75 years is enough: abolish nuclear weapons for peace and justice

Remarks by Ray Acheson, Director of Reaching Critical Will of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF); International Steering Group Representative of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to the Canadian Network to Abolish Nuclear Weapons commemoration of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 6 August 2020

We’re meeting online today in the midst of a global pandemic to mark 75 years of another pandemic—that of nuclear weapons.

For seventy-five years, we have lived under the threat of radioactive blast and firestorm, the effects of which are immediately devastating and punishingly intergenerational.

For seventy-five years, nuclear weapon activities have contaminated land and water, disproportionately harming Indigenous communities.

For seventy-five years, corporations like Lockheed Martin and Boeing have reaped incredible profits from government contracts for bombs and bombers.

Last year, the nine nuclear-armed states spent 73 billion dollars on nuclear weapons. That is more than 138,000 dollars per minute. This is why, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, the United States has more nuclear warheads than hospitals.

While people of the world have suffered from these economic choices, others have profited. Certain academics, politicians, and bureaucrats have risen through the ranks of think tanks or governments in positions bankrolled by the nuclear profiteers, spinning theories of “nuclear deterrence” and “strategic stability” to justify this massive, unconscionable investment in technologies of violence.

This is nuclearism. Nuclearism is the mythology that nuclear weapons are essential for security. That nuclear weapons “deter” conflict.

Nuclearism is an epic feat of gaslighting. It insists that weapons that can kill everyone on the planet many times over are the only things keeping us safe.

Nuclearism is patriarchy: it is the dominance of a mindset that says violence equals power. It is a mentality that comes from the domination of men over women, of white supremacy and wealth, of able-bodiedness and heteronormativity.

Nuclearism is part of the capitalist prioritisation of profit over people. It is part of the militarism that accumulates wealth through war.

It is one of the many structures of violence that plague our societies.
The policies of nuclear weapon development, testing, and use are policies of radioactive racism. The same racist ideology that enables certain governments to explode nuclear bombs, dig up radioactive materials, and bury nuclear waste on Indigenous lands and near poor communities also lies within carceral systems and border controls.

As we work for nuclear abolition, we must pay attention to patterns of oppression and violence. We can see these in other structures of violence:

Much of the technology, tactics, and levels of brutality that we are seeing now from police in the streets of US cities were tested at Standing Rock.

The Border Patrol agents who were let loose on the streets of Portland fine-tuned their tactics and their dehumanisation on migrants.

Some people say Canada is different, that these types of things can’t happen here, that we don’t have the same “history of racism” here, or the same history of violence.

But none of this is true. Our history of violence and oppression is marked across the land and water of this country, marked by who lives where, what languages are spoken, how we treat our environment, our reliance on extraction to generate wealth, what we are taught is possible, who is called naïve.

We need to know our history – our real history, not the Heritage Moments version.

The history of uranium mining on Indigenous land in Canada contributed to the bombs dropped on Japan and facilitated the nuclear arms race and the spread of dangerous nuclear power around the world.

Today, this is mirrored in Canada’s investment in another toxic industry: oil. Canadian corporations, with the support of the government, build pipelines on Indigenous lands and commit acts of the violence against protestors.

We saw the Canadian settler state’s violence against the Wet’suwet’en; we saw Jagmeet Singh get thrown out of parliament while trying to bring a bill against racism; we saw activists arrested for defacing statues of racist figures in Toronto.

We need to look at how our government responds to protest, to uprising. We need to pay attention to what weapons and technologies of surveillance it is investing in.

But this isn’t just about preparing for the worst. We have a chance to do what people in many other countries don’t have: to build the world we want rather than to respond to a dystopian nightmare as it’s unfolding.

Right now, there are calls across Canadian cities to defund the police, abolish prisons, and build alternative structures for preventing harm and for transformative justice. This incredible work is crucial toward building the type of communities in which we can all live
and thrive. This work is about, among other things, disarming and demilitarising; it is about
divesting from weapons and violence and investing in peace and equality instead.

Abolishing nuclear weapons is part of this work. Canada does not possess nuclear weapons,
but our government says that outlawing them was “sort of useless”. It has said that it wants
nuclear disarmament, but then it supports the possession and possible use of nuclear
weapons by its allies as a member of NATO. The government says it wants to develop a
feminist foreign policy yet refuses to join the only existing treaty that categorically prohibits
these patriarchal weapons, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

In response to Setsuko Thurlow’s appeal to Canada to join the Treaty, Prime Minister Justin
Trudeau, and today spokesperson Adam Austen, just say that they “salute the tireless
efforts of activists to draw attention to the humanitarian consequences of nuclear
weapons.” This is not enough. This recognition of the catastrophic harms caused by these
weapons must be followed by real action to abolish them.

It’s time to shake off the nonsense we have been force-fed about strategic stability and
deterrence and learn from those who have actually experienced the realities of nuclear
weapons. If the Canadian government is serious about being feminist, about healing its
relationship with Indigenous nations, about being a leader against climate change, it has a
LOT of work to do.

Something it can do right now is sign the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and
start the process to ratify it. Outlawing nuclear weapons for all countries and setting the
stage for the elimination of these weapons, the Treaty also recognises the disproportionate
impacts that nuclear weapon activities have had on Indigenous communities. It recognises
the gendered impacts of radiation, and it calls for gender diversity in discussions on nuclear
weapons. It includes provisions on victim assistance and environmental remediation,
recognising the harms that have been caused and the needs of communities that have
suffered. Canada’s joining this Treaty would be a significant, meaningful step towards
actually fulfilling the role of peacemaker and leader in reconciliation that it claims to be.

For activists: Across all the work that we need to undertake for a more peaceful, equitable
world, it is imperative that we deconstruct power, centre lived reality, and create a political
economy of nonviolence. Regardless of what political or social project we’re working on,
these are key ingredients to fostering change. Nuclear weapons are no exception.

We can abolish structures of violence. This is not naïve, this not out of reach. Just a few
hours ago in New York, the state Attorney General gave an order for the dissolution of the
National Rifle Association, one of the most powerful institutions in the United States.

We can stand up for justice, for peace. We can achieve change if we work together, if we
persevere through struggle and find hope in our collective efforts.

Thank you again for inviting me to participate in this commemoration, and to say with all of
you, Never Again.