



### On-to-Ottawa

**Film Summary:** During the Great Depression, unemployed men took to the rails, with the intention of arriving en masse in Ottawa. While they did not reach their destination, this protest lives on in memory. Students are introduced to the economic and political realities of the “Dirty thirties” and information on the On-to-Ottawa Trek

**Curriculum Application**  
Social Studies 11

**The Essential Question:**

Evaluate the political and social impact of the On-to-Ottawa Trek on Canada’s Depression era.

### Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions for the vignette provide a short lesson option. (15 minutes)
2. Small Group Activity
3. Historical Perspectives writing exercise; individually or in small groups
4. This lesson has been adapted from Youth, Unions and You, A Secondary Teacher’s Guide to Labour Studies for B.C. Schools available through the BCTF.

### Learning Objectives

1. Apply critical thinking and ethical reasoning skills
2. Analyze examples of injustice in Canada related to socio-economic status
3. Describe the effects of and various responses to the Great Depression (e.g., unemployment, government intervention, protest parties, soup kitchens)

### Materials and Resources Provided

- ["On-to-Ottawa" Episode 2- Working People –A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- Activity 1: On-to-Ottawa Trek Introduction
- Lesson Activity 2: A Trekker Remembers
- Lesson Activity 3: Discussion questions and classroom activities

### Additional Suggested Materials

- [These were the reasons...Chapter 5: Unemployed Get a Union - Stories from the relief camps](#)
- [On-to-Ottawa 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration](#)
- [On-to-Ottawa and For Twenty Cents a Day videos](#)
- [Battle of Ballentyne Pier; Graphic History Project](#)
- [Begbie Contest Political Cartoons](#)

### Vignette Questions

1. What were the economic conditions in Canada in the 1930's?
2. Why do you think the Canadian government set up rural work camps for the unemployed?
3. Why would the unemployed want to travel to Ottawa?
4. What were the reasons for the riot in Regina?
5. Evaluate the On-to-Ottawa Trek?

### Lesson Activities

1. **First Class:** Read the Historical Context and the On-to-Ottawa Trek-Introduction (Activity 1) with the class, and discuss.
2. Show the class the On-to-Ottawa Knowledge Network Vignette (if a teacher decides to only show the short vignette and does not assign the readings, the brief discussion questions could be used following the vignette).
3. Distribute the reading on Ronald Liversedge A Trekker Remembers ( Activity 2), read together and answer the discussion questions ( Activity 3)
4. **Second Class:** Divide class in groups of four students. In their group, students will collaboratively write one friendly letter from the point of view of Ronald Liversedge, the trekker. The letter will be addressed to his parents back in Vancouver. The letter should describe what he sees and hears, the people he meets, his inner frustrations about being young and unemployed.
5. Have each group read their letter to the class. At this time, the class can do a variety of activities, including asking questions to each of the groups and/or discuss the similarities and differences in the letters. The letters could be sent to another group, and then have the groups collectively or individually write back to Ronald, from the point of view of his parents.

**Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by Arthur Scott Parker**

## Lesson: On-to-Ottawa

### Lesson Activity 1 # On to- Ottawa Introduction

#### **Historical Context**

The On-to-Ottawa Trek ranks as one of the most important events in Canadian labour history. In the 1930s, with so many unemployed, the focus of working-class organizing became the unemployed. The social safety net: unemployment insurance, welfare, universal medical care, and worker's compensation didn't exist in the 1930's. The "Dirty Thirties" led to a marked swing toward radical left-wing organizations, from block committees, growth in memberships of the Communist Party of Canada and a new socialist party: the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The three divisions of unemployed, led by Slim Evans, left Vancouver for Ottawa in 1935 to demand action from Bennett's Conservative government were part of that radical workers movement. The "Dirty Thirties," with its strikes, unemployed workers' unions, riots, occupations, street demonstrations, sit-ins, a dramatic increase in unionized workers, the rising popularity of socialism, the CCF, and the almost universal feeling that classical capitalism had failed, will have long-term consequences that will help shape contemporary Canadian society

