



Disaster is political

Voices from the BCTF International Think Tank
on Responding to Climate Emergencies

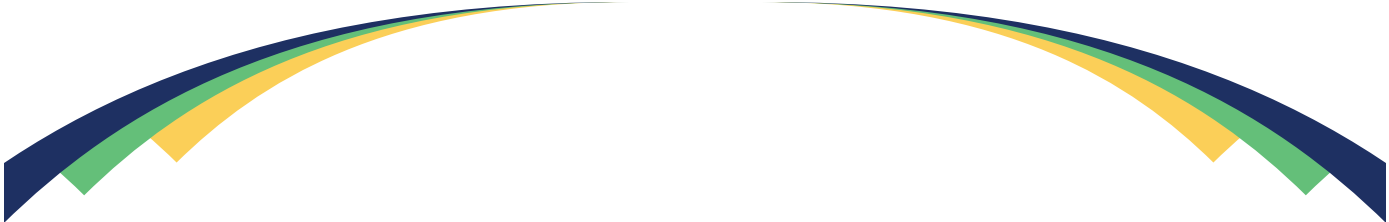
May 2023

BCTF Kids Matter
Teachers Care



Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory

BC Teachers' Federation members and staff live, teach, and carry out union work on the traditional and unceded territories of the many First Nations peoples of British Columbia. We specifically acknowledge the unceded joint territory of the x^wməθk^wəy^əm (Musqueam), səliwətał (Tsleil Waututh), and S_kw_x wú7mesh (Squamish) Nations on whose land the BCTF building is located.



Disaster is political - Voices from the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF) International Think Tank on Responding to Climate Emergencies

From floods to fires, the recent impact of climate disasters on communities across British Columbia (BC) has been unprecedented. Teachers have been at the forefront of assisting community members displaced by these disasters and helping each other to recover and rebuild.

As a social justice union that has signed onto the principles of a Just Recovery and the Green New Deal, what is the responsibility of the union in addressing the global issue of climate change? How can small actions lead to greater awareness and broader actions in collaboration with other social and labour organizations? How can an agenda of social demands, linked to the needs of our communities, be advanced by the union?

To explore these questions, the BCTF International Solidarity Program hosted a one day think tank: Teachers Responding to Climate Emergencies. The think tank brought together teachers in BC who have been directly affected by climate change¹, teacher advocates working on environmental justice², and colleagues from the Puerto Rican Teachers' Federation (FMPT). The think tank is a methodology used by the BCTF as a form of activist research. Following Jones (2018), activist research is a “framework for conducting collaborative research that makes explicit challenges to power through transformative action” (p. 27). As such, the day was structured to first share experiences and perspectives on the theme “teachers responding to climate emergencies,” and then develop strategies for action. The day’s conversations were interpreted in a visual mural, created by Miley Leong of Drawing Change. Drawing Change (see www.drawingchange.com) is a network of graphic recorders who listen, synthesize, and draw dialogue in real time.

