the White dominant leadership, there is a prevalent avoidance of honest conversation of power relations and privilege with equity group members for fear of antagonizing the White members as Fletcher and Gapasin (2008) observe. There is also a failure to integrate the issue of race and equity as legitimate body of knowledge that is critical to union and movement building. Here I draw great resonance from Dei's stance on the notion of education:

Education is a power-saturated discussion. What we are arguing here is that there is more to inclusion than the dominant conception of education. This is often compounded by the failure to acknowledge difference as a significant site for education. That is, addressing questions of difference, diversity and power, as defined through the lens of class, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, language, and indigeneity. It is such an expanded discussion that can help us respond to the possibility of creating a new vision of education that holds the promise and possibility of excellence for all. (2010, p. xiv)

This is the crux of the challenge of doing anti-racism education in unions and other social institutions within the context of hegemony. This is where my own sense of urgency comes in, as a labour educator in reimagining an integrative model of critical education that can serve as a vehicle of counter-hegemony.

### ***Beginning the Exploration***

The notion pedagogy of solidarity is anchored in the understanding that the gathering of diverse groups in a process of respectful engagement will spark a synergy for solidarity building, a new consciousness-in-action.

This bridging cannot be built on the thin air of generalities but must be constructed on the concreteness of meaningful events that expand the mutual awareness of one another in the association....Too often the embrace of progressive idioms such as “solidarity” smother real tension. In such cases,

the problem is not that there is a conflict, but the sources of conflict are hidden. (Childs, 2003, p. 61)

A commitment to imagine a pedagogy of solidarity needs to be grounded and built from meaningful acts to wrestle with some of the tensions. Childs (2003) astutely observes how often we, as progressive activists, are too scared to confront the sources of conflict in the name of unity. This comes from a firm belief in a critical education that will bring people together for deeper reflection; and that such genuine ethical and political dialogue will serve as a crucial path in remaking a labour movement that will be grounded in justice and equality. It is also an envisioning of the possibilities and potentials of real solidarity building between workers of colour and Aboriginal Peoples.

### ***As a Project of Decolonization***

From the collective narrative on solidarity in practice, the daily challenge and rage associated with being confined to a certain space and being typecast to certain roles within and outside the labour movement can be exhausting and excruciating. From indifference to patronizing, from exclusion to tokenism, Aboriginal workers and workers of colour share a similar pattern of experiences of asserting ourselves within labour's equity agenda and ensuring our voices are heard.

In linking the resistance and arrogance of the labour movement as part of the legacy of the Eurocentric colonial project and the pervasiveness of the dominant power, the pedagogy of solidarity is therefore, first and foremost, a project of decolonization. The coming together of a solidarity circle will be an act of decolonization. It is an active form of resistance aimed at breaking the isolation and the intellectual and spiritual silos as referred to by Erica-Irene Daes:

A fundamental weapon used by most colonizers against colonized peoples is to isolate the colonized from all outside sources of information and knowledge and then to bombard them with propaganda carefully aimed at convincing them that they are backward, ignorant, weak, insignificant, and very, very fortunate to have been colonized. (2000, p. 7)

In bringing together Aboriginal activists who are the colonized, and workers of colour, many of whom were formerly colonized, my intention is not to equate and homogenize their experiences. Rather, the systemic pattern of colonization and the subjectivity of being colonized expose the scope and gravity of dominance and the colonial project. Dei poignantly refers to “the decolonizing of the mind” as the first step in dismantling colonial relations:

Anti-colonial thought is about a “decolonizing of the mind” working with resistant knowledge and claiming the power of local subjects’ intellectual agency. Resistance in this context is about fighting for survival and beyond. It is about resistance to domination of the past, contamination of the present and the stealing of a people’s future. The dominated/colonized subject survives despite attempts to deny her existence. (2006, p. 11)

The survival of Aboriginal Peoples against all odds has been a powerful testimony to resistance and defiance. The critical dialogue at the beginning of a decolonization project is an opportunity for workers of colour who are part of the settler community to begin to unpack and relearn the history of this land, not from the colonizer, but from the colonized. It is time to meet the real hosts of this land, to draw inspiration from their resistance, and to interrogate the complexity and complicity of roles we have engaged in as part of the settlers of this land. As workers of colour within the labour movement, how do we turn the critical gaze on ourselves and examine the duplicities that we have knowingly or inadvertently played in assuming the values of the colonizer? Dei poses the important question:

The site from which we oppress is the site on which we least cast our gaze. It is significant in an anti-colonial practice to engage the question whether the dominant/colonizer should know and critique colonialism, imperialism and oppression without the input of those who have received, and continue to receive the brunt of the colonial encounter and its violence? (2006, p. 41)

In framing this pedagogy of solidarity as a dialogue between Aboriginal workers and workers of colour enabling them to recover their authentic voices, cultural expressions, and stance, I have taken the step of strategic essentializing and precluded the participation of White activists. It is a necessary step because I believe that White activists from the dominant group will require a different forum and orientation to truly wrestle with these issues. They require a setting where no one needs to feel defensive, angry, or misunderstood. It takes a deep commitment to the movement, and it also requires the humility to turn inward and critically analyze their locations posed in Dei's question. This type of relearning for White activists to examine their privilege and power relations is part of the core principle of the pedagogy of the privileged, which has been ardently proposed and theorized by a growing number of committed anti-racist White educators who share the vision of critical consciousness education (Curry-Stevens, 2007; Thomas, 2006; Wilmot, 2005).

The emerging scholarly work in this exciting field of study indicates where more groundwork and separate organizing could be done with White activists. The traditional approach within the labour movement to do anti-racism and human rights education has been to bring groups together prematurely to talk about differences without appropriate and thoughtful preparatory work. The likely scenario before the end of a week-long educational program will include temper tantrums, denial, or defensiveness on one side, and painful outbursts or silence on the other side. I am strongly convinced that this equally important

work requires a different kind of reframing, which should come from the lived experiences of White activists in the Canadian context; it is, therefore, beyond the scope of this research.

