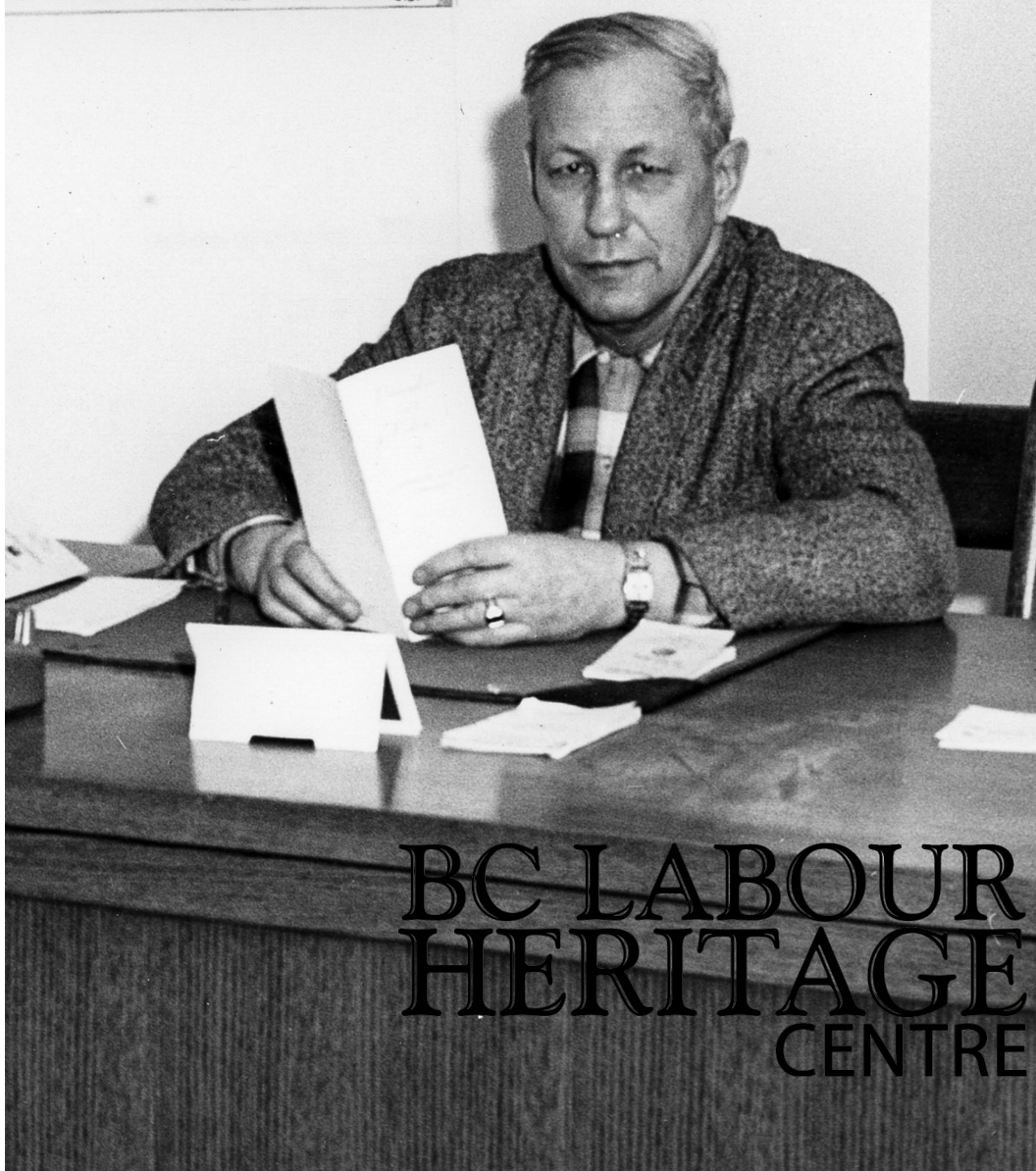


Charles Howard Webb

by Rob-Roy Douglas



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Over the past century the labour movement in Prince George has become integrated into the mainstream of politics and labour relations in the city and Interior region. The creation of the International Woodworkers of America Local 1-424 (now the part of the United Steelworkers) was fundamental to this process, as it extended organized labour into the largest industry in the region. Establishing the IWA and extending its influence through the forest industry required dedication and hard work. Much of that work took place behind the scenes, in the Local office and at the mills.

