

The 1931 Barnet Millworkers' Strike

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The 1931 Barnet Millworkers' Strike

by Eric Damer

The saw mills, like the logging camps, are speeded up to the maximum of human endurance. Those who are unable to "hit the ball" "hit the trail". Their speed is determined by the speed at which the machinery can be driven. Many get hurt in the rush, but woe betide those who get hurt too often.

Canadian Labour Advocate, Oct 2, 1925, p 6.

Visitors to Barnet Marine Park on a hot summer day can enjoy sun, sand, and surf, completely oblivious of the human history that surrounds them. But the old pilings and concrete ruins in the park suggest a much more active past. Barnet, a railway station at the foot of Burnaby Mountain near the junction of Burrard Inlet and Indian Arm, once supported large sawmills and housed a diverse workforce on a site long known to local indigenous people.

In 1931 a major strike occurred here when 360 workers were locked out by the mill's US owners after going on strike to protest wage reductions. In response,

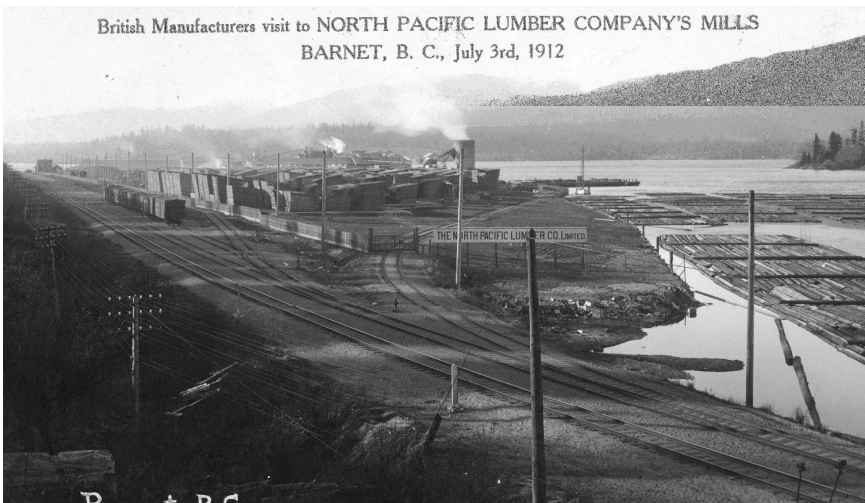
COVER PHOTO: "A Good Size Log - British Manufacturers Visit to North Pacific Lumber Company's Mills", 1912. City of Vancouver Archives, Out P1232.6.

the owners shut down operations and many of the men remained unemployed until World War II.

For decades, employees at the Barnet mills endured hard labour and unsafe conditions to support themselves and their families, while producing profits for mill owners. Sawmill work was always physically demanding and dangerous, but in 1931 wage reductions made the situation intolerable, pushing workers into strike action.

Barnet's first sawmill, the North Pacific Lumber Company, was built in 1889 by partners James MacLaren and Frank Ross of Quebec. Provincial regulations required owners of timber rights to operate a mill in the province, so McLaren and Ross chose a site near tidewater and the railway.

Raw logs could be towed to the mill in booms, and finished lumber could be shipped via the Canadian



ABOVE: "British Manufacturers Visit to North Pacific Lumber Company's Mills", 1912. City of Vancouver Archives, Out P1232.3.

Pacific Railway. Economic conditions were not favourable, however, and the mill did not begin operation until 1900.

Once the sawmill opened, it quickly grew to a considerable size with several hundred workers. Although Barnet was part of the municipality of Burnaby, it was isolated from much of the larger community and grew as a self-contained company town.



ABOVE: "Piling the lumber, Barnet, BC" 1904. Indigenous workers may be visible in photo. Image MSC130-17612-001, courtesy of the Philip Francis British Columbia Postcards Collection , Simon Fraser University Library.

