Not Always Sweet

The 1917 Vancouver Sugar Refinery Strike

by Janet Mary Nicol

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ALL was quiet along the Vancouver waterfront in the early dawn of 22 April 1917. A lone male figure passed through the refinery gates and observed smoke rising from the factory stacks where men had refined raw sugar for 26 years. Through an arched window on the main floor of an elongated six-storey brick building, he could see five men unloading jute bags of sugar cane. He was determined to turn around and leave with these men if refinery owner Benjamin Tingley Rogers didn't respond to their demands for overtime pay for Sunday work.

But the American-born Rogers, who trained his first group of 75 employees on the alchemy of sugar refining at age 25 and had since made his fortune closely managing the city's pioneering factory, was aware of his employees' rebellious talk. From his yacht *Aquilo*, anchored off a nearby Gulf Island, he had radioed his superintendent the previous day. "I learned the melting house gang intends to quit Sunday morning unless given time and a half. Are led by a man known as Irish Johnny." Rogers ordered the worker fired. "Will discharge Irish Johnny in the morning," superintendent William Aitchison wired back.

"Irish Johnny" could have been any one of the 25 "John's" or "J's" listed as sugar refinery employees in the 1917 Henderson Directory of Vancouver. On that fateful Sunday, the ubiquitous "John" was summoned and dismissed soon after he entered the building, along with a foreman who came to his defence. Next day, when more than 240 employees arrived at work and heard about the firings, most walked off the job. They rallied at the Vancouver Labor Temple on Dunsmuir Street and formed the Sugar Workers Union.

These series of events marked the beginning of a bitter 92-day labour dispute, pitting one of Vancouver's earliest millionaires against recently immigrated labourers. Rogers resided with his wife and seven children in a stone mansion (now a restaurant) on Davie Street at Nicola in the city's west end. He was among the city's first citizens to drive to work in an automobile. Refinery workers owned homes within walking distance of the sugar factory in the east-end neighbourhoods of Strathcona and Grandview. Many of their two-storey wood-framed houses still stand. Though the workers' attempt to form a union at BC Sugar would end in defeat, their confrontation with Rogers provides an insightful glimpse into Vancouver's early days.

Rogers sailed back to Vancouver the day the workers walked off the job and promptly issued a statement to the press: "The men went out on strike because the superintendent saw fit to let out one of the laborers," he maintained. "The men want him reinstated. I don't know what reason the superintendent had for discharging him, but I will stand behind the superintendent until the crack of doom."

Blaming the superintendent for firing John didn't improve Aitchison's popularity with the staff. "No matter when or how the employees return to work there will be serious friction as long as this man is in charge," a striking employee complained in an anonymous letter to Rogers. "We could name about 20 instances of Mr. Aitchison's craziness, meanness, and insulting ways, in dealing with men of long service who have far more intelligence than he. We think he is incapable of handling men."

Rogers had closed the refinery for eleven weeks the previous December, further distressing his employees. He claimed raw sugar cargoes were delayed because of shipping disruptions caused by the First World War. The shortage of manpower on the home front impacted much later in the west. Consequently workers in Vancouver were still receiving layoff notices in the winter of 1916 with slips reading: "Your king and country need you—we don't." Workers also had to contend with inflationary prices of consumer goods (including sugar) while their wages remained constant and BC Sugar, a monopoly operation in Western Canada, continued to profit.

The week before the strike, nearly all of the 206 men and 36 women on staff had signed a petition requesting a wage increase from 32 ½ cents to 40 cents an hour with time and a half for overtime and Sunday work and a maximum ten-hour day and a minimum five-day week. For mechanics, watchmen, and women, the workers

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Above: *B.C. Sugar Refinery, Vancouver, 191-?*

requested a pay increase from 20 cents to 24 cents an hour. The petition was left in the storeroom where it was found by the timekeeper who took it to management. The following day management pinned a response in the staff dressing room, offering a three-cent increase to male labourers only. The workers considered the offer unsatisfactory.

Rogers made it clear he would not deal with a union and continued operating the refinery. He hired a personal bodyguard and retained the services of the Thiel Detective Agency, an American firm specializing in labour relations, with offices in five Canadian cities. Rogers' resolve may have been strengthened by the fact that when he was 18 years old, his father, also a refinery owner, was killed by a brick thrown during a labour dispute at his sugar plant in New Orleans.

