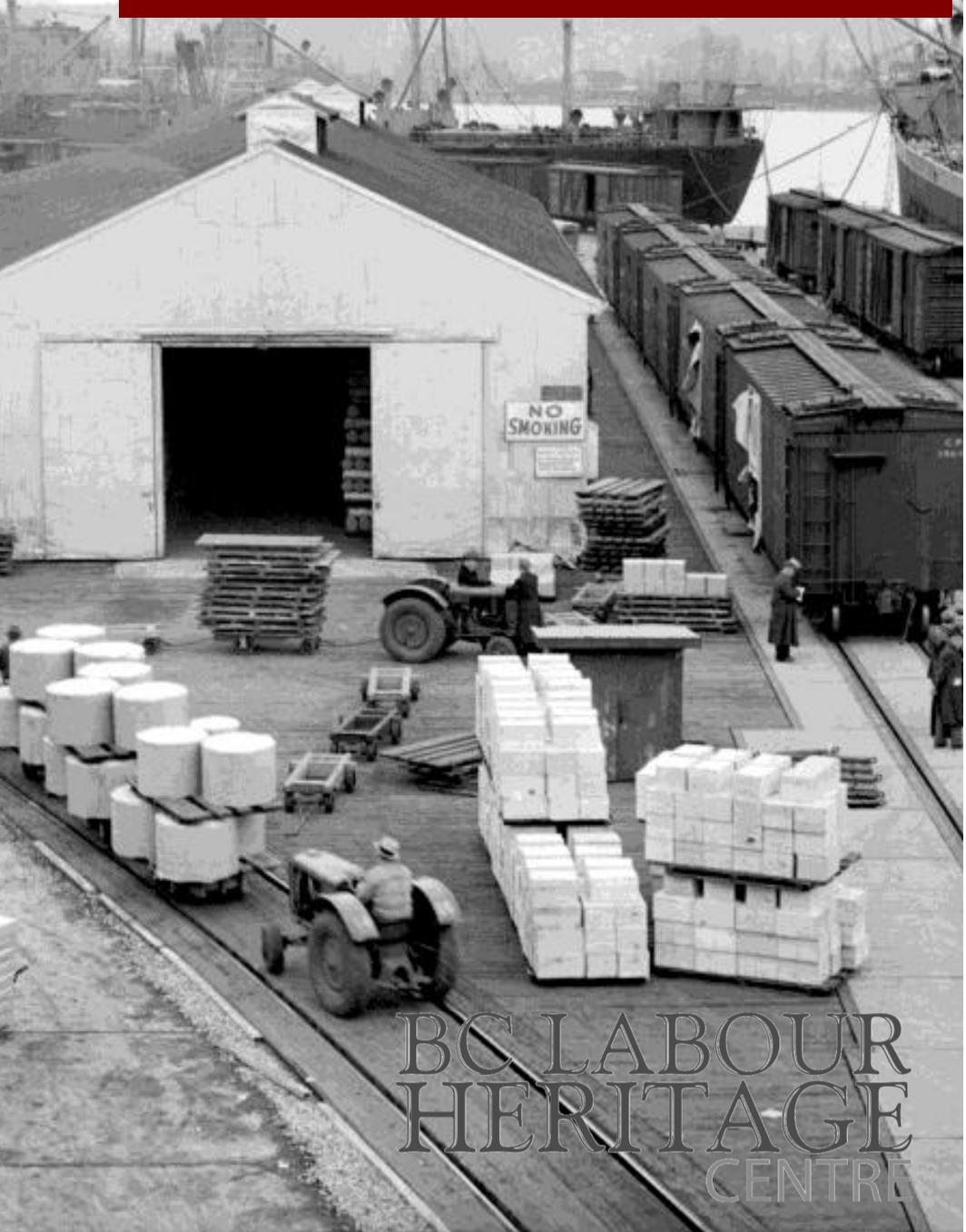


# New Westminster Waterfront Strike - 1935



BC LABOUR  
HERITAGE  
CENTRE

**Remember 3 September 1935:  
Police Arrest Longshore Workers during a Strike  
on the New Westminster Docks  
by Chris Madsen**

New Westminster was once a busy commercial port where ships from the around the world arrived regularly to discharge and load cargo. The docks and shipping terminals employed large numbers of longshore workers through hiring and dispatch halls run by unions. Before mechanization and increased automation came, the gang was the basic work unit, typically comprised of thirteen persons performing various functions in moving loads between shore and ship.