Men working at the mill came from diverse backgrounds, including European, Chinese, South Asian, and particularly Japanese. Indigenous men may also have been part of the workforce. “White” men typically had the safer jobs, and were paid considerably more. Of course, the largely Asian workforce was not likely to complain about low wages or dangerous conditions at a time when few other employment options existed.

Men lived in bunkhouses according to their ethnic background, while a few lived in cottages with wives and families, and sent their children to a local school.

Fire devastated the North Pacific Lumber Company in 1909, but the owners rebuilt the mill into a state-of-the-art facility and operated it until 1914 when recession and the First World War again hurt the economy.

For the next decade it sat idle until a conglomerate from Everett, Washington, purchased the sawmill and re-opened it in 1925 as the Barnet Lumber Company.

The sawmill was soon one of British Columbia’s largest, employing some 350 men. Unlike its predecessor, however, the Barnet Lumber Company proudly advertised an “all-white” labour force. Such a policy was likely adopted as a ploy to compete with nearby mills that still hired “orientals”.

Newspapers in 1927 claimed that the mill was a model of industrial efficiency and employee relations.

BARNET LUMBER COMPANY LTD.

' Barnet, B. C.

NOTICE TO EMPLOYEES

**From this date any employ-..
ee who has three accidents in
one year, which puts him un-
der the doctor's care will be
considered a careless workman
and discharged accordingly,
unless he can furnish positive
proof that the accident was
unavoidable. All accidents
must be reported to the office
at once. Please help us keep
down accidents.**

Barnet Lumber Company Ltd.

Canadian Labour Advocate, Oct 2, 1925, p 6.

Workers earned more than minimum wage (perhaps \$20 per 48-hour week), slept in comfortable beds, ate hearty meals, and enjoyed a range of social and recreational activities. If this was true, the owners of the Barnet Lumber Company evidently subscribed to a paternalistic management strategy to keep their workers happy and out of unions.

The Canadian Labor Advocate was less impressed, however, claiming that workers were forced to work much too fast to keep pace with the new machinery. Anyone who had an accident risked discharge as a “careless worker.”

Workers at the Barnet Lumber Company, and indeed across British Columbia sawmills, were without any kind of union representation in the mid-1920s. But in 1928, the Lumber Workers’ Industrial Union reorganized in the province and began recruiting members, building on the remains of an earlier union effort.

Affiliated with the Workers’ Union League, the union intended to confront capitalist ideology and practices head-on. It fought against wage cuts, piece work, the blacklist, and for union recognition. The LWIU grew slowly while the economy remained good, but more rapidly after the collapse of the New York stock market in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression. Workers at mills in nearby New Westminster joined



Logo of Lumber Workers Industrial Union of Canada.
BCLHC collection.

the union in numbers, encouraging Barnet workers to do likewise.

Wages for millworkers across the province fell quickly and sharply during the Depression as timber prices fell. Barnet workers endured several cuts, and indicated their displeasure with a two-day strike in July, 1931.

The LWIU organizer was arrested and jailed; the general manager believed there would be no more protest. However, the proposed wage cut in September of 1931 (the fourth that year) proved him wrong. Wages had already dropped to \$12 a week and the mill proposed to take them to \$9, or 19 cents an hour.

LWIU workers at the Fraser Mills sawmill in nearby Coquitlam struck on September 16 to protest wage cuts and working conditions there, and some of the strikers travelled to Barnet to encourage their comrades to follow suit.

Of the two hundred Barnet workers who met for a strike vote on September 22, 196 voted in favour. However, mill managers caught wind of the vote and immediately locked them out. The result was the same: operations ceased and the mill sat silent; 360 workers were out of a job. The LWIU encouraged strikes at several other nearby mills, with mixed responses.

A local newspaper reported that all was quiet at Barnet. Workers posted pickets and Burnaby sent two police officers to keep an eye on events, but one returned home claiming his services were not needed.

The Department of Labour report told a similar story, but Barnet residents at the time recalled the Provincial Police arriving on horseback to keep the strikers at bay. A dozen or so police remained stationed at the mill to protect the property.