#### **On to Ottawa Trek-Introduction**

The On-to-Ottawa Trek in the summer of 1935 captured the hearts and minds of Canadians. The Depression of the 1930s—The "Dirty Thirties"—was a time of despair and fightback. Thousands of people were thrown onto the streets without jobs, without money, without savings, without hope. By 1932, more than one-third of the labour force was unemployed. There was no unemployment insurance in those days. Those who were working also suffered. Employers could cut wages and increase hours without fear of strikes. Families broke up. Men left home to look for jobs. Boys were cut off their families' relief on their 16th birthday. They travelled the country on freight cars to look for work and food. In 1932 the federal government set up relief camps in isolated areas for unemployed single men. Over the next four years, more than 100,000 young Canadians lived in those camps. The camps were run by the army. Pay was 20 cents a day, the food was bad, accommodations poor, and the workers were denied the right to vote.

The relief camp workers in British Columbia were organized into the Relief Camp Workers Union. They wanted "work and wages." The union demanded an increase in wages, a five-day workweek, unemployment insurance, and Worker's Compensation coverage, the right to vote, and to have the camps taken out of control of the Defence Department. In 1935 about 1500 workers left the camps in B.C. to protest the bad conditions. They gathered in Vancouver over several weeks. The relief camp workers organized a trek to Ottawa by freight car to protest directly to the federal government. Starting with 1500 in Vancouver on June 3rd and joined along the route by more unemployed, 2000 trekkers reached Regina two weeks later. In Regina on July 1 (Dominion Day), citizens and trekkers were brutally attacked by the RCMP and city police on orders of Conservative Prime Minister R.B. (Iron Heel) Bennett.

The trek was stopped. Its leaders were arrested. But the trekkers maintained their unity and organization. They won the right to return to their homes as a group in railway passenger cars.

Within months, the Tory Bennett government was defeated. Soon after, the relief camps were abolished. Although the trekkers didn't make it to Ottawa, they won their battle. They raised people's spirit to fight for jobs and a better life. They helped change Canada.

*Adapted from Heritage of Struggle Canadian Labour History Workbook, Published by Metro Labour Education Centre*

## Lesson: On-to-Ottawa

### Lesson Activity 2: **A Trekker Remembers**

Ronald Liversedge took part in the On-to-Ottawa Trek and was a member of the Communist Party of Canada

We boarded the CPR boxcars and huddled together on top of the cars preparing ourselves for the long, cold ride ahead. We were slowly moving east to the shouted good wishes of the people of Vancouver. At every crossing, there were people to bid us good luck, until Victoria Drive where the train picked up speed, and soon it was goodbye to Vancouver, and that was the start of the trek. After one night in Kamloops, the trekkers headed east again. Their next stop was Golden, as Calgary was too far to go in one stretch.

I was wondering about Golden in the heart of the Rockies. From what I could remember, having passed through a few times riding freight, there was nothing at Golden except a station, a hotel, and a few shacks. Trek leader Slim Evans was very optimistic. He said, "There is a large farming area there with lots of good farms." What's more, there was a little white-haired lady living on one of those farms, a communist, and a persona acquaintance of Evans, to whom Slim had sent a telegram from Kamloops telling her the time of our arrival in Golden, and stating, "Please prepare food and welcome for one thousand."

We pulled into Golden shortly after noon. We very soon marched onto a large expanse of park like land, richly grassed with large shade trees scattered here and there. Under a half dozen of the huge shade trees were cooking fires, and suspended over the fires were various kinds of makeshift cooking vessels full to the brims with simmering, bubbling, thick, heavenly-smelling beef stew. Over one fire (and this is the gospel truth) was suspended a full size bathtub, also full to the brim with beef stew. There were long trestle tables with thousands of slices of golden crusted bread. Around each fire were just two or three quiet, smiling women, salting, peppering, and tasting.