The work was physically hard, monotonous, and often irregular which shaped those engaged in the occupation and the labour unions that represented them. The work of loading and unloading ships on the Fraser River is today performed by members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 502, a union that remembers its past and still takes pride in the union dispatch.

The historical plaque located along the New Westminster quay promenade near the Queensborough railway bridge commemorates an event that happened on 3 September 1935 when the city and its police force intervened in a major waterfront strike affecting port operations. On that day, twenty-one striking workers were arrested and brought before police court for standing in solidarity with other

**COVER PHOTO:** Dockside operations at Pacific Coast Terminals on the main New Westminster riverfront show the extent of mechanization in moving goods. This 1930s view is taken from the second floor of the cold storage building. New Westminster Museum and Archives, IHP 1653.

waterfront unions in Vancouver, Powell River, and Port Alberni. The occasion had none of the violence or high drama associated with the so-called Battle of Ballantyne Pier, when Vancouver police clashed violently with striking longshore workers, though the willingness of civic officials to use force and intimidation against workers defending their rights to organize and strike was the same.

### **Militant Longshore Unions**

In the throes of the Great Depression, workers and unions representing them faced dismal economic

conditions, limited or no employment, and attempts by employers to dictate wages and unfavourable working terms in an arbitrary manner. Some resisted better than others.

Longshore workers in British Columbia, in waterfront associations since the last big strike in 1923, followed American affairs closely and changes in leadership to the West Coast arm of the longshore union after the “Great Waterfront Strike of 1934”. A conciliation decision forced them to accept lower wage rates than prevailing along the Pacific Coast in American ports.

The waterfront associations, increasingly strident in their demands for parity, created the Longshore and Transport Workers of Canada, a body intent on pressing for a better

*... twenty-one striking workers were arrested and brought before police court for standing in solidarity with other waterfront unions in Vancouver, Powell River, and Port Alberni.*



Longshore and Transport  
Workers of Canada, Local  
No. 1 (Vancouver)  
membership pin. Courtesy  
David Yorke.

arrangement with the Shipping Federation of British Columbia, the main employer association.

The New Westminster Waterfront Workers Association was an affiliate of the Longshore and Transport Workers of Canada and supported the actions in the resulting stand-off with the Shipping Federation. When longshore workers belonging to waterfront

associations in Powell River and Vancouver refused to load ships, they were replaced by non-union men and the existing agreement set aside. The Shipping Federation no longer recognized the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers Association and recruited its own workers from the ranks of the unemployed.

New Westminster longshore workers voted 290 in favour and 55 against going on strike in sympathy with Vancouver longshore workers, in protest against the Shipping Federation's refusal to even talk, never mind entertain union demands. It was a defiant and militant move meant to put pressure on the employers and signal solidarity. On 15 June 1935, work stopped at the docks and terminals on the New Westminster waterfront as longshore workers stayed away.

### **A Port City Awoken**

The reaction from civic officials reflected a blend of political imperatives and business interests that determined to keep the port open, despite the surprise sympathy strike by longshore workers. Fred Hume, the city's mayor, was the owner of an electrical contracting company and elected with a popular vote based on a friendly guy image. He initially

tried to talk with representatives from the New Westminster Waterfront Workers Association, to convince them to go back to work pending settlement of the dispute in Vancouver, received support from provincial and federal officials in doing so, and accompanied them for a few days of discussion with the Shipping Federation. Positions became more polarized when a procession of some thousand longshore workers attempted to make their way to Ballantyne Pier in Vancouver and the police blocked them with force on 18 June 1935.