A key figure in this process, and in the labour movement in the Interior in general, was Charles Howard Webb (1896-1977). Webb's role was crucial at important turning points in the history of labour in both the Interior and on the provincial stage. But more importantly, his tireless work built both the IWA and organized labour in general into important political and social forces in Prince George.

Howard Webb was born on a farm in Smith's Falls, Ontario, but his family moved to Manitoba when he was young, part of the great western exodus of Ontario farmers to the Prairies before the First World War. He joined the Royal Northwest Mounted Police during the First World War, but then, as was common practice among RNMMP graduates in the circumstances, he volunteered for the Lord Strathcona's Horse cavalry regiment and active service in Europe.¹

¹ Personal Communication, Arthur Webb. 28/04/2016

After the War, Webb moved back to Saskatchewan, where he married Elizabeth Ann Jones, an immigrant from Wales. The Webbs had two children, Mary and Arthur, and Howard Webb began career as a lumberman in a mill in Prince Albert. He sustained an industrial injury at the mill in the early 1930's and moved with his family back to Manitoba, where they lived briefly while he recuperated.²

After his recovery, Webb began his long career in the BC labour movement when he responded to an advertisement for a position at the Eagle Lake sawmill in Giscome, BC in 1938.

Eagle Lake was then one of many mills located east of Prince George on the Upper Fraser, along the East Line of the CNR, but was unusual for its size and output. While most mills were small portable operations with only a few employees, often engaged in seasonal work, the Eagle Lake Mill, established in 1916, was the largest spruce sawmill in Western Canada. It produced up to 90 million board feet of lumber a year and employed a workforce of 100 men in the mill itself and more in the Mill's logging camps around it. The mill also supported a substantial community of 400-600 people, including families of millworkers and local businesses.³

“Webb’s role was crucial at important turning points in the history of labour in both the Interior and on the provincial stage.”

² Ibid

³ J Kent Sedgwick, *The Giscome Chronicle: The Rise and Demise of a Sawmill Community in Central British Columbia* (Prince George, BC: College of New Caledonia Press, 2008).

By modern standards life in Giscome was primitive - none of the houses had running water nor indoor plumbing. However, compared to the miserable conditions in most lumber camps at the time, Giscome was quite luxurious, boasting a general store, church and community hall. Many of the workers were, like Webb, married and the mill provided single-family housing for them, which was not common in the Interior industry at the time. Eagle Lake Mill also provided unusually stable employment for the Interior BC forest industry at the time, encouraging employees such as Webb to move their families there often for their entire working lives.

Webb and his family became important members of both the mill workforce and the community, volunteering their time for a variety of community activities, including, in Howard Webb's case, the local Boy Scout troop⁴ and Victory Loan campaigns during the War.⁵ He also became the local livestock pound-keeper in 1940⁶, a position he held until he left Giscome in 1951⁷.

When Webb arrived the mill was unorganized, but this was soon to change. A wartime application for a wage increase submitted jointly by the mill management and workers was refused by the Regional War Labour Board on the grounds that the mill workers were not members of a union.⁸ As a

⁴ Staff, "Giscome Scouts Plan Christmas Tree." *Prince George Citizen*, 01/12/1949.

⁵ Staff, "District Winds Up Campaign With \$6050 Over Quota." *Prince George Citizen*, 20/05/1943.

⁶ Staff, "Pound District Act." *Prince George Citizen*, 22/01/1942.

⁷ Staff, "Pound District Act." *Prince George Citizen*, 23/04/1951.

consequence, when the International Woodworkers of America held an organizing drive in Giscome in 1945, the workers voted overwhelmingly to join, and faced no opposition from the manager, Roy Spurr.⁹ Webb was elected a shop steward in the newly formed local, designated 1-424.