1 Four locals each sent two teachers—Merritt, Fraser-Cascade, Princeton and Kamloops

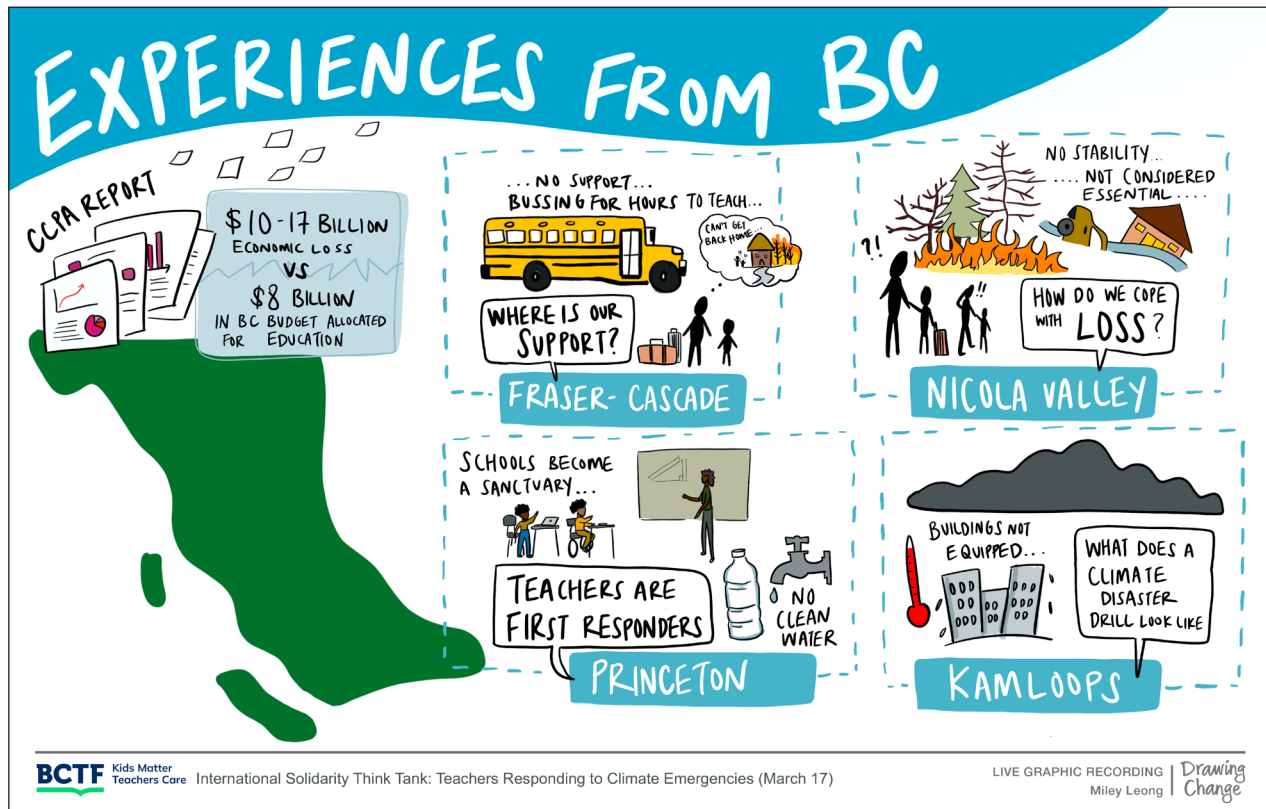
2 This included: one teacher representing the BCTF Committee for Action on Social Justice (CASJ), two teachers representing the Environmental Educators Provincial Specialist Association (EEPSA), and two teachers representing the BCTF WR Long International Solidarity Committee.

Teachers responding to climate emergencies

As highlighted in recent research by the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives (Lee & Parfitt, 2022), British Columbia has experienced an intensification of climate related disasters in recent years. In 2021 alone, communities faced a heat dome in June, wildfires over the summer months, and significant flooding in November. In that year, the disasters cumulatively cost the province between \$10.6 and \$17.1 billion dollars. This is equivalent to 3.5% of the province's GDP.

While these numbers are staggering, financial figures alone cannot capture the trauma of these events within communities, nor how communities have come together to support one another. This includes the work of teachers and school communities in responding to the immediate disaster as well as the ongoing affects.

As a part of the think tank, teachers from four locals—Merritt, Fraser-Cascade, Princeton and Kamloops—were invited to share their experiences of how teachers had responded to climate emergencies within their local. While the contexts are distinct, there are several key themes that could be drawn from their narratives.



“Teachers are expected to be first responders”

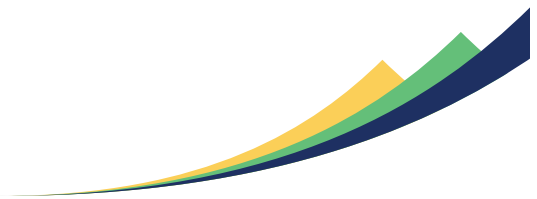
Across different locals, teachers described how teachers were a central part of the community response—from knocking on doors to checking-in with families, passing out supplies and meals, and participating in search and rescue operations.

However, despite this role that many teachers have taken on, the vast majority have not received training or crucial mental health supports. One teacher who was a trained first responder stressed the importance of training prior to a disaster. Lack of these supports contributed to experiences of trauma, as well as struggles to think through the new realities of being a teacher within the context of climate emergencies.

“Students attach a safe space to a school”

Teachers recognized that keeping schools open after a disaster is very important for the students and their school community. At the same time, they described a need to critically engage with what the role of the teacher is in that moment. One teacher described how they did not feel like an educator in the immediate aftermath of a climate disaster, but rather a “nurturer.” This points to how schools can become “climate sanctuaries,” and the need for critical infrastructure to ensure that schools are the safest places within communities.

