

Canada's First Teachers' Strike:
Victoria 1919



BC LABOUR
HERITAGE
CENTRE

“The children will know their teachers are made of stern unyielding stuff”

The Victoria Teachers' Strike Feb 10-11, 1919 by Tony F. Arruda

On Monday, February 10th, 1919, one hundred and sixty nine teachers of the Victoria and District Teachers' Association (VDTA) refused to show up to their respective schools, thus precipitating the first teachers' strike in Canada.¹ Mr. Jeffrie A. Cunningham, president of the VDTA had informed an emergency meeting of the school board late Friday that his delegation “represented the full power of the teaching staff,” and that, “failing a satisfactory settlement,” and “a more just schedule,” teachers would not report to schools on Monday.² On



COVER PHOTO: “Bank Street School, Division III, Victoria”, 1914. Image B-03420 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives

THIS PAGE: Image courtesy BC Teachers' Federation

Monday, Superintendent Paul told the board only six teachers had reported for work, two attempting but unable to teach a class, and all six had been sent home.³ The VTS ended forty-eight hours later at 9:00 am, Wednesday, February 12, when teachers returned back to their schools under the understanding the board had delegated the matter to arbitration. The school board was later “greatly surprised” by a “contemptuous response by a scholar [pupil]” in reference to non-striking teachers. When asked if any of his teachers had shown up at his school that first day, the pupil had replied, “No teachers; only one scab.”⁴

When asked if any of his teachers had shown up at his school that first day, the pupil had replied, “No teachers; only one scab.”

In 1919, Victoria teachers, like their colleagues in 744 separate school boards across British Columbia, had little voice in educational matters outside their classrooms, and little influence within their bi-annual Teachers’ Institutes controlled by “school men,” let alone educational policy and control over their salaries and working conditions.⁵ They were beholden to their school boards, and to the changing constituency and temperament of those boards. Like other wartime workers, Victoria’s teachers had participated in austerity measures, had seen their salaries cut ten percent in 1914, and weathered wartime scarcity and rapid inflation under a frozen

annual salary schedule ranging from \$720 to a maximum of \$2760 for principals.

The VDTA had delivered “an ultimatum” for a timely salary increase, to their outgoing school board in the fall of 1918. The board discussed a committee recommendation that “teachers now on staff be placed on the salaries they would have received had there been no interruption in the schedule.”⁶ Compared to their Vancouver counterparts – who were not only better paid, but demanded twenty-five percent increase on salaries under, and twenty percent increase on salaries over \$1500 – the Victoria teachers’ demands were modest indeed: a ten percent increase for January 1 to June 30, 1919, and a proposal to negotiate a “mutually satisfactory scale” effective July 1, 1919. The board recommended, “the incoming board should favour the schedule.” In February, 1919, however, the new school board rejected the old board’s recommendations instructing their finance committee to prepare a new schedule based on the 1912 schedule and that of the teachers. The new board then offered five percent. The teachers demanded a “more just schedule.”⁷ This deadlock, and the subsequent two-day strike, propelled the labour dispute from the back pages to the front page of the *Daily Colonist*.⁸

Teachers struck on Monday, February 10, because the School Estimates were due to be presented to Victoria City Council that Friday. The board chose to refer the whole matter to the Council of Public Instruction requesting they “take whatever



ABOVE: "Class picture, Boys' Central School, Victoria", ca 1918. Image B-03423 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

action it may consider in the premises, leaving little doubt they hoped for disciplinary action.⁹

Victorians worried about the strike's deleterious moral affect upon the children and indeed the nation: One trustee stated, "It will have a bad effect on the children. The whole of Canada will be looking to Victoria to see what the Victoria School Board does in the matter of a teachers' strike."¹⁰ The *Victoria Times* added to the moral outcry admonishing teachers for not acquiescing and accepting the board's "compromise" of five per cent, and pointing out the dire pedagogical consequences. Witnessing the "breaking of a contract" by their teachers would lead to pupils'

questioning of the “inviolability of contracts.” A letter to the editor of the *Daily Colonist* tempered the panic with that perennial populist ambiguity toward teachers’ salaries: “Let me add that the teaching profession ought to be the best paid in the world, coming as it does, next to motherhood in influencing the lives of our future citizens.”¹¹