Facing armed officers and a unsympathetic provincial government, the strikers maintained their morale with refrains of “Horsey Keep Your Tail Up,” a hit song in 1923.

Eventually, a few mill managers and foremen attempted to operate the mill to fill orders for timber, but they were met with angry strikers. On one occasion, the strikers released the chains holding timber on the backs of delivery trucks. Police fired warning shots into the air to disperse the men who fled into the brush.

On another occasion, as foremen left the saws for their mid-day meal, some fifty locked-out workers who had snuck in through a hole in the fence began throwing large stones, none of which hit the targets. Two men were arrested and tried in a Burnaby courtroom, one for throwing stones and the other for interfering in the arrest.

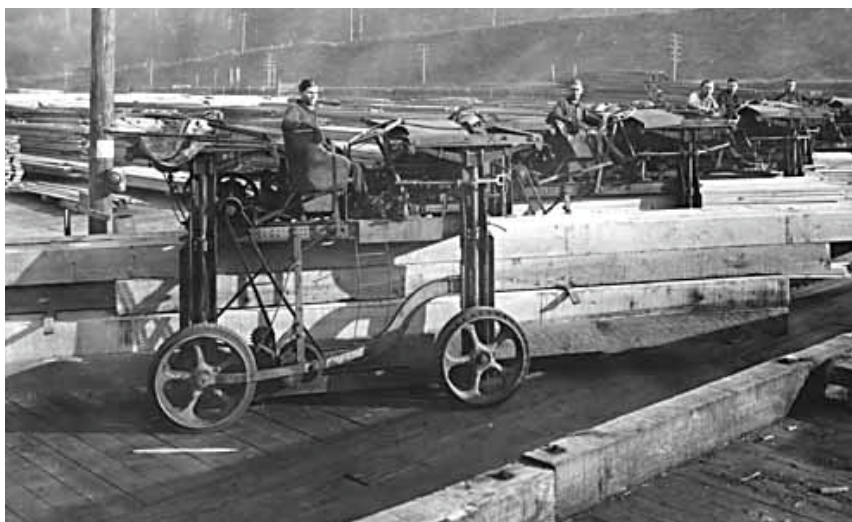
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The presiding magistrate dismissed the first charge as the Crown had not laid a proper charge, but found the second man guilty of tossing a board in front of the arresting officer's car. The accused received a \$25 fine, or in default one month in prison.

After these confrontations, the Barnet Lumber Company mill ceased operations. The mill manager, already suffering from poor health, died; some said he died of worry. Many of the unemployed men kept a vigil at the mill, lighting a fire in an old stump each night for many months.

The mill never did re-open, and a large number of strikers remained unemployed until the end of the 1930s. Fortunately, Burnaby tolerated squatters along the water front who could subsist on fishing and gardening, or bartering with neighbours.



ABOVE: "Canadian Miller Lumber Carriers at the Barnet Lumber Co. Ltd.", 1926. Vancouver Public Library, 4145.

It took several years to liquidate mill assets to pay off debts, including \$6,000 in taxes to the Municipality of Burnaby, although in the end Burnaby acquired the mill site.

The final chapter in Barnet's mill history began in 1939 when the site and water rights were purchased by Kapoor Singh Siddoo, a British Columbia resident for twenty-five years since leaving India. Siddoo had helped to pioneer a successful sawmill on Vancouver Island along the railway belt, but had recently moved to Vancouver. Kapoor Sawmills operated successfully and with considerably better labour relations until 1959 when it was sold and soon after closed.

A few years later, Burnaby turned the site into a recreational area, leaving the pilings and concrete ruins behind to remind visitors of the mill and community that once thrived in the shadow of Burnaby Mountain.

Eric Damer researches Burnaby's history for Burnaby Village Museum. He has published several books and articles on aspects of local social and educational history, particularly the history of higher education in BC.

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.

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