Hawai'i scholar Poka Laenui (2000) puts forth an evolving process of decolonization that involves five distinct phases:

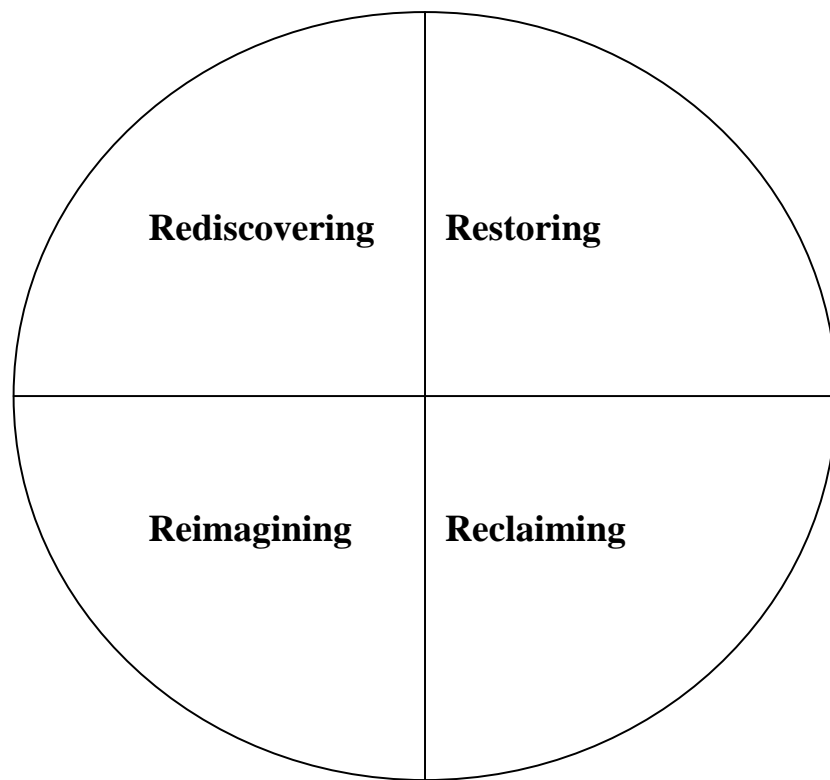
1. rediscovery and recovery;
2. mourning;
3. dreaming;
4. commitment; and
5. action.

In developing the conceptual framework for the pedagogy of solidarity, I have drawn on the critical work of Laenui's (2000) model, Dei's (2010) insights on anti-colonial education, and Kelley's (2002) stance of surrealism on revolutionary dream on freedom and love.

Taking into consideration the context and reality of the current labour movement, the framework for the pedagogy of solidarity is conceptualized in four Rs, each representing an act of an evolving process of decolonization: to rediscover, to restore, to reimagine, and to reclaim.

### ***Putting the Four Rs in the Context of the Medicine Wheel***

The four components of the pedagogy of solidarity – Rediscovering, Restoring, Reimagining, and Reclaiming – follow the Aboriginal concept of a medicine wheel in acknowledging the body, mind, emotion, and spirit aspects of each individual. As one component of a circle, the process of decolonization is evolving and interlocking. Figure 8 shows the four components in a format of a medicine wheel.



***Figure 8. The four components of a medicine wheel.***

The circle represents the fluidity and the interconnectedness of the four components. The essence and emphasis for each component will be explored in greater detail in the next section.

***As an Act of Rediscovery and Recovery***

From the lived experiences of Aboriginal workers and workers of colour who participated in the research, the challenges and paradox of living in dual realities illuminates a shared desire for meaningful change within the labour movement. The pedagogical framing of solidarity is anchored in the necessity of co-creating decolonized space where Aboriginal workers and workers of colour can engage in dialogue to counter the hegemonic practices and control. Dei reminds us of the importance of returning to our own indigenous cultural

sources and our everyday lived experiences as the contextual basis of knowing as part of our collective resistance in challenging the dominant's sense of entitlement (2010, p. 11).

Part of the process of rediscovery and recovery is to unlearn and relearn the history of the land from Indigenous perspectives. In tracing back the 500 years of contact with European settlers, such a perspective provides an opportunity to unlearn the colonial version of Canadian history. The original map of the nations of Indigenous Peoples in the Americas will be a powerful tool for workers of colour to visualize the genocide and the extent of pillage by the White man's economy.

**This is our land. We are the peoples of this land. What are First Nations Peoples? Is this just a slogan without meaning, or does it mean what it says?** (Coon Come, 2001)

Mathew Coon Come poses the fundamental question to all of us as immigrants and refugees, or descendants and descendants of immigrants and refugees to this land.<sup>17</sup> It is a critical question to wrestle with for workers of colour.

The pedagogical approach of such sharing enables workers of colour to retrace their history of colonization in their countries of origin, their paths of migration, and the daily experiences from their own sites of dislocation. In the process of unpacking and rediscovering the diverse histories, we resist and challenge the "constant and overwhelming reminder of the superiority of that society over the underlying Indigenous one" (Laenui, 2000, p. 150). The dialogue will rediscover what is lost, unspoken, and dismissed. The recovery will be an assertion of the voices, the knowledge, and the histories of resistance in its richness, complexity, and dignity.

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<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Brown, former Chief Human Rights Commissioner of Ontario, and the first Member of Legislature Assembly (MLA) in British Columbia.

### *As an Act of Restoring*

The urgent desire of making whole among workers of colour and Aboriginal workers is the foreground of this solidarity building project. It is in this ongoing process of unmasking race and remaking the labour movement that we will be able to restore the hearts and souls with hope, love, and solidarity of a movement of justice.

To be made whole is a familiar term used by trade unionists as part of grievance language to redress past wrongs and conducts of management. In this component, I have departed from Laenui's (2000) notion of mourning and replaced it with remembering and restoring. In acknowledging what we have lost collectively, the unburdening of the emotional load and pain among participants is part of the healing. However, I am acutely aware of our position around not wanting to be viewed as victims, but rather to be viewed as activists who resist. Focusing on remembering is a stage whereupon participants are encouraged to take stock of their own strength and resistance, as well as the strength exhibited by their ancestors. These acts of resistance, often spontaneous, small, and imaginary are what sustain our spirit and allow us to withstand the nastiness of racism. Knockwood (2001) characterizes the most important form of resistance for Aboriginal children in the residential schools as "those inside out heads, even though it produced little outward sign at the time" (2001, p. 127). For workers of colour, it could be the resistance in our own countries of origin in the decolonizing project in songs, gatherings, and even bloodshed. Remembering these acts of defiance by those who walked before us will give us the strength necessary to move from mourning to remembrance and from remembrance to making whole.