At the same time, keeping schools open in the immediate aftermath of a climate disaster had a particular effect on teachers who were also living trauma. One participant described “going to work with a suitcase in your car,” while another described the ongoing work of “loss” and “coping” that they were doing in addition to their teaching.





Each teacher “gave a lot to be in my district”

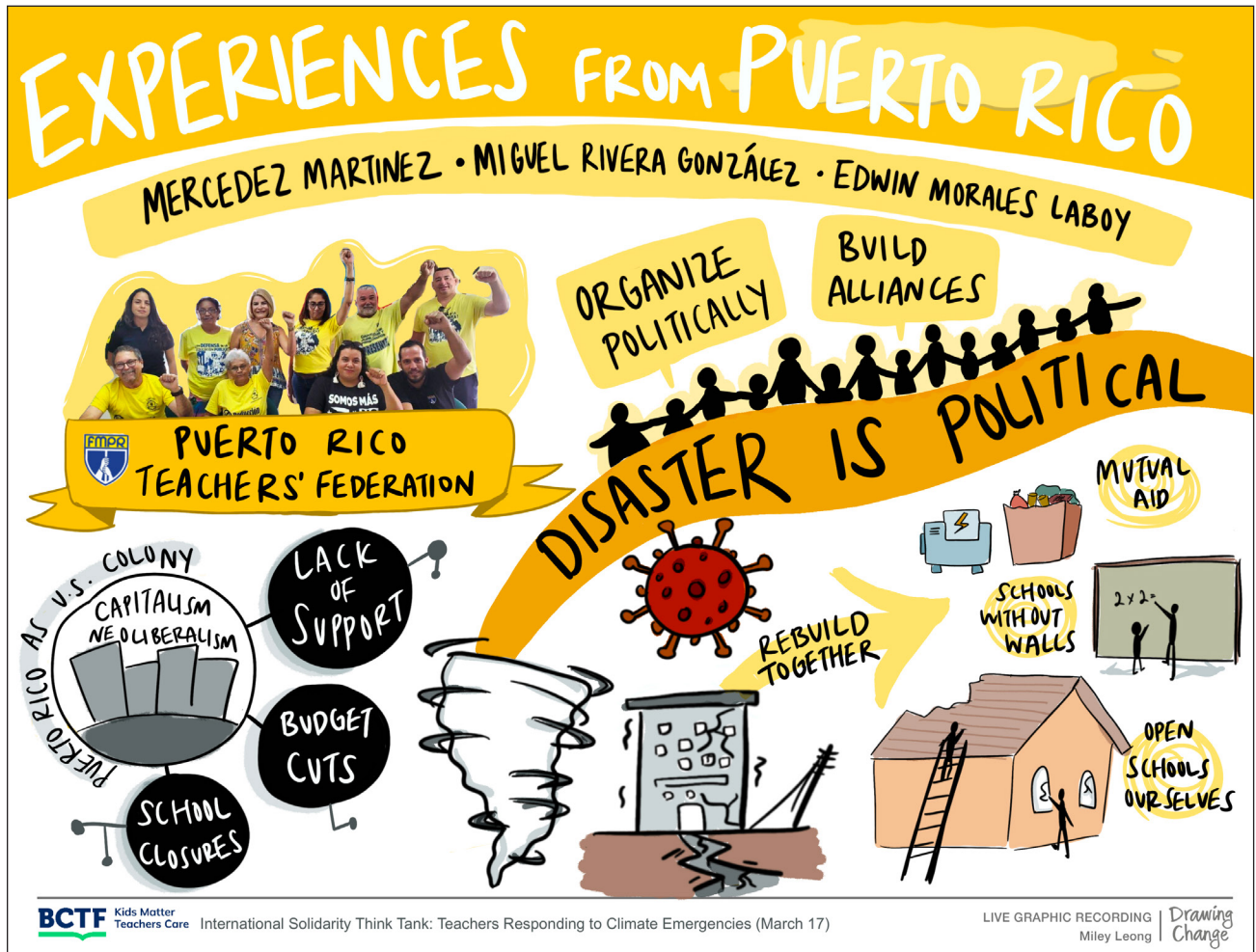
While time may have passed from the immediate climate disaster, the effects are often still keenly being felt. One teacher described the trauma of losing their home, and emotional and financial toll this has taken on them. This can include renting alternative accommodation, being separated from family members, and long commute times between school sites.