But the tide of public opinion was against the Victoria school board. Workers in Victoria, indeed, across the Dominion, sickened by wartime profiteering in the face of their own belt tightening, struck everywhere for wages and better working conditions. Unlike the *Times*, the *Daily Colonist* recognized the post war ethos “which cannot be stemmed . . . in the direction of a universal demand for justice,” and sided with the teachers who had “exhausted every avenue of persuasion in the pursuit of what was fair.” In view of salary increases across the Dominion during the latter years of the war, the Victoria teachers were

***“Henceforth, the
children will know
their teachers are
made of stern
unyielding stuff
...”***

underpaid. The Victoria board had no mandate to necessarily hold the salary increases to five percent. Victoria would lose even more teachers to Vancouver and other boards offering better pay.¹² Even school inspectors reporting to the Superintendent of Education extolled

teacher performance but were heavily critical of the

“inadequate remuneration” of teachers, one even venturing the “proper treatment of the teachers in this matter becomes a vital question for the nation.”

13

The Minister of the Department of Education met separately with board and teacher committees on the first day of the strike, offered to intervene with binding arbitration, but was legally powerless to act in settling the strike or to discipline the teachers. After teachers returned to their posts on Wednesday under the understanding there would be arbitration, legal counsel determined that under the Public School Act, the board had no legal right to confer the responsibility “to fix and pay” salaries to the Minister of Education, “or anyone else.”¹⁴ The board thanked the Minister for “his courteous offer to mediate,” and withdrew from the proposed arbitration.¹⁵ Victoria teachers then wrote the board not only expressing their disappointment, but significantly, requesting the board join them in pressing the government to pass amending legislation to enable the arbitration process.¹⁶

In the end, the matter fell back squarely upon the board which was forced to meet teachers’ demands (the ten percent salary increase) or face continued strike action.¹⁷ The board reported this final settlement to the Department of Labour as a result of “Negotiation,” and not arbitration, as it is sometimes thought the matter was resolved. Teachers were never disciplined for the strike; in fact, they were even paid for the two strike days.¹⁸

The socialist *Semi-Weekly Tribune* was

unreservedly celebratory of teachers' collective actions, placing them firmly as comrades within the larger struggle of the post war labour movement. The editors of the *Tribune* took the teachers' collective action as praxis, as *precisely* the sort of moral underpinning required in class struggle; indeed, it constituted the sort of lesson teachers *should* impart to their charges:

*The schoolteachers are to be congratulated on their decision to accept no further nonsense from the Board of Trustees. Their firmness will tend to impart decision of character to their pupils and will also tend to popularize trade union principles and methods in the ranks of the rising generation . . . Henceforth, the children will know their teachers are made of stern unyielding stuff and this will do much to secure discipline and win respect.*¹⁹

Even before the VTS was settled, the Victoria teachers' unyielding demands including an opportunity to help set future salary schedules was clearly an animus for assertive demands by other teachers across British Columbia. The Esquimalt school board offered their teachers the salary schedule demanded by Victoria teachers. But Vancouver teachers, who had seen their own salaries cut in 1912, were emboldened to go much further. Despite commanding higher salaries and minimums than their Victoria colleagues, they unanimously turned down their boards' offer – and better terms than the Victoria teachers had even

demanded.²⁰ Vancouver teachers then pressed their demands on the very day their Victoria colleagues struck. On the first day of the VTS strike, Vancouver teachers adopted a “unanimous standing vote” endorsing the actions of their Victorian colleagues action, and assured them by telegram of “every support we can give.”²¹ At least one Vancouver school trustee worried openly a similar strike in Vancouver “was quite a possibility.”²² On Tuesday, February 11, the Vancouver board proposed the matter of salaries go to a board of arbitration.²³

This story of the first teachers’ strike in Canada is an important addition to the narratives of worker struggle in the latter days of the Great War. The VTS is a cardinal event in the history of teachers and teaching in Canada, denoting a clear and rising sense among teachers of their collective identity and class consciousness. Victoria, 1919, was an historical site of “contested industrial solidarity,” lacking in unified labour leadership.²⁴ However, beginning in the autumn of 1918 through mid-February, 1919, Victoria teachers, unlike the general labour movement in the city, were organized, united and unequivocal in their demands as workers. Significantly, ninety-six percent of Victoria’s public and high school teachers took part in the strike, of these thirty-seven males and 132 females. The strike, and its success, would have failed without the full participation of women.