From the collective narrative on the practices of solidarity, participants have revealed the emotional scars of racism and exclusion; such injuries need healing. In integrating the

component of restoring in a pedagogy of solidarity, I concur with Dei's stance in reclaiming the spiritual as an essential and critical component of our collective anti-racism and decolonizing project. To Dei, restoring is the *repairing of the soul*:

I refer to the notion of repair, one functioning beyond a bio-medical model, as a repairing of the soul from the psychic, physical, psychological and emotional injuries of racism and social oppressions. We all need this repairing of the soul; the oppressor is damaged just as the oppressed; we all need to repair in order to be whole again. (2008, p. 75)

It is in such context of restoring to be whole that healing is “a necessary condition of our daily survival and to show the effectiveness of our political practice” (Dei, 2008, p. 75). In addition, making whole fits the image for what we wish our labour movement and our community to become. bell hooks poignantly describes her reimagining of a beloved community in the following passage:

We should all be so blessed as to engage in social relations that are not tainted and distorted by the twisted politics of racist thought and action. I believe that we can restore our hope in a world that transcends race by building communities where self-esteem comes not from feeling superior to any group but from one's relationship to the land, to the people, to the place wherever that may be. When we create beloved community, environments that are anti-racist and inclusive, it does not matter whether those spaces are diverse. What matters is that should difference enter the world of beloved community it can find a place of welcome, a place to belong. (2009, p. 183)

The ideal vision for the labour movement should be a beloved community where differences are embraced, welcomed, and where there is such a sense of belonging that members can speak passionately about their extended union family. This is when workers can stand and be counted – regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, creed, or abilities – when the slogan “We are the Union!” can become real.

Expanding on the concept of solidarity as love from chapter 7, the pedagogical frame of solidarity is encapsulated in the depth of compassion and wisdom in the following quote: “*We teach what we know as an act of love*” (Annie, a Cree grandmother and historian, as cited in Hodgson-Smith, 2000, p. 158). By extension, as activists, we fight for justice as an act of love.

### ***As an Act of Reimagination***

In this stage of reimagining, the Aboriginal wisdom of looking back seven generations and looking ahead seven generations to the children not yet born is most instructive. Laenui (2000) sees this dreaming and envisioning as the most crucial act for decolonization: “Here is where the full panorama of possibilities is expressed, considered through debate, consultation, and building dreams on further dreams, which eventually become the flooring for the creation of a new social order” (p. 155). This is where participants of the solidarity circle can dream from the heart and imagine what is possible in all its boldness and colours. The notion of boundless possibilities is echoed by Kelley (2000) in his inspiring stance: “By revolution of the mind, I mean not merely a refusal of victim status. I am talking about an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change” (p. 191).

In his work, *Freedom Dreams* (2002), Kelley traces the importance of imagination in each juncture of African American movement building and organizing. To Kelley, the human capacity to dream what is possible has sustained the civil rights movement and enabled people to rise up against the daily emotional toll, to stretch beyond the boundaries and frames, to move beyond the marches and protests. It is in the process of political engagement

and activism in the struggle that enables participants to imagine something different. Kelley refers to this as revolutionary dreams and poetry:

Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society...it is *that* imagination, that effort to see the future in the present that I shall call poetry or poetic knowledge. (p. 9)

I am deeply moved by this notion of poetry in which the reimagination of the labour movement resides. Equally, I find it revolutionary that Kelley acknowledges that dreaming is part of the organic process of political engagement. When I think of the conditions of our lives as anti-racism labour activists, dealing with members daily, confronting management, putting out fires, and all the while constantly either watching our backs or second guessing ourselves, it is difficult to look beyond anything but the present. In that sense, the freedom to dream, to have a different way of seeing, and even feeling differently about the future of the movement keeps us going. In its different cultural forms, dreaming allows for self-sustenance and self-transformation; it changes the way we think, live, love, and handle pain.

[Surrealism] is a living practice and will continue to live as long as we dream...above all, surrealism considers love and poetry and the imagination powerful social and revolutionary forces, not replacement for organized protests, for marches and sit-ins, for strikes and slowdowns, for matches and spray paint. Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we construct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality...if we believe in revolution, we need to move beyond the real and make it surreal. (p. 193)

Kelley depicts radical imagination as the “unleashing” of the mind and as the space for exploration and possibilities. It is liberating to rediscover, restore, reimagine, and reclaim what is possible beyond the existing structures and practices. No doubt, there is value in examining how prevalent the daily racism is, how entrenched the systemic practice of privilege and power relations is; but the pedagogy of solidarity, just like this research, is a liberating project, enabling us to move beyond the rage, beyond “a refusal of victim status” at a personal and collective level. The “unleashing” of the mind is therefore, the beginning of reclaiming the space in mind, body, and spirit that has been colonized and racialized as Dei has forcefully suggested.

The re-imagination begins in our mind as a liberating practice, to dream a world without war, a community without walls, and a labour movement with strength and solidarity can be uplifting. Such re-imagination will certainly lead to re-covering of ideas and thoughts that have long been stripped away through the doctrines of rationality, pragmatism and colonized self.  
(2006, p. 11)

Through making it surreal, Kelley has provided the clarity and the radical potential of envisioning process in popular education. The process of engaging activists in a collective circle of reimagining is therefore part of the ongoing practice of recovering our authentic voices and selves. Kelley implores us to reimagine so we can be “revolutionary in our thoughts so we can be radical in our actions” (2002, p. 191).

### ***As an Act of Reclaiming***

Resisting, refusing to be constrained, refusing to settle for crumbs, or to play in a designated space prescribed by others can be both liberating and unsettling. It is in this juncture of self- and collective discovery that we can begin to truly move into the possibility of reclaiming.

Tuhiwai Smith positions resistance to dominant epistemology as a matter of survival for Indigenous Peoples: “To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves” (2001, p. 4). Although I appreciate this sentiment in terms of resisting the dominant epistemology that devalues and subjugates differences, I am more intrigued with the aspect of “remaking ourselves.” I am not certain that the margins are where we should confine ourselves. Why should we remain in the margins, the locality prescribed to us by the privileged?

Given the shared sense of frustration among participants about the limited space and the snail-like pace of advancing the equality agenda within organized labour, for the sake of the next generation of activists of colour and Aboriginal activists, the reclaiming should be bold and communal. We cannot afford to lose another generation of activists and potential leaders from the equity seeking groups. I take courage from Dei’s stance of reclamation:

The time has come for a radical departure from the politics of negotiation towards a new politics of reclamation. That is to say that we cannot continue to struggle within sites that are afforded to us by privilege. We need to establish politics and strategies of our own and we need to implement them in spaces and places of our choosing. We may be forced to “play the game”, but the time has come for us to “play by our rules.” (2004, p. 9)

Through collective dialogue and exploration on the position of marginality among Aboriginal workers and workers of colour, and the building of a critical mass, the possibility of de-centering the White dominant power base and privilege within organized labour can evolve into a reality. Henceforth, the imagery of removing the margins is both liberating and inspiring. In this regard, the space we wish to reclaim is uncharted territory; we are not interested in playing the game of musical chairs. The reclaiming should be bold

and the reconfiguration communal. This four-stage process of rediscovering, restoring, reimagining, and reclaiming underpins the pedagogical framework of solidarity building. In applying this to the pedagogical framework for solidarity dialogue, the saliency of race will underpin the examination of how labour unions as institution have responded to the challenge of diversity and differences as experienced by workers of colour and Aboriginal workers on a daily basis. In making the invisibles visible, the implications for transformative change will hopefully follow.