Teachers are also living with the ongoing affects of disasters. In Princeton, for example, schools still do not have potable water and 1/3 of the community is still displaced. More broadly, one teacher described that the biggest impact on teachers has been fear and stress and struggling with a “sense of doom” in relation to the climate disasters.

“Disaster is political”

Teachers from the BC had the opportunity to learn from the experiences of three colleagues from the Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (FMPR): President Mercedes Martinez, Vice President Edgar Morales Laboy and Miguel Rivera Gonzalez, Secretary of Labor Education. The FMPR and BCTF have a long-term relationship of international solidarity, based on mutual respect and a shared commitment to defend public education.

The teachers from Puerto Rico shared how they are leading the way in community-based recovery from environmental disasters, forming “solidarity brigades” alongside community groups and allies. First, they mobilized in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017, a deadly category 5 hurricane that devastated the northeastern Caribbean; second, they responded during a series of around 9,000 earthquakes and strong aftershocks between December 2019 and January 2020, with the most devastating being a 6.4 magnitude earthquake on January 7. More recently, brigades worked in the wake of Hurricane Fiona in 2022, a category 1 storm that cut power across the entire island.



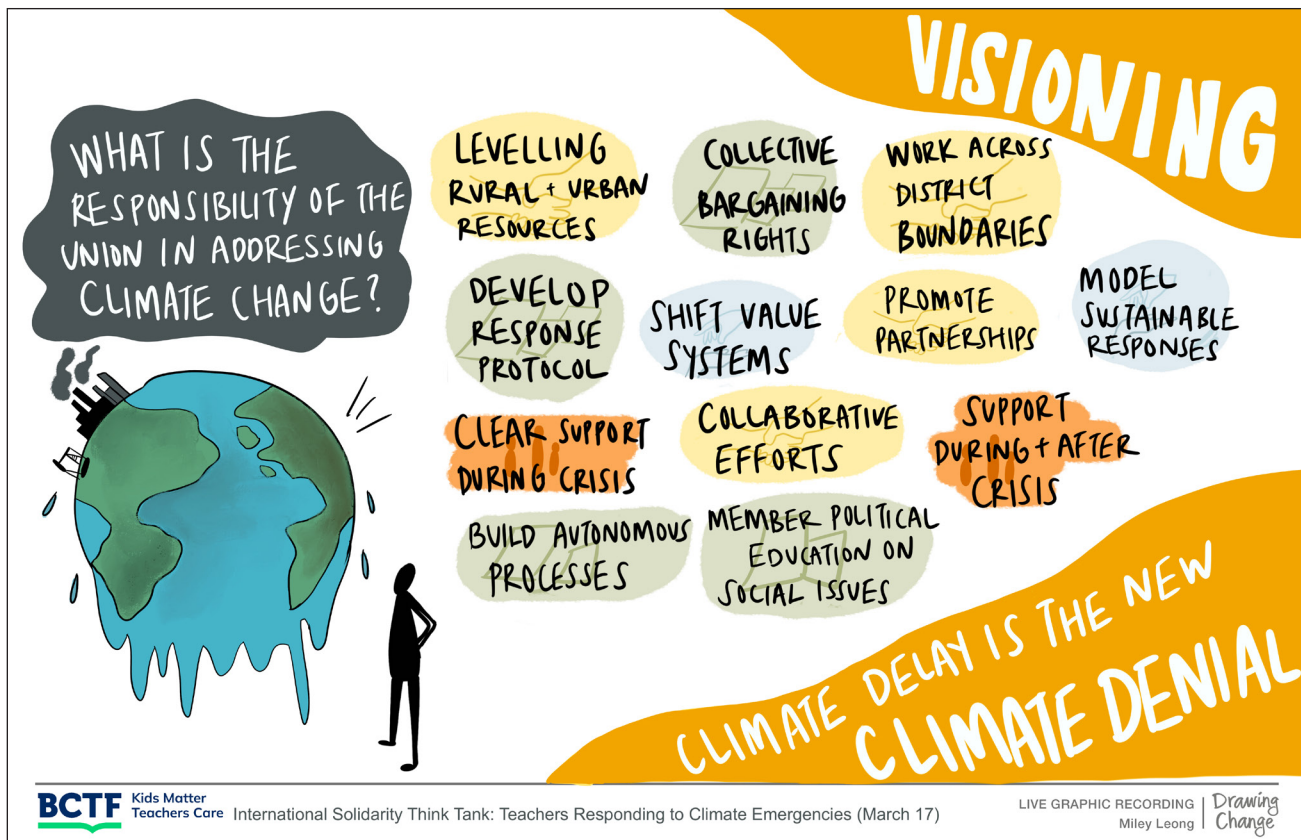
The union’s actions to defend public education have been driven by an underlying political consciousness: “Disaster is political.” Puerto Rico has been what Naomi Klein (2018) describes as a “textbook example of disaster capitalism,” whereby national crisis (following, for instance, a climate emergency) is used to establish and advance neoliberal policies privileging private over public interests. This has included budget cuts, closing of academic programs, the consolidation of schools and proposals for charter schools.

