

Common Frontiers 2024 Report “Roots to shoots” December 23, 2024



Common Frontiers September 19/20 in-person meeting, Kairos Office, Toronto

This report provides an overview of Common Frontiers’ work between the period of March and December, 2024. This year was important for the revitalization of the coalition.

Each section of the report describes work conducted to date and provides a snapshot of the work moving forward into 2025 and beyond.

A 2025 program plan will be circulated in early January followed by member engagement and feedback on that plan, the first of which will take place at our coalition meeting on January 15.

As a national coalition with 35 years of experience, Common

Frontiers builds upon our legacy of working to defend people and the environment throughout the Americas from the harms of neoliberal trade and the socio-economic and political policies and practices that prioritize profits over all else. Through the years, we have shifted according to the particular context of our times, both here in Canada and throughout the region. **Today, we are uniquely positioned to build on this legacy and pivot in the ways that our current – and rapidly changing – context demands in order to promote and defend socio-economic rights, strong public services and the environment.**

Common Frontiers builds alliances here in Canada and across the Americas to deepen our collective analysis and understanding of how overarching socio-economic and political shifts in Latin America connect to struggles here in Canada; to strengthen our understanding of the implication of those shifts for workers and their unions, marginalized and racialized peoples, Indigenous people and the environment; and to formulate strategies for resistance and transnational solidarity. We provide critical analysis, bridge connections among struggles and build education, awareness and solidarity across the Americas. We do this in cooperation with our member organizations and our national and international allies.

1. Revitalizing the membership, mapping synergies in priorities, strengthening coalitional ties

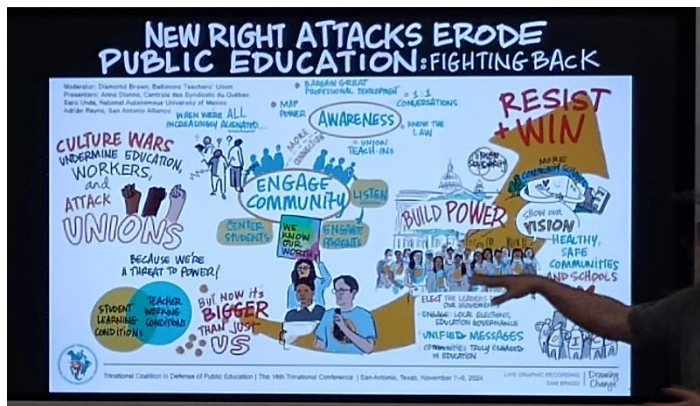
In March, we hired a Coalition Coordinator. The previous Program Manager stepped down in May, 2023 and a transition committee was struck to find a replacement. Our focus since April, 2024 has been on revitalizing the Common Frontiers coalition with a purview of building and strengthening collective work and a strong multi-sectoral coalition. **An important part of that process has involved a comprehensive approach to surveying the needs and interests of coalition members and interviewing founding and prior members and allies.**

Between March and September, **Common Frontiers conducted one-on-one interviews with 27 people** including current and previous Common Frontiers members, allies and former staff as well as some of the historic founders of the coalition. The interviews included adaptations of the following key questions:

- Any thoughts you/your organization/union have about how Common Frontiers could be a useful space to support the work you do in relation to Latin America.
- Your general thoughts or ideas on Common Frontiers – what you know about it, how you understand it as a coalition, why it exists, etc.
- Obstacles or challenges you have seen previously in how the coalition operates; and opportunities you see for how the work could be more useful to you and your organization/union.

The responses to these questions were compiled and formed the basis of the content for an in-person meeting of the full coalition, held on September 19 and 20, 2024 in Toronto (see detail below).

Zoom Cafes | Zoom cafes, which are regular 1-2 hour coalition meetings, were introduced as a way to promote communication, accountability and collaboration within the coalition. They provide opportunities to discuss updates on the work to date; create a space for members to bring forward any potential collaborative work; and to collectively discuss and analyze current events and socio-political and economic dynamics in the region. Zoom cafes were held on May 21, June 18, July 16 and August 13. An average of 8 members participated in each one.



