

Canada's Aboriginal Peoples Social Inclusion and Communities at Risk

A History of Exclusion

Canada's Aboriginal Peoples have experienced many injustices in their homeland since the arrival of Europeans in North America over 500 years ago:

- The entire Beothuk First Nation in Newfoundland, was wiped out by 1829;
- In the 19th century, settlers often gave blankets infested with small pox to Aboriginal peoples resulting in thousands of deaths;
- Aboriginal people were forced on to reserves until the early 1900s;
- The Indian Act of 1876 assumed control over First Nations affairs, outlawing cultural activities, restricting self-support (hunting, fishing, and trade), and removing status from Native women who marry non-native men;
- Amendments to the Indian Act in 1894 led to the forced placement of tens of thousands of children in residential schools. The last of these residential schools closed in 1988;
- More than 50% of Aboriginal children, who attended those residential schools, were forcefully taken from home, not allowed to speak their languages, and subjected to extreme emotional, physical and sexual abuse;
- Aboriginal people were denied the right to vote until 1960 (1968 in Quebec); and
- Centuries of built-up grievances of Aboriginal people exploded into national attention with the 1990 "Indian Summer", when the military suppressed a Mohawk community at Oka.

Poverty and Social Exclusion

As a consequence of Canada's racist policies, Aboriginal peoples and their communities have been confronted by a host of social problems. Just a brief review of some of the problems would include:

Income

- Unemployment rate for Aboriginal people in the labour force rose from 15.4% in 1981 to 24.6% in 1991, despite advances in education – on some Aboriginal reserves rates are as high as 80% and 90%;
- Earned income for the average Aboriginal individual in 1991 was \$14,561 compared to \$24,000 for all Canadians - a \$1,000 DECLINE since 1981;

Crisis for Aboriginal Children

- The Infant mortality rate among First Nations people is more than double the Canadian rate (17.2 compared to 7.9 per 100 babies);
- The suicide rate is 3 times higher than the national rate – 7 times higher for youth 17 to 24 years old;
- Only 42% of Aboriginal children complete grade 12 compared to 61% of Canadian children; and
- Death rates from injury are 3 to 4 times higher among Aboriginal children than among Canadian children in general.

Health

- The incidence of TB and diabetes is 17 times and 3 times higher, respectively, among the Aboriginal population - in 1991, 75% of the TB cases reported in Canada were of Aboriginal origin;
- Over 30% of Aboriginal adults reported a disability - more than double the national rate. Among Aboriginal adults aged 15 to 34, the disability rate is three times the national rate for the same age group; and
- 54% of 74,000 First Nations housing units do not meet basic standards.

Incarceration

- First Nations people make up 3% of the population but more than 10% of the prison population;

Experiences of Social Inclusion

Although faced by many barriers throughout history, Aboriginal people still have been able to make outstanding contributions to Canadian society. There are strong examples of mutual support and shared struggle that members of Canada's First Nations have provided to the rest of Canada.

- Thousands of First Nations men joined in the fight against fascism during the second world war;
- Thousands of students, environmentalists, trade union activists and women's organizations have been involved in international

human rights campaigns and have fought alongside First Nations for justice in places like Oldham River, James Bay and Oka;

- Some unions, including the National Union, have passed resolutions creating aboriginal equity seats on their executive boards;
- The growing Aboriginal Rights movement is having significant influence on public policy; and
- Many First Nations people are playing a highly visible role in Canada's cultural, political, and economic spheres.

The contents of this Fact Sheet are based on a presentation by Lisa Allgaier to the National Union's 2003 Equality Leadership School. Lisa is a consultant on Aboriginal Issues and has worked with the National Union's component, BCGEU/NUPGE, on a number of Aboriginal workshops.

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