



### Vancouver Island War

**Film Summary:** Highlights the 1912-1914 Big Strike in Vancouver Island coal mines where miners and mine owners clashed over worker safety. The film highlights the methods used by both sides to resolve the conflict including the use of police, militia and violent protests.

**Curriculum Application**  
Social Studies 9  
Social Studies 10

**The Essential Question:** How can the study of events of the past, like the “Vancouver Island War”, allow us to better understand labour, human rights and economic issues today?

### Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions for the vignette provide a short lesson option. (15 minutes)
2. Video overview activity to be completed individually or in small groups.
3. Directed reading exercise with guided questions to compare the experiences of the miners in the video with contemporary miners in Mexico.
4. Small group activity to compare the video with a reading article and opportunities for large group discussion.
5. Opportunities to relate the video and article to current worker safety issues.

### Learning Standards

1. Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions
2. Compare and contrast continuities and changes for different groups at the same time period (**continuity and change**)
3. Explain and infer different perspectives on past or present people, places, issues, or events by considering prevailing norms, values, worldviews, and beliefs (**perspective**)
4. Make reasoned ethical judgments about actions in the past and present, and determine appropriate ways to remember and respond (**ethical judgment**)

### Materials and Resources Provided

- [“Vancouver Island War” Episode 2- Working People – a History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- Activity 1 Article Analysis Sheet
- Activity 2 Video Information Organizer
- Appendix 1- Tyee Article “Embattled Striking Miners”
- Appendix 2- Lesson Strategy

### Additional Suggested Materials

- Working People: A History of Labour in British Columbia Lessons
  1. [Miners vs. Dunsmuirs](#)
  2. [Childrn at Work](#)
  3. [Ginger Goodwin](#)
- [The Labour Movement in British Columbia 1840 to 1914](#)
- [These were the reasons](#) Video Ch. 2
- [On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement Ch 4](#) pages 50-56
- [Vancouver Island Coal Strike - British Columbia - An Untold History \(knowledge.ca\)](#)
- [British Columbia: An Untold History-Labour and Persistence](#)

### Vignette Questions

1. In the three decades preceding the Vancouver Island War, how many miners had been killed in mining accidents?
2. What were the main causes of these accidents?
3. How did the Miners of the Extension respond to the company’s refusal to shut the mine for safety reasons?
4. What actions did Premier McBride take to deal with the Miners strikes?
5. How did the mine owners respond to the strike?

### Lesson Activities

1. A short lesson option is to watch the video and use the Vignette questions above and or the Video Information organizer provided in Activity one as an extension to the coverage of the topic “Fighting for Labour Rights” in the Grade 9 Social Studies text, Horizons: Canada’s Emerging Identity.
2. Follow the lesson strategy provide by the author (Appendix 2) to incorporate the video viewing and the reading and discussion of an article that can be used to compare and contrast the recent experiences of miners in Mexico and the miners of Vancouver Island in the past.
3. Additional vignettes and lessons that deal with coal mining in this time period can be found at the [BC Labour Heritage Centre](#) website. In addition, the video [“These were the reasons..”](#) chapter 2, is available at the Labour Heritage Centre’s websites. There are extra resources on [the Great Coal Strike of 1912-1914](#) also available on the BC Labour Heritage Centre’s Website.
4. The vignette ["Coal Miners Lament"](#) from the Edge of the World Series; BC’s Early Years can also be used to develop an extended unit on this topic.

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Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by John Decaire

# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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## Lesson: Vancouver Island War

### Activity 1 - Article Analysis Sheet

Complete the W5 Chart in note form after reading article *Embattled Striking Miners in Mexico are led from BC*.

Who	
What	
Where	
When	
Why	

In note form describe the similarities and differences between the conditions of BC miners in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Mexican miners described in the article.

Similarities	Differences

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## **Evaluation:**

Overall, do you believe that conditions for the miners in Mexico are similarly desperate to those of the miners involved in the Vancouver Island strike we have been studying? Explain your answer.

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*"People should not have the right to strike. If people don't like their working conditions they should get a new job or complain to the government. You don't own the work site, so you don't get to have a say in how it is run."*

Do you agree or disagree with the above statement? Explain yourself. The speaker suggests options other than a strike. Do you agree? Explain your answer using supporting information or evidence from the readings or class discussion.