Bringing the disaster is political lens to the experience in BC invited an analysis of the broader political situation in BC. Public education systems in BC have been weakened by years of austerity. The lack of advance planning for climate change, as well as siloed political approaches across key stakeholders, puts communities in a position of constantly responding to immediate crisis, a reactive rather than

a proactive stance. The impacts of climate change are also being felt most acutely in communities with a low(er) socio-economic status, and teachers recognized the prejudice and racism that can go unaddressed within climate policies and responses. As climate disasters become more frequent, teachers recognized the need to disrupt “business as usual.” The second part of the think tank turned to a consideration of the role of the union in addressing the global issue of the climate crisis.

The role of the union in addressing the global issue of climate change

Teachers at the think tank began the discussion on the role of the union in addressing the global climate crisis from the position that climate change should be elevated as a central concern within the union. This came from their personal experiences as well as their broader political commitments to environmental justice.



Broadly, while there was no single definition of the union’s role two key principles ran through the discussions.

Principle one: Adaptation and Mitigation

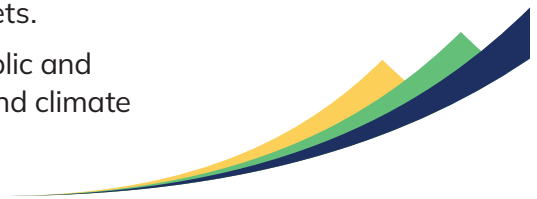
The role of the union should take into account the need to act on two levels: (1) responding to the impacts of climate emergencies—adaptations; and (2) advancing long-term strategies to reduce the impacts of climate change—*mitigations*.

In terms of adaptations, teachers discussed the need for policy for immediate responses to climate disasters. This includes:

- Developing a response protocol and command ladder across the education sector, including clear communication channels.
- Establishing a provincial emergency committee for climate disaster responses, including a team of specialists to support crisis.
- Developing clear union support processes to meet teachers' immediate needs during a crisis, including trauma therapy and mutual aid/a solidarity fund.
- Providing first responder training to teachers, in preparation for potential climate emergencies.
- Advocating for structural changes to ensure schools are as safe as possible.
- Bargaining provisions related to climate emergencies in collective agreements (e.g., leaves, workload, commute, or relocation provisions) that are equitable across urban and rural districts.

Mitigation, in turn, centered around framing climate justice as a key issue for the union. This included:

- Shifting value systems to prioritize climate justice.
- Advocating for the inclusion of climate justice in curriculum across all grades and subjects.
- Gathering information from locals to campaign and raise public awareness of teacher involvement in responding to the climate crisis.
- Having grants for local projects related to the climate crisis.
- Including climate justice in bargaining objectives, such as decarbonization plans for the education system that are socially just and meet United Nations climate targets.
- Continuing to promote partnerships with other public and private organizations to address climate change and climate change emergencies.