Graphic from the Tri-National Conference for the Defense of Public Education, San Antonio, Texas. Design by Sam Bradd

The final Zoom café was held on December 2 and included a report-back from the **Tri-National Coalition for the Defense of Public Education conference** held in San Antonio in early November. The conference was an important moment to rebuild alliances throughout the region with workers fighting to protect students, parents, teachers and support workers from attacks on public education. This alliance will be particularly important as we build solidarity with the student and teachers' movement in Argentina.

Zoom cafes will continue in 2025, and will focus on sharing analysis about the region and updates on key areas of work.



Panel presentations at September in-person meeting

On September 19 and 20, we held the first in-person meeting of the full coalition since the COVID-19 pandemic. 21 people participated from 16 organizations. We engaged in small group work to collectively delve into and expand on the key areas of interest identified in the one-on-one interviews. The meeting was highly successful, very participatory and provided an opportunity for cross-coalition engagement and the development of a path forward for collective work.

The first day included an **historical panel** bringing in voices from Common Frontiers history and its roots in the fight to protect workers and the environment from the potentially negative impacts of the neoliberal free trade agreements of the late 1980s and 1990s (recording available [here](#)). The objectives of the panel were 1) To increase understanding among the newer folks around the Common Frontiers table of the rich history of Common Frontiers, including key moments that shaped the coalition’s work, important learnings, and the challenges that it faced, and 2) To reflect on the learnings from different moments of Common Frontier’s trajectory to begin to consider the possibilities and challenges of the work today amid new socio-economic and political contexts – both in Latin America and here in Canada.



John Foster zooming in for the historical panel

Speakers included John Foster - a long-time member of Common Frontiers who played an instrumental role in building the Canada-Chile solidarity movement, and has helped shaped Common Frontiers since its inception; Manuel Perez-Rocha – previously a member of the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMAALC), a coalition of Mexican organizations focused on NAFTA and with which Common Frontiers worked very closely in the NAFTA and later FTAA days; and Judith Marshall - a scholar-activist who worked for more than 20 years doing member education, worker to worker exchanges with the Steelworkers Humanity Fund, and who played a key role in Common Frontiers during the World Social Forum era. Louise Casselman and Jennifer Seif from the Common Frontiers transition committee facilitated the panel.

Louise Casselman provided weaving commentary during the panel based on her decades long work in Mexico, and Central America, as a member of the Latin American Working group, and as one of the pioneers of Canada-Latin America Labour solidarity, *Fronteras Comunes* in Mexico and Common Frontiers here in Canada.



Conjunctural analysis panel

We also held a **conjunctural analysis panel** that focused on the rise of the right in Latin America and the current challenges and opportunities for the Gustavo Petro government in Colombia (recording available in [original Spanish](#) and [dubbed in English](#)). The latter was led by Edgar Isch, from the Central University of Ecuador and the IDEA Network, an alliance to defend and enhance public education throughout the Americas. The presentation

on Colombia was conducted by Omar Fernandez Obregón currently serving as Deputy Director General of the Unit for Comprehensive Care and Reparation of Victims (UARIV) of the Colombian government.

The remainder of the meeting involved small group work and discussions to gather and chart members' alignment and misalignment on potential collective work.

Key objectives for our work that came out of that meeting include:

- To counter governments' and corporations' attempts to divide, and pit workers, Indigenous and environmental interests against one another (within the priority themes of the rise of the right and trade).
- To intervene/build opportunities for cross-sectoral discussion on neoliberal trade and its impact on the protection of public services, people, the environment and Indigenous land and rights.
- To align ourselves with social movements in Latin America and Canada that respond to current realities to promote a more ecological and human centred future.
- To enhance and build opportunities for collaboration on global education/solidarity programming and curriculum in our unions, organizations and associated events.
- To amplify Common Frontiers' members' work when relevant/possible and without duplicating efforts of other coalitions/networks.