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## Lesson: Vancouver Island War

### Activity 2- Video Information Organizer

1. Using the visuals and narration of the video, describe in note form the working conditions experienced by the Vancouver Island mine workers.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What was the reaction of the employer to the strike?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What was the reaction of the workers to the mine owners' tactics?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. After viewing the video read (or re-read) pg 264 in your *Horizons: Canada's Emerging Identity 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* text. Make any additional notes on the "Vancouver Island War" strike that you might have missed.

### Appendix 1-Tyee Article

### Lesson: Vancouver Island War

#### *Embattled Striking Miners in Mexico Are Led from BC*

As troops attempt to crush strikers in Sonora, their exiled union president ponders next steps from Burnaby.

Mike Bruce, "Embattled Striking Miners in Mexico are Led from BC," *Tyee*, June 10, 2010, accessed April 2015. <http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2010/06/10/MexicanMiningStrike/>

The lip of an enormous copper mine pit looms behind the dusty streets of Cananea in Sonora, Mexico. Walk those streets, and you encounter outsized memorials and tributes to the mine and its workers, the kinds of markers you might find in the British Columbian communities of Kimberley, Logan's Lake, Trail, or any other mining towns that dot the rural landscape across North America.

Cananea is the largest mine in Mexico, at one time responsible for some 40 per cent of the country's copper output. At a high point on the main road leading to the mine stands what used to be a movie house. Now it is the union office and hall of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalurgicos y Similares de la Republica Mexicana (Los Mineros) mineworkers union.

The union-owned funeral home for members sits across the street.

In Cananea, where miners work in crumbling, dangerous facilities owned by transnational corporations focused on bleeding profit out of the earth, walkouts, strikes and company lockouts have become a regular part of the life.

The workers at the Cananea Copper Mine have been on strike for almost three years in a fight over health and safety conditions. In those three years, the mine has been shut down and Grupo Mexico, the mine's owner, has claimed to have lost some \$1.5 billion U.S. in revenue.

The company and the government have placed intense pressure on the union, driving its leader beyond Mexico's borders and forcing him to lead the fight from an office thousands of kilometres away. Napoleon Gomez Urrutia remains in charge from his base in Burnaby, B.C., even as the conflict enters a new and violent level of intensity.

#### **'Industrial homicide'**

On Sunday, June 6, some 400 Federales, the paramilitary Mexican federal police force, stormed Cananea, backed up by what estimates have placed at between 2,000 to 4,000 "Federal Preventative Police" sent to the town to secure the mine and evict the strikers.

Late that night, tear gas was fired into the union offices near the mine entrance, and arrest warrants were issued for the leadership of Section 65 of the Los Mineros union. There are unconfirmed reports of two union members killed in the police action.

At 2:15 a.m. Monday morning, state police stormed Grupo Mexico's Pasta de Conchos mine in the state of Coahuila, site of a 2006 explosion that killed 65 miners. The police used this action to expel family members of those killed who have been working to recover the bodies of their loved ones who have remained buried for four years. According to a Grupo Mexico official quoted in the June 8 New York Times, the timing of these two police actions was coincidental.

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The 2006 disaster at Pasta de Conchos is where the relationship between the mineworkers union, the government, and Grupo Mexico took the hostile turn that led all the parties to this point. The explosion was dubbed "industrial homicide" by Napoleon Gomez Urrutia, the erudite, soft spoken secretary general of the 280,000-member Los Mineros.

Safety standards had been in freefall at Grupo Mexico's mines and facilities for years, the result of aggressive privatization of state resources administered by the conservative administration of president Vicente Fox, succeeded by the current government of President Felipe Calderon. Grupo Mexico is a mining and resource behemoth that has close ties deep within the Mexican government, a relationship often likened to that between Halliburton and the George W. Bush administration.

The government stood firmly behind their patron when Gomez forcefully criticized Grupo Mexico after the deaths of 65 of his members. Following Gomez' furious, emotional remarks in the wake of the Pasta de Conchos explosion, the government leveled several charges of corruption against him, claiming that he had embezzled millions of dollars from the union's coffers.

Facing these charges alongside a steady stream of death threats against him and members of his family, Gomez fled to the United States and later to Canada, fearing the risk that the Bush government would extradite him.

### **Firmly in charge**

Gomez is now living in Vancouver with the assistance and support of the United Steelworkers, the 1.2 million-member international union. Working out of the USW District 3 offices in Burnaby, Gomez has not only continued to run the union and negotiate agreements on behalf of his members, he has also expanded his base of support. As a regular speaker at union conventions, delegate meetings, and community group gatherings, Gomez retells the stories of government violence and repression alongside the horrific working conditions often faced in Grupo Mexico facilities such as the Pasta de Conchos mine.