Dei's critical integrative framework on inclusive schooling (2004) offers an insightful theoretical lens for the reflection in this particular component of reclaiming. The integrative perspective argues that power and resistance are not intrinsic to the dominant group and that "discursive agency and resistance also reside in/among local minoritized and marginalized communities" (p. 22). The collective knowledge among the various subjects in the community who have been traditionally excluded will inform communal agency and provide the impetus for collective political action. In that sense, Dei's integrative anti-racism framework (1996, 2004) not only employs a critical interrogation on the dominance of White power and privilege in the context of social structural inequality, but it also seeks,

To question the roles that social institutions play in reproducing racial, gender, sexual and class-based inequalities. It acknowledges the pedagogical need to confront the challenge of diversity in schools, and the need to develop educational models that are more inclusive and capable of responding to racial minority concerns and aspirations.... Put succinctly, anti-racism deals foremost with equity: the qualitative value of justice. It also deals with the question of representation: that is, the need to have a multiplicity of physical bodies, as well as diverse voices/perspectives entrenched as part of mainstream social knowledge. (2004, p. 23)

Reclaiming does not mean only the reclaiming of space and the boundless possibilities that we can engage in within the labour movement. It also means the

reawakening of our inner space, the spirit within each of us. This can happen even though this is the place where no colonizer can even touch, because it has been dormant. The critical pedagogical approach of reclaiming will “honour the sacred at the heart of knowing, teaching and learning” (hooks, 2010; Palmer, 2007), and the notion of embodied knowledge by integrating the mind, body, and hearts of activists into the acts of reclaiming. This is where Kelley’s passionate plea drives home the boldness of our dreams. Kelley (2002) urges us to use imagination as a critical and necessary step for radical transformation to take place. His inspiring stance is well captured in this quote:

Struggle is par for the course when our dreams go into action. But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won't bring about our liberation. (p. 198)

It is in this powerful context that actions of reclaiming should emerge. Two essential prerequisites for such acts of solidarity building are the principle of co-responsibility and the notion of hopefulness. The practice of solidarity circle becomes a forum and an opportunity for genuine dialogue to take place, a site to build trust among progressive forces.

### ***The Principle of Co-Responsibility***

Solidarity is not some magical or cosmic combustion that happens when people come together. The proof and testimony of solidarity is grounded in the principle of co-responsibility and commitment; it is grounded in actions and not in words. Part of the realization for us as workers of colour is recognizing the snail’s pace of progress of the equity agenda. Within limited space and airtime, we are made to compete with each other to advance our own issues. Building different solidarity connections becomes an exercise in theory and not in practice.

In liberating our minds, it also implies that as activists, we will engage at another level of conversation and co-action where we can be more accountable to each other. In countering the hegemony of dominance and power, the sense of empowerment and entitlement needs to be nurtured and co-developed in an ongoing solidarity building project. The revolution is made real by how we interact with each other, how we open our hearts, and how we mean what we say when we address each other as brothers and sisters in the labour family. In that sense, the revolution begins with holding each other and ourselves accountable in a project of co-responsibility as part of the conditions necessary for reclaiming. The empowerment of participants who have engaged in this project of decolonization and solidarity building will strengthen everyone's commitment and resolve to take action. As workers of colour, by standing in solidarity with the Indigenous rights movement, we will be making visible the often invisible dynamics of unequal power relations and become engaged in a project that has real potential to decenter and decolonize the power base.

Such a vision of transformation through solidarity is a powerful way of drawing the line in the sand, reimagining a society based on co-existence and co-responsibility. The process of such building will become an act of mobilizing and resisting in the context of class, race, and gender. As labour activists, the interconnectedness between the fight to resist the neoliberal agenda and the Aboriginal sovereignty movement is part of the integral fight to topple the tightening grasp of the capitalist class. The spirit of coexistence and respect is grounded in the practice of co-responsibility. The solidarity built between Aboriginal workers and workers of colour will be a critical link to the advance of this shared project of reclaiming and decentering.

It is my hope that the pedagogy of solidarity will be an enriching process of engagement between Aboriginal Peoples and organized labour. It is my dream that the solidarity built will be lasting, uplifting, and real. In renewing our commitment and co-responsibility, Thomas King, the Indigenous scholar and storyteller, introduces this challenge:

Take it. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to your children. Turn it into a play. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You have heard it now. (2003, p. 151)

Now that we know, how do we conduct ourselves as allies in struggle? How do we sustain ourselves through creative and radical actions? The co-responsibility and co-action is what gives impetus to our personal and collective sense of agency and resistance.

Through the rediscovery of our respective histories as workers of colour and as Aboriginal workers, we recovered our own stories within Canada and within the labour movement. The restoring began and continued through such intense sharing in a decolonized space. The power and vibrancy of the reimagining came through in such clarity in both the words and the visual images of what solidarity could and should look like. The reclaiming began when participants shared their lived experiences and engaged in resistance through their embodied selves.

## **Chapter Nine:**

### **Implications and Concluding Remarks**

The struggle of people against power is like the struggle of memory against forgetting!

Vandana Shiva (2010)

#### ***Making the Invisibles Visible***

This qualitative study has been a process of discovery based upon both reflection and careful examination and analysis of the data. In the context of hegemony of dominance and power, this research has been an excavation project of making visible the invisible power relations within the labour movement. The embodied knowledge of participants revealed deep emotions as they experience racism through body, mind and soul. It also made visible the depth of their passion and commitment to a movement that can be vibrant, inclusive and nurturing. The buoyancy and optimism on the envisioning of solidarity came across with such clarity through words and the visual images. Despite the woundedness, rage, and disappointment, these activists are not broken. The affirmative piece of this research is their level of commitment, passion, and activism in the goodness of a labour movement that can truly be grounded in the building of interracial working class consciousness and solidarity. There is a collective stance among these activists to resist being typecast and a collective refusal to claim the victim status. In that regard, the research is not a narrative of oppression but rather a narrative of resistance.

This group of participants experienced the collective power of solidarity as workers, as union members struggling against the capitalist class, but also as racialized workers resisting the hegemony of White, male dominance. Solidarity in such a context has a layered

meaning beyond the usual notion of taking a working class stance. The standing up for dignity and respect evokes an empowering sense of collectivity and agency. It is the transformative power of such experiences that has fuelled the hearts and souls of these activists and sustained them against all odds. It is therefore, critically important for labour to create more openings and opportunities for members to participate meaningfully and experience the transformative power of solidarity and where inter-racial working class consciousness can be nurtured through actions.