The two-day meeting ended with a field trip to the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) Resource Centre, located at York University. Eight coalition members attended and received a guided tour by long time scholar-activist Dr. Liisa North. We toured the Centre's rich collection of historical materials of Canada-Latin American and Caribbean solidarity, including various boxes from John Foster containing historical Common Frontiers documents, and a tour of the two main collections held at the Resource Centre – the Latin American Working Group (LAWG) Library and The



Cerlac Resource Centre tour with Professor Emerita Liisa North, York

International Commission for Coordination of Solidarity Among Sugar Workers (ICCSASW) Library. Participants also visited the offices of CERLAC two floors up where various CERLAC Fellows and graduate students have offices and meeting space. The history of Common Frontiers is wrapped up in the treasure trove of resources carefully preserved at this incredibly important Resource Centre.

The outcome of the discussions and small group work from the two-day September meeting were summarized in a three-page document sent as follow up to the coalition in October which serves as

the basis for planning, discussion and work for 2025 onward. The next full meeting of the coalition will be on January 15, and there will be a two-day in-person meeting held in 2025.



File boxes at the CERLAC Resource Centre

2. Build opportunities for education and analysis on key trends impacting the region and their relevance to members and their own membership and organizational structures

This period has been important for building our engagement with strategic partners and allies throughout the Americas to garner a deeper understanding of how social movements in the region are resisting these overarching trends and threats. We are building an important base for defining Common Frontier's strategies to build power and support resistance efforts throughout the Americas and to respond as a Canada-based coalition. This work has involved informal meetings with allies throughout the region, including here in Canada, organizing internal educational sessions, supporting and amplifying the messages and advocacy work of delegations visiting from Latin America, and sharing information through our internal listserv, website and social media. See below for detail.

Venezuelan elections | As follow up to our 2023 Program Plan, between May and September, we held a number of meetings with **members interested in the lead up to and aftermath of the 2024 Venezuelan electoral period**. We met with Teri Matheson from Code Pink to get her pulse on the current political and economic situation, her analysis of the presidential candidates and the growing opposition movement against the Maduro government. Based on these conversations, we held an August 28 panel with Maria Paez Victor, a prominent Venezuelan Canadian academic and Ken Montenegro from the U.S. National Lawyer's Guild who had recently returned from observing the July 28 elections. Twelve people attended the internal event. Common Frontiers member Jim Hodgson, former Latin American Coordinator for the United Church of Canada, joined the panel as a discussant. Notes from that meeting were shared through the Common Frontiers internal listserv. We have also connected with a new Canada and US-based solidarity group, the [Venezuela Solidarity Network](#).



Jorge Orgales-Garcia

Argentina under the Milei government | As part of our ongoing work to analyze and educate ourselves, as a coalition, and our organizations / unions on the larger trends in the region and their implications for work here in Canada, we held an internal event on July 16 with Common Frontiers member Jorge Garcia-Orgales, an Argentinian Canadian formerly with the Steelworkers Humanity Fund. Jorge was in Argentina during the inauguration of libertarian president Javier Milei and had recently returned from a second trip to Argentina in May.

Jorge provided a **socio-economic and political analysis of the current situation amid this very staunch right-wing government and provided information about the resistance efforts** organized largely by students, teachers' unions and university professors speaking out against Milei's controversial 238-article economic reform bill. The bill includes a set of austerity measures aimed at economic deregulation, tax breaks for investors, mechanisms to reduce access to minimum retirement allowances and to drastically weaken labour protections. It has been criticized by a wide segment of Argentinian society including a range of organizations, left-wing parties, retirees, teachers and labour unions. (See section 4 for related ongoing work in 2025).