The Victoria teachers’ actions constitute a milestone step towards formal collective bargaining

for British Columbia teachers. While the dispute was not, in the end, directly resolved by arbitration, it certainly widened the possibility for other teachers and boards in similar circumstances who knew they would have to deal directly with each other while teachers remained safe from disciplinary action. It was not until 1937 that compulsory arbitration would be legislated into law as the dispute resolution mechanism for teacher negotiations. Until that time the solidarity and pluck demonstrated by Victoria teachers galvanized teacher associations facing ignorant, or intransigent boards across the province. Two years later in 1921, New Westminster teachers struck when their board failed to implement an arbitration settlement. In 1939, the resolve of teacher, Connie Jervis, and her colleagues led to the firing of the Langley school board and the appointment of a trustee to honour an arbitration award.²⁵

The win of the Victoria Teachers' original, and relative to other workers, moderate, salary demands – and being paid for the two days struck – is thus recorded as a material and moral victory for the Victoria teachers. But there is more. The “stern and unyielding” teachers served as models of fortitude par excellence to their pupils and colleagues, and to future generations of teachers.

April 2017

- ¹Two ambiguities surround the Victoria Teachers' Strike. First, the VTA was not, as has been variously reported beginning with Harry Charlesworth, and continuing in the Canadian Encyclopedia, the first teachers' strike in the British Empire or Commonwealth. That honour belongs to the Burston School Strike, in England, 1914-1939. Second, the number of strikers was not 178, but 169 (37 males and 132 females), as reported in the Part 1 form sent by the employer to Ottawa. See Strike no. 15. Department of Labour. *Strikes and Lockouts*. RG27 Vol. 310.
- ²"Teachers' Strike Now Threatened," *Daily Colonist*, 8 Feb. 1919.
- ³"Higher Tribunal to Settle Dispute," *Daily Colonist*, 11 Feb. 1919.
- ⁴"Scab Teachers," *Semi-Weekly Tribune*, 17 Feb. 1919.
- ⁵Ken Novakowski details the difficulty facing teachers granted, but not collecting, arbitration awards well after 1919. See Ken Novakowski, "1939-40: The Langley affair," *Teacher, BC Teachers' Federation*, Vol. 24, No. 5, March 2012.
- ⁶"Now the Teachers Present Ultimatum," *Daily Colonist*, 3 Oct. 1918.
- ⁷"School Teachers are Firm in Their Stand," *Daily Colonist*, 9 Feb. 1919.
- ⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁹Minutes, Special Meeting of Victoria School Board, 10 Feb. 1919. There was not yet a Ministry of Education.
- ¹⁰"Higher Tribunal to Settle Dispute."
- ¹¹*Daily Colonist*, 11 Feb. 1919.
- ¹²*Ibid.*
- ¹³Annual Report of the Public Schools of British Columbia, 48th Annual Report: 10
- ¹⁴*Daily Colonist*, 15 Feb. 1919.
- ¹⁵Minutes. Meeting of Victoria School Board, 12 Feb.
- ¹⁶Minutes. Meeting of Victoria School Board, 25 March 1919.
- ¹⁷Minutes. Meeting of Victoria School Board, 12 March 1919.
- ¹⁸See Strike No. 15.
- ¹⁹"The School Teachers," *Semi-Weekly Tribune*, Vol. 1 Feb. 13, 1919.
- ²⁰Vancouver School Board, for example, offered a minimum salary of \$950. "Higher Pay for City Teachers," *Vancouver Daily Herald*, 8 Feb. 1919.
- ²¹"Victoria Teachers Given Strong Support," *Daily Colonist*, 11 Feb. 1919.
- ²²*Vancouver Star*, 12 Feb. 1919.
- ²³"Will Arbitrate on Teachers' Salaries," *Vancouver Province*, 12 Feb. 1919.
- ²⁴Benjamin Isitt, "Searching for Workers' Solidarity: The One Big Union and the Victoria General Strike of 1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 60 (Fall 2007): 10.
- ²⁵Novakowski, "The Langley Affair."

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.

Contact Us

BC Labour Heritage Centre
#301—8988 Fraserton Court
Burnaby, BC V5J 5H8
PH: 604-419-0400
www.labourheritagecentre.ca
info@labourheritagecentre.ca

BC LABOUR
HERITAGE
CENTRE



BC Labour Heritage
Centre



@BC_LHC

**The BC Labour Heritage Centre and the following groups
contributed to this project.**



The Boag Foundation



BCLHC Sponsors: Bargaining Council of BC Building Trade Unions • BC Federation of Labour • BC Government and Service Employees' Union • BC Teachers' Federation • CUPE BC • Movement of United Professionals • United Steelworkers District 3 and National Office • United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1518