There is also a shared desire among this group of Aboriginal and workers of colour activists wanting to be made whole. The same parallel can be made of the labour movement with solidarity divided. One cannot help but imagine what a strong labour movement it could be if the talents, skills, and strength of all the equity group members are harnessed. The solidarity of such a different movement grounded in interracial working class consciousness will truly be in an image of a clenched fist. In probing deeper into the multiple layers of meanings on the notion of solidarity, the study has made explicit the transformative power of solidarity in the remaking of the labour movement.

The vision of social justice unionism outlined by Fletcher and Gapasin (2008) could be framed in a context of decolonization and be embraced boldly as a political project. Within such a project of counter-hegemony, anti-racism, and equity agenda will be at its core. It is a radical alternative for a movement that is so under siege and in such desperate need not just to survive, but also to be made whole.

Such a project of challenging the existing power relations will require like-minded Aboriginal workers and workers of colour who are engaged in the daily struggles of resistance to sustain and support each other. This was the rationale behind the conceptual

framing for a pedagogy of solidarity. By framing the pedagogy of solidarity as an act of decolonizing our own mindset (Dei, 2003), this group of Aboriginal workers and workers of colour has begun the process of reimagining, reclaiming, and remaking solidarity. It is in this critical link of relationship and solidarity building that we begin the political project of transforming the labour movement.

### *Critical Reflection on the Dialogue and Research Process*

The critical pedagogical approach to solidarity building has been both a powerful and empowering experience for me as a researcher and for the research participants as fellow labour activists who are engaged in advancing the anti-racism agenda within the labour movement.

The conceptual framework for the pedagogy of solidarity is built on the premise that solidarity can only be nurtured if it comes from the heart and through learning that acknowledges and integrates the importance of embodied knowledge. The four evolving components of recovering, restoring, reimagining, and reclaiming in the pedagogy of solidarity have been very much an integrative approach to recognize the wholeness of activists as embodied selves. The four components of the pedagogy represent the interlocking process of decolonization – from being conscious of our colonized self to the reimagining and reclaiming of the revolutionary possibilities from a stance of entitlement instead of doing shape shifting and waiting in line for anointment.

Throughout the solidarity dialogue, the circle became the decolonizing and decolonized space where participants drew strength and support from each other. The reclaiming took place in strategizing follow up actions to decenter. It was an exhilarating

process to see the depth of the interaction and the bond created. Participants of the solidarity circle have since met regularly after the initial gathering and supported each other in different acts of reclaiming. A number of them are now actively involved in bringing the three constituency self-organizing groups – CBTU, ACLA and LATUC – together for cross-constituency organizing.

As a novice researcher, integrating my self-narrative has been a journey of recovering, restoring, and reclaiming. The honesty and courage of participants through the research process has given me strength to take the risk and direct my gaze inward. The unearthing and writing up of my personal narrative has been part of the letting go and restoring. Now I feel less conflicted in saying no and the guilt is eased. Instead, there is a renewed sense of co-responsibility and urgency to build a new generation of activists who share a different vision of solidarity practice.

This research process has also made me recognize how difficult and complex it is to interrogate my own colonized self. While the project has never wavered from the objective on how to forge a WE among Aboriginal activists and activists of colour within labour as a shared political project of resistance, there were times, particularly during the writing up of this study, that my own embodied location as a woman of colour has rendered the Aboriginal workers as Other. The *we* in my imagination would slip back to addressing other workers of colour and revert to the old mode of doing anti-racism work within labour. In my attempt and caution of not to speak on behalf of Aboriginal workers, I have lost sight of the common interest shared by Aboriginal labour activists and activists of colour in challenging the status quo, reclaiming space, and transforming the labour movement. Thus, it is in the complexity

and tensions of such a dilemma that we continue the journey of decolonizing our own mindset.

As an educator, I have also developed a keener awareness of the power of stories – personal and collective – in building relationships and building movement. In that sense, all our stories are narratives of resistance and embodied knowledge, and acts of reclaiming in the process of decolonization. The subtle transformation has evolved, and I am excited with the potential and possibilities of this pedagogy of solidarity.

However, the cautionary note is to be mindful that the decolonizing project is an ongoing political project. It is neither linear with clear demarcation in between stages, nor is it a one-size-fits-all approach. What the group has accomplished in the 2-day retreat is only the beginning of an unpacking and relearning process. Upon reflection, several critiques should be noted and key lessons can be drawn to further the work.

For one, while the process has provided the forum and impetus for collective solidarity actions, it has been more individually driven than a collective initiative. I feel there was limited success within the group as a whole in connecting the dots between the historical and contemporary realities and challenges of Aboriginal Peoples. So the outrage that was expressed collectively as we listened to each other's stories has yet to be transformed into follow-up action with workers of colour standing in solidarity with Indigenous rights issues. The two individuals that the Solidarity circle ended up supporting through concrete action were both workers of colour. Two possible explanations can account for this outcome. One is the small representation of Aboriginal activists in the group (three out of a group of 20). In spite of their strong presence and participation, there was the lack of a critical mass to make the personal connections with participants of colour and reinforce the lessons from the circle

dialogue. As a result, the stories that emerged were primarily from workers of colour linking their migration to colonialism. The key learning for future gathering is to ensure a healthy percentage and balance of participants from both groups. If the number of Aboriginal participants is smaller, as a researcher, I should have scaled back the number of workers of colour to maintain a more appropriate balance.

Given the breadth of knowledge and sharing that took place through the circle process, as critical educator, I should have anticipated the possibility that participants might be overwhelmed and revert back to their familiar ground on fighting racism on a case-by-case approach. In the last two rounds of the circle process, the notion of co-responsibility could have been more emphasized and the discussion deepened.

Time was an issue but there was also an issue with trust. Was a 2-day time span long enough for the process to evolve so we can examine the complexities of the industrial economy which made us accomplices of the ongoing colonial project of Aboriginal Peoples? Was the circle time long enough for participants to build up the trust so there was a willingness to reveal our own vulnerabilities and implications? In raising these questions, it is not my intention to negate the empowering aspects of the pedagogy and the solidarity circle process. Rather, it illustrates how easily we as anti-racist activists can fall into the trap of repeating the same pattern. It is also a realization that this ongoing decolonizing of our own mindset is not an instant noodle soup syndrome that by just pouring hot boiling water everything will be softened and edible in 3 minutes. It is in recognizing this is hard work and the only approach is for all of us who are committed to building an alternate labour movement not to take flight out of fear; we must continue to learn from our actions and from our mistakes. These are key lessons that require further examination. The solidarity circle

was a pilot practice of the pedagogy of solidarity. I am reminded of Dei's position that there is no one model of doing anti-racism work (2010). I also take heart from the following quote of one of Aboriginal facilitators during the circle dialogue: "This is not an assembly line. We can't predict how people are going to change!" (Field notes, June 15, 2009).