It was incredible, it was heartwarming, it was beautiful. The next day, we left Golden with reluctance, but we had to pass on. There was one bad spot on this lap of our journey, the Connaught tunnel. The tunnel, which spirals through the heart of a mountain, is about seven miles long. It was a nightmarish trip. I think the two locomotives pulling the train were coal burners. The tunnel was filled with dirty, brown, billowing, gritty, warm smoke. The acrid sulphurous stench was overpowering, and gave one a choking sensation. We all lay on top of the boxcars, covering our mouths and noses with handkerchiefs or rags. The trip through the tunnel took about 30 minutes, and it was a wonderful sensation to finally emerge into the fresh air.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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After Calgary, soon we were rolling across the lone prairie, where the coyotes howl, and the sheriffs were busy delivering more closure notices to the poor farmers. In Saskatchewan alone during the depression, 5,000 farms were seized for debt by the mortgage companies, the banks, and the farm machinery companies. There was very little in the way of crops evident as we travelled along on the boxcars. What was the use of growing wheat when all the elevators were full to the bursting point? No matter that millions of people in the world starved, along with scores of thousands in our own country. As long as the people didn't have money to buy, then the goods and food would remain locked away and guarded by armed men.

One entry into Regina was something of a triumph. We had been successful up to now, had built our forces up, and we were a proud little army. As we marched through the city streets, throngs of people lined the sidewalks to give us a rousing welcome. At the official welcome, there were gathered representatives of all the working people's organizations, communist, CCF unemployed, trade union, and there was a large choir from the Ukrainian Labour Farmers Temple Association.

Hundreds of unemployed workers joined the trek as it moved east. Public support was growing. In a manoeuvre to stop the trek, the federal government invited a delegation to negotiate in Ottawa. They met Prime Minister R.B. Bennett.

There sat Bennett behind his desk, surrounded by officials and guards. There were the press, and in front of Bennett, the eight representatives of the trek. The Prime Minister wasted no time, but went into his diatribe of abuse, condemnation, and threats, his face crimson with hatred.

He then singled out Slim Evans and roared, "We know you down here, Evans! You are a criminal and a thief!" At this, Slim calmly rose to his feet, and looking the Prime Minister in the eye, he said, loudly and distinctly, "And you're a liar, Bennett, and what is more, you are not fit to run a great country like Canada."

The offer of negotiations, openly and cynically a trap to get the delegation to Ottawa, the heaping of verbal abuse on their heads, with no intention of negotiating, all this, even coming from Bennett, was, in the eyes of the Canadian people, shameful and inexcusable.

The trek representatives returned to Regina by July 1; plans were made to call off the trek. But at the outdoor meeting to announce the decision, the Federal Mounties launched an attack. Dozens of people were injured, 100 were arrested, and there was much damage in downtown Regina.

What a price to pay for the defeat of a government and extinction of a political party. Although R.B. Bennett was too great an egotist to admit the fact, he had on that Dominion Day in 1935, signed the death warrant of his government and party for the next two-and-a-quarter decades.

*Adapted from Heritage of Struggle, Canadian Labour History Workbook,  
published by Metro Labour Education Centre.*

# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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## Lesson: On-to-Ottawa

### Lesson Activity 3 # Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

#### Discussion Questions

1. Do you know someone who is or has been unemployed?
2. Is unemployment a problem only for the unemployed? Explain why or why not.
3. What do people do today when they are unemployed?
4. Why do you think the unemployed were so desperate in the 1930s?

Students will read to each other the article “A Trekker Remembers,” divide the questions, report to the group, come to a consensus on the answers and record the answers in their notebooks.

1. Why were so many people supportive of the trekkers?
2. Comment on the effects of the depression in Saskatchewan.
3. Why did the meeting between R.B. Bennett and Slim Evans end in mutual insults?
4. What were the long-term consequences of the trek?
5. Describe the role of women in the article.
6. What would you have done if you were unemployed in the 1930s?
7. What was a relief camp, and what were the conditions like in the camps?
8. Quote the sentence that tells you there was no need for people to go hungry.

After students have finished discussing and writing down their answers; take up their responses with the class. (This could be done at the end of the period or at the beginning of the next period.)