Despite the charges and his isolation, Napoleon Gomez remains firmly in charge of Los Mineros' 280,000 members. He has been re-elected unanimously six times since his first election in 2001, and the overwhelming majority of the membership remain steadfastly loyal to him. Banners and murals pledging unanimous support dot union halls across Mexico.

An independent audit conducted by Swiss accounting firm Horwath Berney Audit SA examined all of the union's books and has completely exonerated Gomez of any wrongdoing. At the same time, several lower court rulings in Mexico have thrown out the federal government's charges against Gomez.

None of this has budged the Calderon government, which continues to seek the extradition of Gomez, and senior Mexican ministers have pressed their Canadian counterparts for action. The Canadian government has yet to reply to these requests.

Yet the Mexican Government and Grupo Mexico continue their assault, and the actions at Cananea -- both the strike by the miners and the assault by Federales -- are part of the larger conflict surrounding Gomez, union independence, and an ongoing government crackdown, often by use of force, on independent unions not recognized, or thus controlled, by the government.

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### **Government's gambits**

In the wake of the Calderon's government's charges against Gomez, the authorities have moved to seize Los Mineros' assets and set up a parallel, government-controlled union, the National Front for the Miner's Renovation.

One of Gomez' former deputies, Carlos Pavon, is working for this puppet group, and is rumoured to have accepted a large cash payment in reward.

Pavon had remained loyal to Gomez in his exile, traveling with other senior members of the Los Mineros Executive to Vancouver in 2008 to attend the B.C. Federation of Labour convention where Gomez and Los Mineros were being honoured.

Upon his return to Mexico, Pavon and another senior deputy, Juan Linares, were arrested at the Mexico City airport and incarcerated at the Reclusio Norte Prison. Shortly thereafter, Pavon was released after issuing a public renunciation of Gomez and Los Mineros.

Linares, however, remains behind bars. During a recent visit by an international delegation of labour activists, including Canadian Labour Congress president Ken Georgetti, USW Canada chair Ken Neumann, and Vancouver-based union leaders Steve Hunt from the USW and Andy Ross from COPE 378, Linares said that he has received many overtures from Grupo Mexico, including offers of vast amounts of cash alongside immediate release in exchange for a public renunciation of Gomez.

### **Still a target**

Like Linares, the vast majority of Los Mineros members remain loyal to Gomez and the independence of the union.

Few signs are more indicative of this than the fact that, with the exception of Grupo Mexico, employers across Mexico whose workers are represented by Los Mineros still go directly to Gomez for negotiations and collective bargaining. Members simply won't recognize the authority of anyone else. Such is Gomez' authority that representatives from many employers in Mexico frequently travel to Vancouver to negotiate directly with Gomez at the United Steelworkers District 3 offices in Burnaby.

Yet despite this authority and this success, or perhaps because of it, Gomez remains a designated adversary, and target, of the Mexican government.

Gomez has been a thorn in the side of the government, and Grupo Mexico in particular, since he was first elected in 2001. Traditionally, Mexico's government-recognized unions have had a close, non-adversarial relationship that more closely reflects collusion than confrontation.

All this changed with Gomez' election, which occurred shortly after the election of the right-wing administration of Vicente Fox, a former executive with Coca Cola.

Following the staid labour atmosphere of the 1990s, where Los Mineros engaged in only one strike against Grupo Mexico, the union has engaged in 32 strikes at Grupo Mexico operations since Gomez' election.

The situation that now exists between Los Mineros and the government/Grupo Mexico is intensely personal and Gomez is clearly the target.



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## **Cross-border strategies**

Which brings all of this back to Cananea and Pasta de Conchos and the launch of a government assault on workers in both locations.

While the Cananea strike is ostensibly over health and safety issues, it is just as much, if not more, in solidarity with members' exiled leader.

When the international delegation of labour leaders visited Cananea in early May, union members were anticipating the hammer to fall at any time. With Calderon's planned state visits to Washington and Ottawa, the Los Mineros executive was predicting that the government would take action shortly after Calderon returned to Mexico on May 28. Calderon wouldn't risk provoking a rebuke direct from U.S. President Obama, said union leaders, a result which would be likely considering the relationship between the White House and United Steelworkers, who have a strategic alliance with Los Mineros.