Such gatherings and interactions could be a place for bridge building; they can also be a place for us to unlearn, to recover so we can de-center. It is also a forum for support and solidarity in action. In this sense, it is an act of self-love and preservation. What the circle process has shown is the potential of a holistic and integrative approach that can restore and make us whole in body, mind, heart, and spirit. Solidarity therefore, goes deeper in an emotional sense, and it is in the reciprocity of such generosity of spirit that it heals and lifts our spirit. I am also acutely aware that the past advances have only taken place when there was an upsurge of mobilizing among workers of colour and other equity groups. There seems to be an illusion among the leadership that they have done equity, so they should now go back into focusing on the more important priorities.

I have come to realize that unless Canada as a country is willing to acknowledge the colonial project of having subjugated Aboriginal Peoples and redress the injustices, any anti-racism initiatives and strategies are just window dressing at best. To learn to be an ally for Aboriginal issues is also an ongoing project of unpacking our individual and collective privilege, and acknowledging that the industrial economy that we depend on for our livelihood is, often times, the source of the problem for Indigenous Peoples. A session of solidarity circle has barely scratched the surface of this dilemma; the ongoing dialogue needs to take place; more work needs to be done and carried on for the long term. The potential of using this pedagogy of solidarity as a way to broaden the network of allies should be linked

and interconnected with other conditions that will remake solidarity and reinvigorate both the labour movement and the broader movement for social justice.

*Taking Actions to Stand in Solidarity with Aboriginal Peoples*

It has been 14 years since the release of the groundbreaking report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), but nothing substantive and significant has taken place in terms of treaty rights and land claims. The disproportionately higher rate of HINI cases in North communities in the summer of 2009 and the crisis of AIDS is a continuation of the pattern of genocide and colonialism. To me, the silence is deafening as the normalcy of White hegemony dominates the public discourse, and inadvertently, as workers of colour, as non-Aboriginal Peoples, unionist or non-unionists, who have internalized racism through the daily practices, we become accomplices and a silent majority to this ongoing colonization project of Aboriginal Peoples around us.

In the context of corporate globalization and its devastating impact on Indigenous Peoples and the environment worldwide, there is an urgency to organize and build solidarity to counter, to expose and to decenter the core of privilege and power. The challenge is for us to look beyond the size of unionized Aboriginal membership or potential return to justify the offer of support or the level of attention from organized labour. Instead, as labour activists and leaders, we should stand with a profound sense of solidarity with the causes of Aboriginal Peoples, for they are ultimately labour causes, as well as being a movement committed to justice for all. With the backdrop of current recession and job losses, the growing concern of climate change, and the search for green economy, there is much we can learn from the teachings of Indigenous peoples and their acts of defiance across the world to

stop the unbridled greed of multinational corporations. In fact, it is through Aboriginal insistence and resistance in keeping their resources and ecosystem intact that the world has not completely turned into a big playground for the highest bidder.

The practice of solidarity needs to come from a location of respect, accountability, and from the heart. It is my sense that the next Aboriginal sovereignty movement could be the next upsurge of the social and racial justice movement in Canada, and it would be led by the First Nations leaders and activists. Such an Aboriginal Rights movement could be similar to the uprising of the Civil Rights movement in the United States in the 1950s in becoming a watershed in public awareness and understanding. In such a collective project of solidarity, it is the shared sense of justice that will propel all of us to act.

### ***Remaking Interracial Working Class Solidarity***

The hopefulness of this research is grounded in the vision of building an interracial working class movement that goes beyond the labour movement. When one reflects on the progress of equity agenda within labour, changes and progress are made when there is a momentum built by a set of more favourable external conditions, or an upsurge of an independent and powerful social movement that has pushed for change. This is visible in the solidarity and strategic alliance built in North America between feminists in the women's movement and labour movement that is credited for some of the gains and the presence of equity agenda. To expose the institutional racism that is so invisible and yet so invasive within and outside the labour movement, we need to take lessons from this experience in the feminist movement and from the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., that is we have to build

from outside so we can bring it home. Working from the outside will mean building a movement which is so formidable that the labour movement cannot afford to be absent.

In his autobiography, *The Long Haul*, Myles Horton refers to the best educational work at Highlander Education Centre, renowned for its grassroots organizing and civil rights training program, having always taken place when there is a social movement (2002, p. 84). He credits his experiences at Highlander for his own instinct for guessing right about the beginning of CIO organizing in the south in the 1930s and the coming of the Civil Rights movement. In the 1950s, Highlander operated the only integrated residential centre in the country in defiance of the law, started citizenship schools where Blacks taught Blacks to read so they could pass voter registration literacy tests, and was building a network of support prior to the civil rights movement.

Horton refers to the preparatory time leading up to the upsurge of a movement as the organizational period when it has limited objectives and is completely different from what takes place when there is a social movement when people who share the same problem get really involved:

During organization times you try to anticipate a social movement, and if it turns out that you've guessed right, then you'll be on the inside of a movement helping with the mobilization and strategies, instead of on the outside jumping on the bandwagon and never being an important part of it. You try to figure out what's going to happen so that you can position yourself in such a way as to become part of it: you do things in advance to prepare the groundwork for a larger movement. (2002, p. 84)

The distinction Horton made is very instructive to us as activists and organizers. In preparing the groundwork, we are not starting a movement, rather we are building capacity so when the movement happens, we are there. Movements arise when a large number of

people are so gripped by the same issue that they are driven to act—they break with their routines and take risks to make changes. That collective agency and critical consciousness is an expression of solidarity. In the pursuit of racial and economic justice, Aboriginal workers and workers of colour within the labour movement are also here for the long haul.

### ***Building From the Bottom Up***

Leading feminist and social activist, Judy Rebick, in her book, *Transforming Power*, talks about a different kind of building, and provides inspiring examples of transformative change from the Global south, and the Indigenous People in the north. Those who have the least to lose have a world to imagine: “Central is the idea that the change will not come from the right set of policies, the right program, or a better ideology. Rather, change will come from the process of building power from the bottom up” (2009, p. 90).