The IWA had only come into existence in 1938, emerging from the ashes of several industrial predecessors that collapsed due to the Depression and unrelenting hostility from both government and employers.¹⁰ It organized its first local in the coastal lumber industry, which was dominated by larger firms, with larger workforces, which were easier to organize.¹¹ As it spread into the Interior, the IWA, like its predecessors, found the small mills, with small numbers of employees and in precarious financial condition, a challenge to organize.¹² Its initial success was with the larger mills: Eagle Lake and Sinclair Mills and the planer mills that lined River Road in Prince George, which together dominated lumber production through economies of scale. Organizing them gave the Union, with only about a thousand members in a Northern Interior industry that employed

⁸ K Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior* (Prince George, BC: IWA Local 1-424, 1981).

⁹ Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*.

¹⁰ G Hak, "The Communists and the Unemployed in the Prince George District, 1930-1935," *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly* 68 (1985).

¹¹ G Hak, "British Columbia Loggers and the Lumber Workers Industrial Union, 1919-1922," *Labour/Le Travail* (1989).

¹² G Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934-74* (UBC Press, 2011).

at least 5,000, considerable power, as its members worked in mills that shipped up to 90% of all lumber produced in the region.

Before the Second World War, the IWA leadership was dominated by Communists, particularly in the person of the President, first of the International, then of the British Columbia Section, Harold Pritchett.¹³ Although Pritchett and his allies provided competent leadership before the War, increasing tensions between Canada and the Soviet Union rendered their leadership controversial and led to repeated challenges to their positions. Pritchett was forced to step down from the International and then in 1948, with Cold War tensions running high, the Communist slate at the BC Federation of Labour executive elections was challenged by pro-CCF candidates in a contest between so called Red and White Blocs . The key position of Secretary-Treasurer was contested by Harold Pritchett, the founder and former President of the IWA, and the White Bloc candidate, George Home, from the Packinghouse Workers, on a roll call vote. When the last name on the delegate roll was called the vote was tied between the two contenders. As the delegate at the end of the alphabet, Howard Webb cast the deciding vote against Pritchett, ending Communist domination of the BC Federation of Labour.¹⁴

¹³ J Lembcke and WM Tattam, *One Union in Wood: A Political History of the International Woodworkers of America* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1984).

¹³ Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*.

Webb's personal motivations for casting his vote as he did remain unknown. He had worked with the Communist dominated IWA executive as a member of the Giscome sub-local executive and continued to work with the new White executive. When the former president of the sub-local contested the new leadership through the courts, Webb was in the unusual position of being both a plaintiff and defendant in the court case.¹⁵ Certainly the Communists, led by Pritchett, had made enemies through their political tactics, although their opponents were far from lily white themselves. However, throughout his career Webb was noted for his gradualist approach to social change and labour rights. After all, the IWA had organized Webb's mill in Giscome with the explicit blessing of its owner and manager. He was also a supporter of the CCF, which was probably reason enough to back their candidate for the Secretary-Treasurer.

Webb returned to Giscome and resumed his work at the mill and his union position as a shop steward. Meanwhile the struggle for control over the IWA and the BC Labour movement between Whites and Reds ended in the expulsion of most of the hard line Communists from the IWA by 1950. Labour peace led to increased production, but the infighting had crippled attempts to extract better wages and conditions from employers, who formed their own organization, the Northern Interior Lumbermen's Association (NILA), to confront the IWA in bargaining.

¹⁵ J Lembcke and WM Tattam, *One Union in Wood: A Political History of the International Woodworkers of America* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1984).

By the early 1950's the IWA began rebuilding across BC, including in the Interior. With the movement united, membership growing and increasing efforts to sign up more workers in the Interior, the IWA needed a business agent for Local 1-424, who could coordinate activities across its large geographical footprint, mediate between members, and handle

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day-to-day interactions with the public, employers and government - to act, basically, as the public face of Local 1-424 and the IWA in the region. As a respected union member from the largest mill in the region, Howard Webb was an apt choice to fill the role. He accepted the position in 1949

and moved his family from Giscome to Prince George. His appointment was made through the IWA executive, possibly due to his support for the White Bloc. Certainly he remained on good terms with J. Stewart Alsbury, the President of District One after the Communists had been purged¹⁶, and even acted as an intermediary between Alsbury and Mike Sekora, the President of Local 1-424, when relations between them seem to have become strained.¹⁷ In Prince George Webb and his family lived for many

¹⁶ Webb appears to have been the only Local 424 executive member, and one of the few in the IWA to address Alsbury as “Stu” in correspondence. CH Webb, “Letter to J. Stewart Alsbury,” *IWA District One Papers*. UBC Rare Books and Special Collections (14/08/1951).