The predictions proved true. As soon as Calderon was safely back in Mexico and away from the potential of a dressing down from Obama on human and workers' rights concerns, the Federales were sent into action. Just over a week after the end of Calderon's tour, the troops were sent in.

## **Follow the dollars**

At the end of the day, the government and company actions are about money; the Cananea mine is worth a tremendous amount of money to Grupo Mexico, and the government is prepared to secure the company's access to this wealth with brute force.

Ultimately it is Napoleon Gomez who remains the biggest single barrier to Grupo Mexico's unfettered access to this wealth, and the government of Mexico has made clear that it is prepared to use government resources, including bullets and tear gas, to secure and operate the mine on behalf of the country's mining behemoth.

So today the streets of the small, dusty, desert town of Cananea are occupied with some 2,000 to 4,000 Federales and "Prevention Police."

The union executive is in hiding, and the damage, injury, and possibly death tolls are still being assessed.

Representatives from the United Steelworkers are on the ground, trying to mediate and preserve the safety of the workers and their families.

The government and Grupo Mexico are no doubt trying to sort out the process of escorting and protecting the 1,200 replacement workers needed to operate the giant mine, with the likely result that the police and paramilitaries are digging in.

At the same time, in union offices in Burnaby, in Pittsburgh, in Ottawa, and in Washington, labour leaders and activists are also gathering, digging in, and sorting out their next steps.

There might be a lot about Cananea that looks and feels like a Canadian or American mining town, but with armed troops on the streets and tear gas drifting through the air, the differences with our close ally and NAFTA trading partner could not be more acute. 🇺🇸

*Article used with permission of the Tyee*

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## Appendix 2- Lesson Strategy

## Lesson: Vancouver Island War

### Introduction:

This lesson is intended to be taught as part of a Socials 9 or 10 class, Laurier Period unit, or as part of a Pre-First World War history in Socials 10. Students should have some background already in the history and economic development of BC up to and including 1871 when the province joined Confederation. It is recommended that the events related to labour unrest in BC's coal communities as a result of Robert Dunsmuir's and James Dunsmuir's business practices already be taught.

The teacher should introduce the lesson by briefly reviewing some of the significant content described above then briefly describe some of the conditions that led to the mass coal miner's strike that becomes known as the "Vancouver Island War".

Distribute the handouts entitled "The Vancouver Island War Info Organizer", and play the video vignette "The Vancouver Island War". Before starting the video, instruct students to fill out the organizer with the appropriate information from the video.

### Body:

The teacher can then briefly discuss with the class some of the highlights of the video (and info organizer prompts; W5). The teacher then should ask the question of the class, "We know that there were some terrible labour practices in the past. We know that workers in the past were often paid very little, worked long hours and worked in very dangerous conditions, but do you think most of these are problems of the past? Currently, have we successfully addressed most of these problems?" Solicit a discussion, drawing out multiple points of view. It will be beneficial to draw particular attention to the belief that may be common that laws prevent most labour abuses nowadays.

Divide the class into small groups (3 or 4 students) then distribute the article from *The Tyee* entitled, "Embattled Striking Miners in Mexico are Led from BC" to be read by the students. Depending on the reading ability of the students, the teacher may wish to create a more condensed version of the article or may wish to read the article with the students to clarify different key points. Either through questioning or brief discussion, draw class attention to how there are, in fact, many similarities between conditions for miners in Mexico today and those in BC in the past. Then distribute one copy of "Article Analysis Sheet" to each group. Have each group appoint a secretary and as a group have them analyze the article, and complete the Analysis Sheet.

After giving sufficient time to complete, bring the groups together for class discussion. Each group should select a spokesperson to represent their views. Getting input from each group, record similarities and differences between the situations facing miners of Vancouver Island and Mexico on the white board, over head, or media projector. Now draw the class' attention to the last question on the Analysis Sheet "Do you agree or disagree with the above statement?" ("Should workers have the right to strike?") Solicit responses from different members of the classroom. You may wish to set up a random method of selection, either by number or draw, in order to distribute responses. Encourage class discussion on the issue.

### Closure:

If time permits you may wish to draw attention to current headlines in the news related to shortfalls in worker safety or conditions in Canada. Highlight the importance of not disregarding the events and struggles of the past as necessarily irrelevant, as they apply even today.

1. Collect group analysis sheets for assessment.

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