



Smelter Wars: A Rebellious Red Trade Union Fights for Its Life in Wartime Western Canada by Ron Verzuh.

A book review done by Ken Novakowski.

This book is a very welcome contribution to our knowledge and understanding of the challenges and conflicts faced by working people in British Columbia as they organized unions to represent their collective interests and gain a better work life for themselves and a greater capacity to provide for the well-being of their families. And although this book is essentially a regional story, focussing on the workers at the huge smelters in Trail, the experiences and outcomes have a much broader application for students of labour history. The book provides an excellent account of the effective operation of a company union run by a legendary Trail management figure and does an equally good history of the battle waged by the more moderate and conservative

forces in the Canadian union movement to purge many Canadian unions of the “Red” influence in their leadership.

Verzuh began his work on this book with an extensive knowledge of the history of the West Kootenays, but his prodigious and extensive research on the Trail union experience helped turn his book into a fascinating story that took place in that part of the province. And although he kept focussed on the union battles underway, he never failed to provide a social context for the year or years of the story being told. He had frequent references to the movies being shown in the local theatres, and of musical or sports events happening in the community, including the role of the famed Trail Smoke Eaters hockey team, a Canadian Allen Cup championship team. And throughout, Verzuh highlighted the influential role in “union politics” played by the right wing local newspapers and radio station in Trail. In the process of explaining the various community forces at work in the union conflicts, Verzuh created a vivid sense of life in Trail in the 30s, 40s and 50s.

Like most workers in BC in the early part of the twentieth century, smelter workers in Trail organized themselves into a union, Local 105 of the Western Federation of Miners. And in 1917, they conducted a 35 day strike for better wages and an eight hour day. The strike was organized and led by Ginger Goodwin, who was an effective orator and a good organizer. However, when the strike ended, Goodwin and the workers were unsuccessful in achieving their goals. Goodwin was blacklisted and soon left for the coal mines of Vancouver Island in search of work. Goodwin later went on to become a BC labour martyr when he was shot and killed on Vancouver Island by a police officer in July of 1918. His death sparked a one day general strike across BC.

The company negotiator who broke the Trail strike was one S.G. Blaylock who went on to dominate not only the eventual running of the Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada but also to oversee the successful running of a company union for the men who worked there. The company union he established continued to hold sway over the next several decades. It even managed to survive a significant organizing effort by Arthur "Slim" Evans in the late thirties when Evans tried to get workers to switch to Local 480 of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, an affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).



Eventually, Local 480, openly led and organized by Communists, won the support of a majority of Trail smelter workers in the latter part of the Second World War. They were aided by changes to both provincial and federal laws which did not recognize company unions as legitimate bargaining agents and required employers to bargain with unions representing their employees. Harvey Murphy, one of those larger than life labour characters had become a key organizer for Local 480 in Trail and served as negotiator when Local 480 successfully negotiated the first real collective agreement to determine the conditions of employment in the Trail smelters.

During the war, a significant number of women had gained employment in the Trail smelters as men enlisted in the armed forces to fight fascism in Europe. And even though the Mine Mill constitution supported gender equality, that was not to happen with respect to wages in the Local 480 agreement. This and the fact that women were expected to return to their lives as

wives and mothers once the “Boys” returned from the war, brought criticism from some of the women employees because the union was not living up to its stated beliefs. Verzuh also did well in explaining all the the different groups of people mostly from Eastern and Southern Europe that came to Trail to settle and work early in the twentieth century. Some supported communism but many others did not.

Another fight that Local 480 would have to take on came later in the 40s and into the 50s when McCarthyism and the Red Scare were in full blossom both in the United States and Canada. Opposition to communism was strong in the Catholic and other churches in Trail and priests and ministers used every opportunity available to rail against the communists running Local 480. The local newspapers and radio station joined in the anti-communist crusade. The Communists in the union did little to help their cause, by following policies and taking positions on world events that were clearly the “Moscow line”. Verzuh discussed the different tendencies that emerged in the labour movement during the virulent anti-communist era of McCarthyism and the “Red Scare”. The result was a major fight for control between the communists and the more moderate and conservative forces which wanted the communists out of the labour movement entirely. In the case of Local 480, this meant a series of raids by the United Steel Workers of America through the late forties and into the fifties. Mine-Mill held fast as other communist unions succumbed to the attacks. Having led the local through repeated unsuccessful attempts by Steel to take them over, in 1967, Local 480 negotiated a merger with Steel. That brought about the end of Mine Mill in Trail.

Through the fifties, Local 480 engaged in numerous activities which gave profile to its social role with workers and with the community they served. They played a major role in the staging of a series of border concerts with the well-known American singer Paul Robeson who had his passport seized by American authorities and therefore could not travel to Canada. The local also staged a historic showing of Salt of the Earth, a banned film sympathetic to the labour movement.

The book is also chock full of side stories involving different characters and the roles they played, including “cameos” of people like Bert Herridge and Leo Nimsick, two maverick CCF/NDP politicians. For me, Smelter Wars was both a very informative book as well as a most enjoyable read. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in labour history, indeed, to anyone interested in BC history.