3. Free trade, Investor-state dispute settlement clauses and impacts on people and the environment

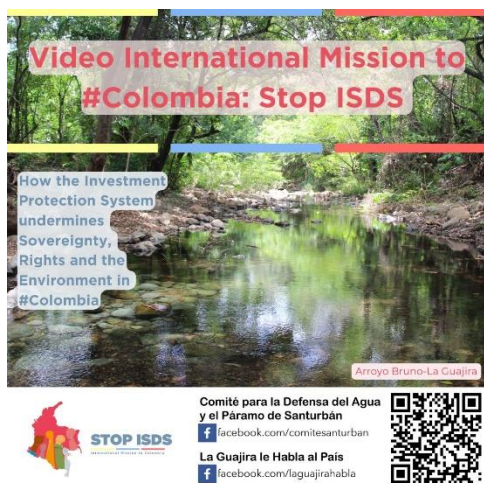
Common Frontiers participates in an international initiative to evaluate the possibility of building a global campaign against investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS). The meetings are spearheaded by various non-profit and non-governmental organizations in Europe who were involved in the successful

campaign to convince European countries to pull out of the outdated Energy Charter Treaty, which continues to protect fossil fuel investors and allow them to sue governments for millions of euros.

The purpose of our engagement is to stay informed on global efforts to fight against the harmful impacts that ISDS is having on people and the environment and build on opportunities for education and advocacy on ISDS in Canada that will come out of those global efforts. For example, we are active in discussions on the formulation of a global pledge.

While ISDS is a major focus of work for many Latin American organizations and communities, engagement has been low on the global calls given the particular focus at this stage on plans, but individual organizations have indicated interest in continuing to be included in conversations moving forward as that work progresses.

As a result, Common Frontiers is engaging with Latin American organizations separately while still maintaining a relationship with the European and US organizations involved in the campaign. In 2025, Common Frontiers will strengthen linkages with the regional coalition [America Latina Mejor Sin TLC](#) (Latin America is better without Free Trade Agreements) and the U.S. based Transnational Institute (TNI).



We continue to engage with organizations including the Committee for the Defence of Water and the Santurbán Páramo, Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA), José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers' Collective (CAJAR), and the Colombian Network for Environmental Justice, along with international allies¹ calling for a withdrawal from ISDS mechanisms. We have helped promote their *Stop ISDS: Report of the international mission to Colombia* which outlines the devastating economic, social and environmental consequences of “investor-state dispute settlement” (ISDS) claims in Colombia. We also promoted their **30-minute documentary**, *How the Investment Protection System undermines sovereignty, rights and the environment in*

Colombia (in Spanish with English subtitles). The documentary helps explain how ISDS mechanisms make it possible for corporations to quash the sovereign decisions of countries when they attempt to protect human rights and the environment, and uncovers the international mission’s key findings.

We helped translate and circulate [this statement](#) for Water and Life by the Committee for the Defense of Water and the Santurbán Páramo. The statement draws attention to a May decision by United Arab Emirates investment management company MUBADALA-MINESA and Canadian mining company Aris Mining, headquartered in Vancouver, to enter into a joint project, Soto Norte. The committee calls for

¹ Alliance Sud (Switzerland); América Latina y el Caribe Mejor sin TLC; Argentina Mejor sin TLC; ATTAC Argentina; Global Justice Now (United Kingdom); Institute for Policy Studies – Global; Economy Program (United States); Public Services International; London Mining Network (United Kingdom); MiningWatch Canada; TerraJusta (Bolivia); Transnational Institute; War on Want (United Kingdom).

the denial of an environmental license which would enable the companies to continue to contaminate the Santurbán and the Suratá River.

This work will continue into 2025, as members of the Committee are currently being targeted and intimidated to stop their work in defense of the Paramo and as Petro's important environmental Decree 044 of 2024, which declares particular territories as reserve areas for the protection of water against mining and which faces criticism by the Colombian and Canadian mining and business sectors.

We are in discussions with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Mining Watch Canada, International Policy Studies and the Transnational Institute on how Common Frontiers can fill the gap in work on Canada's role in ISDS policy and practice in Latin America. In the first part of 2025, we will hold an educational on ISDS cases filed by Canadian companies emphasizing how these clauses are being used against Latin American governments that enact laws and policies aimed at protecting their water and environment. At a time when fossil fuel phase outs are more important than ever, Canadian companies, with the tacit support of the Canadian government, continue to sue governments for billions of dollars.