To apply the same insightful analogy and reimagine what the labour movement could be is an exercise that can be equally liberating. For, in many ways, there is no one program, one blueprint that we can follow to set us back on track. It is more how we can seize these challenges and turn them into opportunities and moments of organizing workers regardless of whether they are unionized or non-unionized, with or without jobs, to experience the sense of urgency and resistance against social and economic inequalities. Some will argue that in response to crisis, the leadership will simply rein in activities in the name of budgetary prudence. In the context of a chaos where nothing can be orchestrated according to plan or safely predicted as easily as in the past, it has offered a crack, an opening for more radical reimagination, to prepare for something extraordinary that will transform the self and the

collective. The notion of building from the bottom up resonates. When we become a force to be reckoned with, organized labour will take notice.

In Toronto, we have already witnessed the emerging trend of workers of colour taking the lead in the struggle for justice for non-unionized workers and issues that affect their communities. The organizing for the labour legislation to regulate temp agencies and the push for live-in caregivers status are two current campaigns that were led by workers of colour themselves through the leadership of Workers Action Centre, a community-based worker advocacy organization. Labour came on board during the process as supporters.

The mobilizing of the Tamil community and its disciplined occupation of the Gardiner Expressway, as a self-organizing initiative, poses inspiration for the labour movement. The juxtaposition of working for a positive racialization within the labour movement or working to build a strong worker of colour movement within the community is not mutually exclusive. We need to do both, to keep continuing to crack open the power structure within the labour movement, to build from the bottom up, and at the same time, strengthen the solidarity organizing within the community. The far-reaching tentacles of the transnational corporate agenda require us to foster connections whenever we can.

After all these years of activism within the movement and working to connect struggles, I have come to realize the importance of that saying, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” It means we will take whatever openings and claim whatever space, within and outside the labour movement, to do solidarity and movement building work. Wherever it is through the formal institutional structures or informal community gatherings, we will continue to build the critical mass of activists of colour and Aboriginal activists.

### *Implications for Future Research and Actions*

This attempt to integrate Indigenous knowledge and worldview into my thesis research is my way as a non-Aboriginal person to begin my own journey of decolonizing my own mindset. It is neither my desire nor my intention to claim to be an expert on Indigenous knowledge. My perspective is undoubtedly one that is rooted in my realities as a Chinese Canadian woman who came to this land over 40 years ago and who has spent most of those years as a labour activist. Further research on anti-racism and decolonizing projects within the labour movement grounded in the lived experiences of Aboriginal workers and from an Aboriginal perspective would be a critical addition to the much-needed work on labour reform and renewal. Further research will greatly enhance and deepen our collective dialogue on how to make the decolonization project real.

This research has explored how a pedagogy of solidarity can serve as a framework of critical education for the purpose of decolonizing and solidarity building between Aboriginal workers and workers of colour. The outcomes of the study have definitely met my learning objective in searching for a more holistic and integrative way of doing anti-racism education in a broader context of decolonization and hegemony. A further extension of this work would be to explore the possibility of applying such a pedagogy of solidarity framework in a mixed audience gathering (i.e., to include White labour activists in the circle). How would it unfold? What would be the prerequisites and adjustments required to ensure that the transformative power of the circle and the critical examination of power and privilege is not *diluted* with the presence of White activists in the room? If we take into consideration the principle of co-responsibility (Mohanty, 2008) outlined in chapter 8, what is the possibility of this pedagogy of solidarity working in tandem with the pedagogy of the privileged to advance the anti-

racism and decolonization agenda? How do we ensure that the vision of an interracial working class movement as envisioned by the research participants would strengthen through such engagement and collaboration?

The directions and findings of this study are by no means definitive; it is more an offering to the labour movement to begin a conversation on what is possible. In the rebuilding of a vibrant movement, there is no right or wrong model or blueprint, rather there is only the striving for a movement grounded in working class social justice unionism that will have the capacity to nurture the different ways of solidarity building. It is the vision of building a tent that is big enough and mature enough to practice an alternate form of power sharing. It is in the process of such a profound shift of sharing power that we will truly build power for the working class and solidarity for all.

It is in that vision of building a big tent that I anticipate two specific actions as a follow-up to this research, both of which have potential further research implications. The first action would be to take the research findings in words and visual representations to the labour movement. By taking research out to the labour community, it is my way as a fellow activist to share the research beyond the academy and continue the dialogue on solidarity building with a broader audience of labour activists. Following on the inspiring approach taken by Cole and McIntyre (2006) in bringing their research to the community of caregivers as mentioned in chapter 4 on methodology, I would enlist the help of some of the solidarity circle participants and set up a display with some of the quotes and the artwork in the next annual Toronto & York Region Labour Council Aboriginal Workers and Workers of Colour Conference to be held in May 2011. In addition, I would set aside a speaker's corner with a video camera where individuals, after viewing the exhibit, can add their own stories to enrich

and expand this canvas of solidarity. It is my hope that the accessibility of the materials and attractiveness of the visual images will draw resonance and evoke further personal and collective reflection.

The other concrete action I envision involves the initiative that has begun as a result of the solidarity dialogue. The group has continued to meet and engage in mobilizing activities. In addition, they have made a commitment to go back and take on a more proactive leadership within their respective constituency organizations: CBTU, ACLA, LATUC, and the OFL Aboriginal Caucus. With the support of the research participants and activists, this follow-up action will aim to carry out another round of solidarity dialogue as a way to begin our cross-constituency solidarity building and organizing.

In putting more energy and creativity into self-organizing and cross-equity group organizing, we are building bridges and building capacity. Such strategic alliance will come through when it is premised on a framework of decolonization, when we refuse to be complicit and act as accomplices of projects of exclusion within or outside the labour movement. Honest dialogue and respectful debate need to take place so new consciousness and awareness can fuel our activism. These are some opportunities of engaging more activists in expanding both the solidarity circle and the collective narrative of resistance.

We will continue to create the opportunities and meaningful gatherings where transformation in body, mind, and spirit will take place, and where critical consciousness is created by agency and action. These are ground-clearing activities within the labour movement and the broader social movement in order to make the soil fertile enough for the flowers to bloom in all their vibrancy and colour. There lies the richness of a pedagogy that integrates the heart, soul, body, and mind. This is where the decolonizing of our mindset

begins: by preserving the sacredness and well-being of each of our own narratives, and at the same time, nurturing our collective stance to recover, restore, reimagine, and reclaim.

### *In Closing*

In rekindling the notion of solidarity as the spirit of the labour movement, the core of this research has focussed on the spirit of a group of Aboriginal and worker of colour union activists. The research has also been a collective process of empowerment and solidarity building. It has been a shared journey to recover our personal and collective narratives in this movement with all its challenges and possibilities, to reimagine ways of building solidarity that are more profound and lasting, and finally to work collectively towards reclaiming our space within a new inter-racial working class movement.