The Vancouver Police used tear gas, procured from a supplier in the United States after a demonstration in



**ABOVE:** A mounted police officer clubs a man during the 'Battle of Ballantyne Pier' in Vancouver, June 18, 1935. City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 371-1129.

Bellingham, mounted horse units provided by the provincial police and Royal Canadian Mounted Police, police motorcycles, and police constables wielding batons to break up the crowd and pursue the strikers.

Two Lewis machine guns borrowed from the militia, one under the control of the chief constable and retired major-general William Wasbrough Foster who directed operations

at the site and the other with the federal police stationed on the pier, were trained on workers in case any broke through outer ranks of the police cordon.

A longshore worker from New Westminster, Einar Carlson, was arrested by plain clothes detectives for allegedly throwing a stone and injuring a provincial police constable on horseback. He went to jail with other nabbed workers involved in the conflagration. Carlson represents a person of respect for current longshore workers and members of his family still in ILWU Local 502.

In New Westminster, a strike committee consisting of Fred Jackson, Stanley Blake, and William Clitheroe informed

The Port of . . .  New Westminster

# MASS MEETING

OF CITIZENS

## QUEEN'S PARK ARENA

# TONIGHT

AT 8.00 P.M.

A Crisis having arisen with respect to our Shipping, threatening closing of our Mills and Other Industries, the Mayor and City Council, representing the Citizens, Owners of all our Waterfront, have called a General Meeting of the Citizens.

#### BUSINESS:

To review the local Strike situation and to consider what action would be in the best interests of the Port.

This is a most important Meeting. Every Citizen is directly interested. EVERYONE SHOULD ATTEND.

By Order,

**F. J. HUME, Mayor**

The New Westminster Mayor held a public meeting to gain consent for his plan of action. The City quickly formed the 'Royal City Waterfront Workers' Association' to replace the striking union members.

THE BRITISH COLUMBIAN, NEW WESTMINSTER, FRIDAY, JULY 5, 1935.

## MEN WANTED

Royal City Waterfront  
Workers' Association

Shipping activities at the port of New Westminster will be immediately expanded. Ships will be berthed over the week-end for loading at docks No. 2, No. 3 and No. 4, in addition to No. 1 dock.

This association is called upon to supply an additional 150 men for work on Monday morning, July 8.

Applications for employment and membership in this association will be received at the registered office of this association, Clarkson and McKenzie streets, or by telephone to No. 1928.

Preference will be given to residents of New Westminster and applicants with previous experience.



**ABOVE:** Longshore workers congregate around the strike captain's 'office' outside Pacific Coast Terminals during the six-month-long 1935 strike on the New Westminister riverfront. Three of those pictured were arrested on September 3, 1935. Courtesy Lena West.

Fred Hume that the New Westminister Waterfront Workers Association would not return to work.

The mayor held a big public meeting at the Queen's Park Arena to discuss the port situation and gain consent from New Westminister residents for a decisive plan of action on the part of the city.

The city quickly formed another labour association to replace workers in the striking union and took extraordinary measures to protect operations at the docks. Managers at the near bankrupt Pacific Coast Terminals received orders directly from the mayor and city council because New Westminister had guaranteed the company's debt. A proclamation by the mayor on the front page of the daily newspaper announced that the Royal City Waterfront Workers Association, a union backed by the city which restricted employment to residents, replaced the striking New Westminister Waterfront Workers Association

A high fence was installed around the perimeter of Pacific Coast Terminals with access-controlled gates, manned and patrolled by special constables provided by the BC Provincial Police, at Hume's request. Outside, striking workers maintained a picket line. The first strikebreakers were brought in by police car and accommodation provided inside the fenced area for the workers and extra police. The Royal City Waterfront Workers Association advertised for additional workers. The docks and terminals were soon back in operation loading and unloading ships coming to the port.