¹⁷ JS Alsbury, “Letter to C. H. Webb,” *IWA District One Papers*. UBC Rare Books and Special Collections (24/07/1951).

years at the lower end of Third Avenue, in a house with no running water or indoor plumbing - not that different from life in Giscome.¹⁸

In Prince George Webb was kept busy meeting with the stewards from the different organized mills and visiting those mills close enough to reach in a day trip.¹⁹ Although not a flamboyant personality like other figures in the IWA, such as Mike Sekora, Webb's quiet demeanour and tireless efforts to promote the IWA led him to keep his position as business agent for almost 20 years, until his retirement in 1967. Much of his correspondence during these years reflects his efforts to build the membership. He pursued grievances by members up to the provincial level and emphasized keeping the rank and file informed of union news and efforts on their behalf by making special arrangements to have the Union newsletter, the Timberworker, available to Local 1-424 members as little as 3 days after it was printed in Vancouver. This was no small feat, considering that the newsletter had to be shipped to Prince George via train over the weekend and then rushed out to the various sub locals for distribution.²⁰

Through the early 1950's Webb and the IWA faced implacable opposition from NILA, with wages and working conditions in the industry effectively static. As well, wages and conditions were generally lower than they were in the Coastal

¹⁸ Personal Communication, Arthur Webb. 28/04/2016

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ CH Webb, "Letter to G. Mitchell, Secretary IWA," *IWA District One Papers*. UBC Rare Books and Special Collections (18/05/1951)

industry. More significantly, the IWA only represented a minority of Interior lumber workers, and it needed to show that it had the ability to improve conditions, in order to appeal to the vast majority of unorganized workers in the region.²¹

As business agent, Webb was a key figure in negotiations in 1951, 1952 and 1953. When IWA demands for modest improvements were rejected out of hand by NILA in 1953 negotiations, the union decided to strike.

The strike has been dubbed “the messiest strike in Western Canada”.²² The NILA was adamantly opposed to any concessions, refusing even compromises offered by government mediators and the Premier himself.²³ There was considerable popular support from the public, labour and even some merchants for the IWA. Throughout the strike the members received anonymous food donations to the union soup kitchen, the railway unions refused to transport lumber across picket lines, and the owner of the largest local supermarket chain, Roy Yip, provided credit to strikers and their families. Overall, the local business community was generally hostile, as was the press.²⁴ The result was a long and acrimonious strike, in which the IWA pressed for

²¹ Lembcke and Tattam, *One Union in Wood: A Political History of the International Woodworkers of America*.

²² Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*.

²³ Staff, “Mediator Must Accept ‘No Increase’ Principle.” *Prince George Citizen*, 01/10/1953; Staff, “Nila Rejects Settlement Plan; Premier Rebuked.” *Prince George Citizen*, 23/11/1953.

²⁴ Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*.

a wage increase of 18 cents an hour, union shop, paid holidays and industry wide recognition of union membership. Just as importantly, the IWA sought to force NILA and the lumber companies to adhere to existing contract provisions – to take the Union seriously as a representative of their workers. By demanding union shop, it attempted to import the key features of the Rand Formula into the Interior forest industry – even though the Rand formula itself was not part of labour law in BC at that time.