Rogers told newspaper reporters the wages for the "common labourer" at the refinery were as high a rate per hour as those for "certain skilled workmen." As for the women who filled and sewed the sugar bags, "they are well paid at twenty cents per hour and I have taken a personal interest in their welfare by giving them each day a plentiful hot lunch free of charge."

An unnamed female striker took a different view. "After getting through a day's work all we can do is to just about get home," she told the press. "And any recreation is altogether out of the question." She said most of the factory girls were between 16 to 20 years old. About half of them support themselves on their earnings. "It is not only having to handle the sacks—on one day 40 of us had 30,000 of them to fill and sew," she said, "but the hours we have to remain standing are unendurable."

As for Rogers's free lunch for girls, refinery striker William Lane argued, "If the girls were paid a reasonable rate for their work they would be able to buy their own meals and would be independent of his charity."

The top news stories of Vancouver's four dailies were about the war overseas but the inside pages gave sympathetic coverage to the numerous work stoppages in the city and across the country, including the strike at BC Sugar. "The older men are grave and self-contained," the *Daily World* observed of the picketers, "the boys delighted to escape a day or two from the daily round and common task, the girls chattering among themselves after their kind and plainly excited by the enterprise on which they had embarked, that of joining a real labour union and opposing the will of him who had reigned so many years as undisputed master of the sugar works."

The *Daily World* also noted the strikers were "...what in labor circles are designated 'white,' that is to say, they belonged to that race which, by whatever channels these representatives reached Vancouver and the sugar refinery, has its ancestral home in the British Isle." Rogers had agreed to exclude Asian workers in a deal he struck with city council when he arrived from Montreal with financial backing in 1890. Eager to encourage industry in a frontier port, council members gave Rogers a $30,000 grant, free water for 10 years and a tax waiver for 15 years. Labour leaders were behind the exclusion hiring demand, believing it was a necessary strategy to prevent employers from undermining wage rates. BC Sugar began an informal practice of hiring relatives of employees.

Spirits were high as three Scottish pipers led a parade of sugar workers through the downtown streets the Saturday following the walkout. Later, 120 men and seven women from the refinery, including a Thiel operative hired by Rogers, attended a meeting at the Vancouver Trade and Labor Council. Parm Pettipiece, VTLC editor of *The BC Federationist,* advised the strikers to go back to work until they had their union properly organized and recognized by the company, the detective reported. "This seemed to somewhat discourage the strikers and a good many of them were undecided as to what to do," the detective told Rogers.

Some staff chose to cross the picket line and new employees were hired. Inside the factory, the refined granulated sugar continued to pour out. Longshoremen who supported the strikers suggested their response to the strikebreakers was too mild-mannered. And so with the longshoremen's help, the tactics got tougher. On 1 May the *Daily World* reported "a crowd of considerably over 100 strikers and sympathizers were gathered at the gates. They howled and catcalled at those inside, inviting them to come out." Fearful strikebreakers were sleeping in the refinery overnight. When a merchant tried to deliver blankets to them, the strikers burned the blankets. A boy attempting to cross to deliver milk was turned around.

"Somebody threw a stone at one man," the *Daily World* reported. "And it struck him on the forehead, inflicting a cut. This man when overtaken was fisticuffed. Several other strikebreakers were roughed up."

On 2 May Harry Burgess, the refinery coppersmith, crossed the picket line, and was seized by three picketers who "pounded him, knocked him down and kicked him about the face and head," according to the *Vancouver Province.* On the same day strikers appeared at the front of the home of strikebreaking electrician Harry Pavey. According to news reports the crowd cat-called and jeered him.

Rogers was dissatisfied with police protection of strikebreakers and complained bitterly to the Vancouver mayor, Malcolm McBeath. Not content with the mayor's response that the entire city depended on a third of its police manpower due to wartime conditions, Rogers wired BC Attorney General M.A. Macdonald and later sent him detective reports of picket-line confrontations. To Rogers' dismay, Macdonald passed responsibility back to the Vancouver mayor.

The longshoremen refused to unload raw sugar at the docks and the VTLC declared a boycott of Rogers "scab" sugar. Picketers received $2 a day, relying on other unions and fund-raising events. But on 10 May, a Thiel detective posing as a striker reported to Rogers of a "growing despondency" among the strikers. "The fact, that smoke was seen coming from the stacks and many guards at work did not serve to cheer them up any," he observed. The company now offered to raise the hourly wage for men to 38 cents and to 22 cents for the women.