The vibrancy and optimism for the movement, through the words and visual representations presented here, reflects the deep commitment to the ideal of justice and equality and a vision of a labour movement that also belongs to workers of colour and Aboriginal Peoples. It speaks to the yearning for a wholeness of a movement, a transformative process in which we will continue to engage. In the process of making the labour movement whole, we will continue the project of recovering our voices, reclaiming our space, and remaking solidarity.

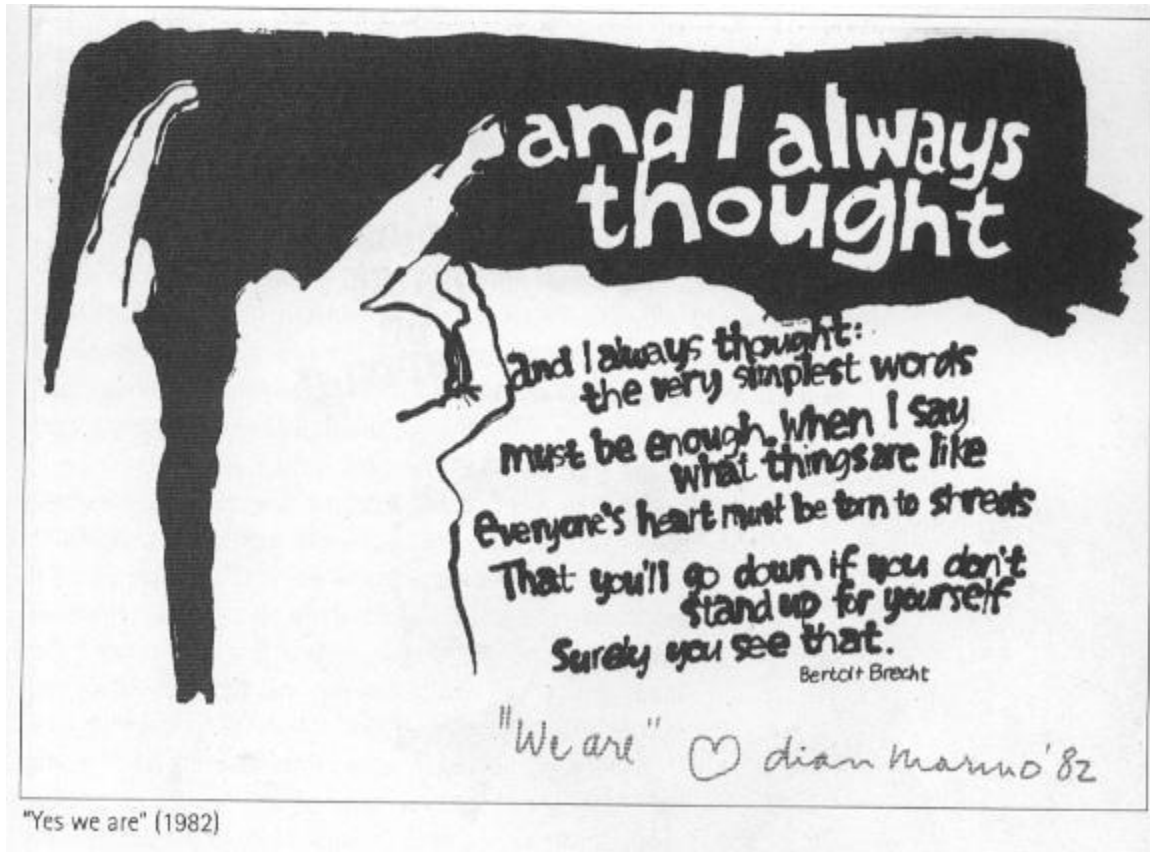
For the journey ahead, I will close by sharing three items in my knapsack as an activist and a researcher that have helped kept me grounded and inspired. First is a quote from Louis Owens, an Aboriginal educator who saw himself as a trickster and used his classroom to challenge the colonial mindset:

Trickster lives in every utterance, ready to subvert, and pervert, to question, to violate, to challenge, to change, and, when one finds oneself defined by the dominant Other- colonized in canon or classroom – one immediately searches for the tools of mimicry and subversion, even if those tools must be forged in silence imposed or tradition commodified. As teachers we must strive to bring that subversive energy and consciousness into the classroom so that our students negotiate frontiers rather than static territories, and so that privilege is put into question and centers do not hold. (2002, p. 231)

The possibility of all of us being tricksters and our gatherings qualifying as subversive energy makes the journey ahead more playful.

The second piece is a visual depiction of a Bertolt Brecht poem, “And I always thought” by dian marino, a friend, popular educator, and visual artist who passed on much too young (1941–1993).

And I always thought: the very simplest words must be enough. When I say what things are like everyone’s heart must be torn to shreds, that you’ll go down if you don’t stand up for yourself. Surely you see that.



**Figure 9.** The power of the clenched fists speaks to me.

The last is an excerpt from a poem, “The Low Road,” by Marge Piercy which serves to remind me of the strength in solidarity and the why of our collective journey.

What can they do  
to you? Alone, you can fight,  
you can refuse, you can  
take what revenge you can  
but they roll over you.

But two people fighting  
back to back can cut through  
a mob, a snake-dancing file  
can break a cordon, an army  
can meet an army.

Two people can keep each other  
Sane, can give support, conviction,  
Love, massage, hope, sex.  
Three people are a delegation,  
a committee, a wedge. With four  
you can play bridge and start  
an organization. With six  
you can rent a whole house,  
eat pie for dinner with no  
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.  
A hundred fill a hall.  
A thousand have solidarity and  
your own newsletter;  
ten thousand, power and your own  
newspaper;  
a hundred thousand, your own media;  
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act, it starts when you do  
it again after they said no,  
it starts when you say *We*  
and know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more.

*To “where the centers do not hold,”*

*to the moments of clenched fists,*

*and*

*to “the low road” of remaking*

*WE ...*

*Solidarity Forever ...*

*Solidarity for All!*

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

How did you first get involved in the union?

1. In your activism within the labour movement, how do you define solidarity?
2. Could you share a story on one powerful experience of solidarity that has given you a lasting impact? And a story when solidarity was not forthcoming?
3. In the context of globalized labour market restructuring, what are your hopes and dreams for the labour movement?
4. What do you see as possible challenges and ideas to build solidarity on equity issues within labour settings?
5. What sustains you to carry on and remain active in the movement?
6. What do you see are the challenges and ideas for change within the movement to integrate class, race and gender and build a renewed sense of working class solidarity?
7. If you have to describe or portray solidarity visually, what will it look like?