Webb's role as business agent was crucial in moderating the impact of the strike upon the members. When the local car dealer's association threatened to repossess cars bought on credit by IWA members, Webb persuaded them to suspend payments for the duration of the strike, by pointing out that otherwise they would face 500 cars returned to their lots the next day.²⁵

As the strike wore on the employers began hiring replacement workers, some of whom were reputedly little more than thugs.²⁶ Picket line violence increased, including an incident where one mill owner shot at a group of pickets, who retaliated by overturning his car.²⁷ As one of the most respected members of the Local, Webb provided the IWA response to these incidents, which also served as a warning to their opponents: "The union

²⁵ .Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*.

²⁶ Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*.

²⁷ Staff, "Violence Flares in Millyard Dispute." Prince George Citizen, 02/11/1953.

does not condone the initiation of violence, but we are ready to resist it where it is encountered. If anybody gets hurt, we are going to see it is not us.”²⁸

Despite efforts to hold out, the strike took its toll, as the Union strike fund, never very large, was soon depleted, forcing IWA members to leave the Interior to look for work elsewhere. When the strike finally ended on New Year’s Eve 1953²⁹ some small gains were made, including a 5 cent an hour wage increase and industry wide union recognition but membership had also dropped by almost half, and years of rebuilding lay ahead.³⁰

As business agent Howard Webb was the central figure in working to rebuild 1-424 membership and restore its influence in the industry. However, this was only part of Webb’s role in organized labour. He also took an important role in coordinating organized labour in Prince George and enhancing the political voice of labour by co-founding the Prince George and District Labour Council with a group of unionists interested in broadening the voice of labour in Prince George in 1956,³¹ in the wake of the amalgamation of the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) and the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) into the Canadian Labour Congress. The Council appears to have mirrored on a local level the rapprochement between the craft

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Staff, “Workers Trek Back to Jobs as IWA, Employers Agree: Contract Signed Tuesday.” *Prince George Citizen*, 07/01/1954.

³⁰ Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs and Skidders: A History of the IWA in the Central Interior*.

³¹ Staff, “Notice of Meeting.” *Prince George Citizen*, 15/10/1956.

and industrial unions nation-wide. It was both a means of increasing the numbers of organized labour in the region and an organized attempt to bring Labour into the mainstream of politics and public discourse in Prince George and the Interior.³² This was done by giving a unified voice to the labour movement in the region, but one that was capable of acting as a broad tent, incorporating different visions of organized labour, and likely different political visions too. Given the popular impact of Social Credit in the Interior the Labour Council was a means of

“Webb’s style of quiet and steady hard work was appreciated by everyone in the labour movement.”

reinforcing organized labour, while remaining apart from divisive provincial politics. Webb was the first Sergeant-at-arms of the Council, and went on to serve as its secretary for the next 26 years. Despite political changes over the years, Webb’s style of quiet and steady hard work was appreciated by everyone in the labour movement. He promoted inclusion of new unions in the Council and the extension of organized labour into new industries in Prince George. His influence can be gauged through his role as spokesman for the Council in the press - numerous news articles chronicling the expansion of organized labour in Prince George cited Howard Webb as their source - more frequently than any other single figure on the Council and in the union

³² G Hak, “Populism and the 1952 Social Credit Breakthrough in British Columbia,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (June 2004).

movement. However, when more controversial unions took unwise steps, Webb also went on the record as criticizing their acts. After the failed PPWC strike against Prince George Pulp in 1970, he called their leaders “a bunch of radicals who don’t know what they’re doing” and when challenged on that stance and his support for public criticism of their leadership, stated that “if you don’t get criticism, you’re not doing anything”.³³ When a more activist faction was elected to the council executive in 1976, Webb’s position was one of only two to remain unchallenged. The new leadership made it clear beforehand that he would keep his position as Secretary for as long as he wanted,³⁴ a testimony to Webb’s dedication to the labour movement in its broadest sense, rather than any particular group.

Following the successful launch of the Labour Council, Webb ran for Prince George City Council in the 1956 municipal elections as an alderman. He took the position that “Since the majority of taxpayers in this city are working people, labor feels it should have a representative on city council.”³⁵ He won his seat with 608 votes and became the first explicitly labour affiliated and backed city councillor to be elected in Prince George.³⁶ His candidacy and subsequent election were considered evidence of the increasing power of organized labour in Prince George.³⁷

³³ Staff, “Labor Council Will Hear Beef.” *Prince George Citizen*, 13/11/1970.