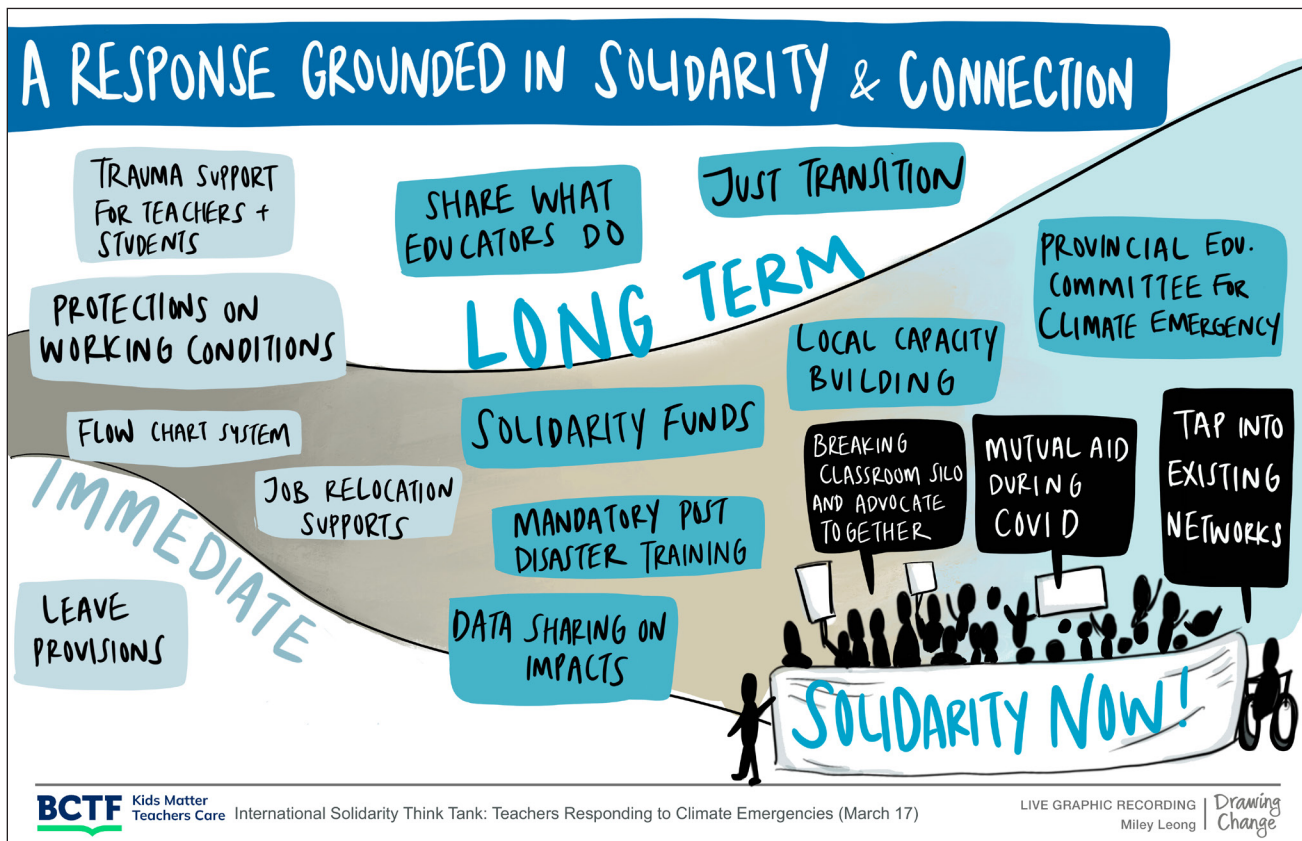
Principle two: A just transition

The union's actions should be advanced within the framework of a just transition, defined by the International Labour Organization (2023) as "greening the economy in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, created decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind." Many communities in BC, including those affected by climate disasters, rely on industries that are contributing to climate change. A just transition is a part of the fight to protect community schools, supporting families to stay within their communities.

A response grounded in solidarity and connection

The space of the BCTF International Solidarity think tank on Teachers Responding to Climate Emergencies was a first step in a response grounded in solidarity and connection. Teachers expressed gratitude for a union space within which to share their experiences and learn from one another. This included learning from the political strategies and actions of colleagues in Puerto Rico.

Moving forward, if disaster is political, our collective action to adapt to and mitigate climate disasters must also be a shared political struggle.



Acknowledgements

BCTF Research would like to sincerely thank the teachers who gave their time to share their experiences and perspectives as a part of this think tank.

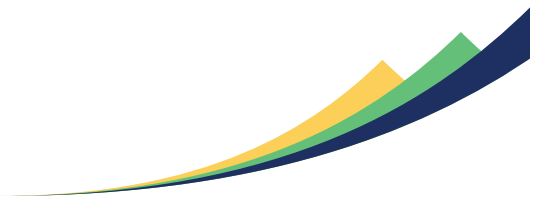
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Information, Research and International Solidarity Division

100-550 West 6th Avenue

Vancouver, BC V5Z 4P2

research@bctf.ca



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