### **Policing the Waterfront**

The waterfront strike, which lasted through the summer and fall, taxed the capabilities of a small municipal police force. The New Westminster Police force, led by chief constable Peter Bruce, consisted of seventeen members, augmented by the provincial special constables posted at the city's docks and terminals.

The long strike added entirely new dimensions that challenged public order and policing in the city. The strikebreakers retaliated against the strikers, if they could corner them in tight spaces with superior numbers. Fist fights broke out between the two groups.

Bruce attributed continued public disorder and minor criminal acts to the strikers. He soon publicly issued a move along order stating that anyone lingering would be subject to arrest on the spot. Nonetheless, striking longshore workers resolutely maintained the picket line.

Fred Hume, as mayor, was also chair of the New Westminster Police Commissioners. In a meeting with

Peter Bruce and trusted councilor Harry Sullivan, it was decided to put an end to the violence through police intervention. Bruce's men would make arrests and Sullivan, a lawyer, would act as crown prosecutor in the criminal courts afterwards.

Peter Bruce chose Sergeant Eric Anderson, an old hand in the police force, to lead a squad of selected constables in a carefully planned action on 3 September 1935. When strikers purportedly threw



rocks at an automobile going through an access gate, Anderson and his men launched into the crowd several times and grabbed a number of strikers. The police then formed a square around the detained individuals and pushed back their shouting compatriots, with taps on the body to anyone who came too close.

Strikebreakers from inside Pacific Terminals rushed to the scene intent on some pay back against the strikers, and more police arrived . After a few hours, the angry strikers gave up the idea of retrieving their friends in an atmosphere that Sergeant Anderson described as tense at times.

### **Workers before the Law**

The arrests at Pacific Coast Terminals by the New Westminster Police criminalized strikers for the purpose of putting an end to picketing before the waterfront strike terminated later in December 1935.

The following workers were arrested on 3 September 1935: Harry Harding, George Zablosky, E. Clark, Daniel Burrow, Arthur Phillips, Alex Cameron, George Arter, Clayton Clark, Peter Winstall, Walter Quissy, Jack Mathews, Elof Blixt, James Stoddart, John Alaric, Robert Archibald, John Lynch, Ian Thorburn, Leslie Stead, Del Halladay, Winfred Tillotson, and Thomas Cleghorn. Many belonged to the New Westminster Waterfront Workers Association, while others came from Vancouver.

Before being brought before a police magistrate in Burnaby, the arrested longshore workers were photographed, fingerprinted, and spent a cold and uncomfortable night crowded into jail cells. They were charged with intimidation and unlawful assembly preventing access into the terminals. Harry Sullivan represented the crown in police court and laid out the case for the prosecution. The charged workers were released with promises to appear again before the police magistrate a week later, instead of being remanded back into custody. The New Westminster Waterfront Workers Association subsequently agreed to a request from Hume and Sullivan that picketing by the union at Pacific Coast Terminals stop, in return for charges being dropped against the arrested workers. The city had achieved its aim, with no small measure of intimidation.



The Royal City Waterfront Workers Association, the city-favoured union created during the 1935 waterfront strike, eventually became International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 502 in 1944. Former strikers and

strikebreakers put aside their differences and collaborated to build a strong union that has looked after the interests of its members and organized labour for decades. Most waterfront work has moved across the river to Fraser Surrey Docks, which is considering new grain terminal and container facilities, and downstream to the expanding Roberts Bank superport in Delta. New Westminster, once described as Canada's Liverpool, has redeveloped its former main waterfront lands for residential, recreational, and service industry purposes instead of industrial. The persons who once worked hard on the docks and experienced police and political power against organized labour firsthand should not be forgotten.

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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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**Contributors to this project:**

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