³⁴ Wenzel, J, “Labor Council Leadership Could Face Challenge.” *Prince George Citizen*, 23/11/1976.

³⁵ Staff, “Labor Backs Webb for City Council.” *Prince George Citizen*, 22/11/1956.

³⁶ Staff, “Light Vote.” *Prince George Citizen*, 17/12/1956.

³⁷ Staff, “Labor Backs Webb for City Council.” *Prince George Citizen*. 1956

Webb served on City Council for the next 2 years, while also holding his position as the Secretary of the Prince George and District Labour Council and continuing to work for the IWA as their business agent. On City Council, Webb formed part of an unofficial left opposition to the predominately business oriented majority on Council.³⁸ His stances included opposition to the expansion of the municipal management bureaucracy by opposing the creation of a city manager position, protection of workers' rights and promotion of a low cost housing programme. He briefly served as interim mayor of Prince George (for about 2 days)³⁹ and continued to be active in provincial politics through the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, and later its successor, the New Democratic Party. Upon being defeated in the 1958 election, the incoming mayor, Carrie Jane Gray, paid tribute to Webb's work on the housing programme and noted that: "I am sorry that Alderman Webb will not be on the council next year. He is one of the ablest aldermen we have had ... He isn't a colourful personality, but he is quiet and steady".⁴⁰

Webb retired in 1967 from his position with the IWA, but continued to serve as secretary of the Prince George and District Labour Council. Upon his retirement, being asked what his hobbies were, he explained that he didn't have any, because he had never had time to develop them. Judging from his continued work for the Labour Council, his leadership in the local branch of

³⁸ Personal Communication. Arthur Webb. 28/04/2016.

³⁹ Personal Communication. Arthur Webb. 28/04/2016.

⁴⁰ Staff, "Labor Suffers Heavily With Defeat of Webb." *Prince George Citizen*, 12/12/1958.

the environmental organization (an early partner with Greenpeace) the Society for Pollution and Environmental Control (SPEC), and his ongoing participation in provincial politics through the New Democratic Party, his “retirement” was no less busy.

He was honoured for his work for the CCF/NDP by being granted an honorary lifetime membership in 1976. In his nomination letter, Stephen Wood, Secretary of the Fort George Riding Association summed up his contributions as: “Many people are elected to positions, many don't serve. However, whether it be Local 424, the Cariboo Constituency Association, the Labour Council, the Prince George Club, the Fort George Association, or the others, Howard served, as the President, Secretary or Treasurer, and served well. All through the 1950's and through the 60's Howard was the party's backbone. He worked harder than the rest. He's treasurer now, and, at 76, still works hardest.”⁴¹

In 1977, during the annual BC New Democratic Party convention, Howard Webb died suddenly of heart failure on the convention floor. His death ended an era in labour politics in Prince George, as he was one of the last active members of the generation of workers who established moderate labourism in the province, replacing the more hardline Communist approach that had characterized the BC labour movement up to the late 1940's.

⁴¹ S Wood, “Letter to Frank G. Mckenzie. Re Lifetime Membership of Howard Webb.,” *CCF/NDP Papers: Honorary Lifetime Memberships*. UBC Rare Books and Special Collections (8/06/1973).

His role in rallying support and thwarting efforts to intimidate IWA members during the 1953 strike helped the IWA make what gains were possible from an impossible situation. Howard Webb's greatest contribution to the BC labour movement, however, lies in his decades of tireless, diligent work to establish the union movement in the Northern Interior. Prior to his arrival the Interior was not notably hospitable to labour. Forestry was largely unorganized, and (with the exception of the railways) so were most other workers. Webb's work as business agent with the IWA, his support for the Labour Council and his stint as alderman were fundamental to establishing both the IWA and the labour movement in general in Prince George. When the Prince George Citizen announced his death under the headline "Friend of Labor Mourned,"⁴² it understated his contribution, but summed up the spirit in which it was made.

⁴² Staff, "Friend of Labor Mourned." *Prince George Citizen*, 24/05/1997

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Who we are

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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