A delegation of two strikers met with Rogers to discuss the offer. Rogers' son Blythe, grooming for his father's job, kept a detailed diary of events. He noted that it was a short, tough meeting and that his father would not recognize a union. One of the strikers, William McIntosh asked: "The men would like to know if they can have a union of their own. Would you discrimi-

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nate against any man for that?" Rogers replied in part, "I will not have the few more years I have left to run this refinery spoilt by any union."

On 12 May, the refinery was staffed by 76 people, including 14 Thiel detectives and the crew of the yacht *Aquilo*. They melted 200,000 pounds of sugar, according to Blythe's diary account. Rogers's plan was to "carry on the work and starve us out," Robert Stevenson, president of the Sugar Union, told the press. "We are receiving all the assistance we can desire from other unions and we are fighting for a principle," he said. "We want conditions improved for the girls also and now we want the right to have our union."

But Thiel detectives posing as strikers urged the workers to return to work. Detectives were also harassing strikers, "trailing after the girls on strike no matter where they go, at all hours of the day and night," according to the *BC Federationist*. On 20 May, Blythe's diary recorded 103 men were working at the refinery. A car with curtained windows, dubbed the "Black Maria" by strikers, drove workers through the picket lines. Samuel Bellamy, the union's secretary, was fined $25 plus costs for smashing its windows. In another incident, an unnamed female striker was fined $5 for "roughly persuading" a female strikebreaker not to cross the line.

Two more months on the picket line passed before striking sugar workers acknowledged defeat and met with government officer J.D. McNiven to set up a meeting with management. Rogers refused to recognize a union, McNiven reported, but "agreed to reinstate as many of his former employees as there were vacancies, without discrimination, except as to those who had been convicted of violations of law and order." McNiven advised the refinery workers to accept the offer, believing the strike "was lost to them." On 22 July they voted to end the strike and seek their jobs back. Those rehired—about half of the original staff—gained an hourly wage increase of six cents (with no increase for women), had their hours regularized to ten hours a day, and began receiving employer-subsidized meals for all in the company cafeteria.

When former striker Alex McKinnon made it a point to refer to non-strikers as "scabs" one of the Thiel detectives retained by Rogers reported: "It is evident to the Operative that this man McKinnon is creating dissension and promoting ill feeling and if it is possible to replace him, Operative believes it would be a good thing in the interests of harmony." McKinnon was fired at noon that day. However he was eventually rehired and would retire in 1944 after 48 years of service.

Samuel Bellamy was not hired back at the refinery because of his picket-line conviction. He is listed as a longshoreman in the *1918 Vancouver Directory*. Bill Perry, a crew member of Rogers' yacht, helped run the refinery during the strike. He rose from the position of sugar boiler in 1917 to superintendent, retiring in 1958.

The destiny of "Irish Johnny" is a mystery. After the labour dispute he may have drifted to another job, perhaps as a longshoreman on the nearby docks. Or he may have gone to war following the conscription legislation in June 1917, which saw government agents dragnet for men aged 18 to 35 along Vancouver's waterfront.

A concluding Thiel operative reports "that those men who have gone back to work seem to be a very good class of workmen, being steady, sober and reliable and unless some agitator works his way in among them, he does not look for any trouble for some time to come."

BC Sugar organized a staff picnic at Bowen Island in an attempt to heal the rifts caused by the dispute. The following year Rogers died at age 53. His son Blythe took over the operations and fought another union drive when 141 sugar workers organized into the short-lived Warehouseman's Union and in 1919 sugar workers participated in a citywide one-month sympathy strike in conjunction with the Winnipeg General Strike. Women workers at the refinery did not join the walkout, possibly discouraged by their lack of gains in the 1917 dispute.

In 1944 BC Sugar employees organized into the Industrial Union of Sugar Workers. They later joined the Retail Wholesale Union and currently have about 155 members, mostly men. The manual jobs once performed by female labourers have long since been automated. Sugar is still being refined in the modern buildings on the waterfront property. After three generations of ownership by the Rogers' family, BC Sugar was sold to Lantic whose headquarters are in eastern Canada.

Today, the original six-storey building facing Powell Street is used for storage. Its gothic factory brick exterior is a popular backdrop for film makers, but at one time was the scene of real-life drama among Vancouver's earliest residents.

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