Environmental and water defenders' delegations to Canada



Ecuador | Between September 28 and October 6, a delegation of four women land defenders from Ecuador came to Canada to provide a platform for Ecuadorian organizations and communities impacted by Canadian oil and mining projects. Common Frontiers supported with logistics for the

delegates' time in Toronto and organized a meeting with local civil society organizations. Twenty-eight people from twenty different environmental, trade union, church and social justice organizations participated. The delegates spoke about human rights and environmental abuses at project sites in their country and the lack of transparency, inclusiveness, and consultation related to those projects and the trade negotiations themselves.

The land defenders also raised concerns about a planned investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) clause which will likely be included in the trade deal, which they argue would prioritize the rights of transnational companies over communities and the environment. We continue to circulate information and opportunities for advocacy to the Common Frontiers' listserv and to the civil society meeting attendees and, along with 179 other organizations, recently signed onto [this open letter](#) in solidarity with mining affected communities in Palo Quemado and Las Pampas, Ecuador who are facing intimidation and criminalization as a result of their defense of water and life and their opposition to Canadian mining.

In the lead up to the delegation, in March, we also helped to promote and endorsed [the webinar](#) *What's at stake in Canada's trade negotiations with Ecuador?* The webinar included presentations from three of the four Ecuadorian delegates; David Boyd, UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment; and Ketty Nivyabandi, Amnesty International.

To date, Indigenous communities in Ecuador have not been consulted and no human rights impact assessment has been conducted. Common Frontiers continues to meet with the other main organizations of the delegation - Amnesty International, Mining Watch Canada, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Kairos and the Canadian Labour Congress to strategize on next steps, and to centralize information about subsequent negotiation rounds and ongoing and increased security concerns in the regions where the delegates live. This work will continue into 2025.

El Salvador | Common Frontiers has been sitting in on weekly strategy and planning calls related to the ongoing case against five Salvadoran water defenders arrested on trumped up charges back in January 2023. While we do not take on case work in El Salvador, we participate in order to accurately share and amplify information that is constantly evolving in that long historic struggle and to stay abreast of the right-wing swing in El Salvador since the election of President Nayib Bukele and related grassroots organizing. The Canadian organizations who spearhead that case work includes the United Church of Canada, Mining Watch Canada, PSAC-Social Justice Fund, among others.



Tri-National meeting on the 2026 CUSMA review, Toronto

The five water defenders, Miguel Ángel Gámez, Alejandro Láinez García, Pedro Antonio Rivas Láinez, Antonio Pacheco, and Saúl Agustín Rivas Ortega were among the leaders of the historic and successful campaign that convinced the Salvadoran legislature to unanimously pass a ban on metals mining in 2017 to protect that country's rivers. On October 18, a Salvadoran tribunal ruled that all five were innocent; however, ten days

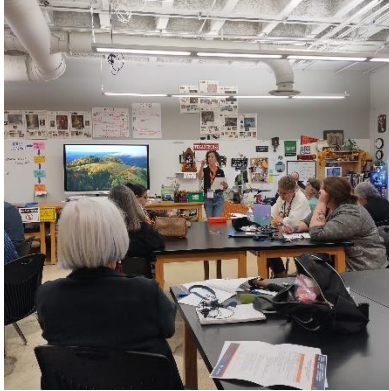
later, the Attorney General's office filed an appeal and then the case was sent back for a retrial scheduled between February 3-6. Common Frontiers promoted and re-circulated [the statement](#) about that case and has amplified tweets coming from the international allies and the Economic and Social Development Association of Santa Marta (ADES).

In an extremely disappointing turn of events, on December 20, the Bukele administration introduced a legislative proposal overturning the historic metals mining ban. It will likely be passed today. We will continue to monitor and support the efforts of the International Allies to raise awareness about the case against the Santa Marta 5 and the ongoing actions taken by the Bukele government to enrich the few and curb protest related to the defense of water and territory.

Finally, we have been participating in meetings of the Trade Justice Network. The main focus of discussions to date is on the 2026 review of the Canada-US-Mexico Agreement. At a November 12 meeting of the Trade Justice Network (TJN), members of the network evaluated the potential for engaging in a coordinated campaign related to the review. The decision was made to hold a December 11 meeting on the heels of the Canadian Association of Labour Lawyers's (CALL) two-day conference on the CUSMA Rapid Response Mechanism and to invite folks from Quebec, the U.S. and Mexico, in addition to the Canadian organizations in the TJN. More will be shared about the outcomes and next steps related to that meeting once the TJN organizes a follow up meeting in early January.

4. Rise of the Right throughout the Americas

An important outcome of the one-on-one interviews and the September in-person meeting with the full coalition has been a keen interest to focus attention on the dramatic turn to the right in various countries throughout the Americas, **including the potential for a Polievre government here in Canada.**



Andrée Gacoin, BCTF, moderating a panel at 16th Tri-National Conference

Main concerns include how this shift is bringing a decrease in political space and restrictions placed on civil society limiting their capacity to defend the rights of workers, poor, racialized and marginalized people and Indigenous people. It has led to increases in militarization, crackdowns and criminalization, failure to adhere to due process and lawfare and widespread violations of fundamental rights and freedoms.

As mentioned above, during the in-person meeting, we had a speaker from Ecuador provide an overview of the key themes related to the rise of the right in Latin America and working groups delved into how Common Frontiers might focus our work in relation to this overarching theme. While more questions than answers emerged

during those working group sessions, we are now focused on building connections with other networks working on this issue as a way to build alliances here in Canada and throughout Latin America and share analyses and strategies to defend against this uptick in right-wing attacks against the protection of public services, racialized and marginalized people, workers, Indigenous people and the environment.

On November 7-10, three Common Frontiers members participated in the **Tri-National Coalition for the Defense of Public Education's conference in San Antonio, Texas**. The conference brought together 113 delegates including teachers, support workers, academics and non-profits from 31 organizations in the US, Canada, Quebec, Mexico and Puerto Rico. One of the workshop streams focused on the "The New Rights' attack on public education." The conference was an excellent space to build connections and new alliances among those fighting to defend public sector workers and to connect with [The Initiative for Democratic Education in the Americas \(IDEA\) Network](#), which is a network of organizations in the Americas that share a commitment to protecting and improving public education which they see as essential to democratic development and the protection of human rights.



Cuba government's delivery of food by bicycle trolleys in Cardenas to over 100 people daily. Photo: The Christian Centre for Reflection and Dialogue

The IDEA Network is engaging in a large-scale research project pertaining to the rise of the right in the region, which includes a mapping of various organizations currently struggling against the impacts of this trend. We will have a follow up meeting with the Coordinator(s) of the IDEA Network on collaboration related to transnational solidarity with Argentinian students and workers following their mid-December network meeting.

5. Sanctions in Cuba

Common Frontiers was approached by various Canadian churches, trade unions and other non-governmental organizations to host an online action on our website in support of the ongoing campaign to pressure the Canadian government to take meaningful action on Cuba. This includes scaling up efforts to provide immediate food, medicines and medical supplies to Cuba; using its influence with the United States to encourage the easing of sanctions; and urging the US government to remove Cuba from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, as the Obama administration had done in 2015. The coalition argues that the ongoing sanctions against Cuba are contributing to the undermining of public policies, public

services and food sovereignty. In November, Cuba made international news after [widescale power outages](#) impacted a majority of its residents. Canada has a key diplomatic role to play to counter the devastating impact that U.S. sanctions has wreaked on the country's economy and the ability of those who live and work there to afford basic necessities.

Common Frontiers [set up an online email campaign](#) (currently being revamped) targeting Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as key Conservative, NDP and Bloc foreign affairs critics and MPs. The campaign will last for several months, though will be relaunched and nuanced in the new year, given the uncertainty of the current Canadian political context and to reflect a recent decision by the Canadian government to increase aid.