

Episode 12: The Battle of Blubber Bay BC 1938

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:17] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast dedicated to shining a light on British Columbia's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. Today we focus on an epic confrontation just before World War II between workers fighting for justice and an arrogant company with authorities in their hip pocket. It has come to be known as the battle of Blubber Bay. This is a bit of a dark story, but yes, as mentioned, it did unfold in a place with the unlikely name of Blubber Bay, a name that proved irresistible to BC songwriter Wesley Wheelwright. You know, the guy who wrote 'Moon Over Kelowna'. Anyway, just for fun, here is Wesley Wheelwright's amodal tune, 'The Blubber Bay Boogie'.

Music: 'The Blubber Bay Boogie' performed by Weeley Wright [00:01:18] It happened one night in a island town, a logger walked in to an old cafe, a place that stood overlooking the bay, where the boys all met at the end of day. The logger walked up to the eighty-eight, he said, now boys, I'm getting in shape. Gotta little tune everybody knows, Blubber Bay Boogie, here's how it goes. You boogie right up, you boogie right down, you boogie boogie boogie all around. The keys go up, the keys go down. The boogie goes rollin' rollin' round. You boogie I'm here, you boogie I'm there, you boogie boogie boogie everywhere. The keys go up, the keys go down. The boogie goes rollin' rollin' round. You play it cool, you play it hot, you gotta keep it goin' with all you got. The keys go up, the keys go down. The Blubber Bay boogie goes rollin' round...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:02:54] The name Blubber Bay came from its previous existence as a whaling station on the north end of Texada Island. But by the 1930s, it was home to an enormous open pit limestone mine. Over 30 years, starting just after the turn of the century, workers, many of them Chinese, had quarried the 250-foot deep glory hole with little labour turmoil despite wretched working conditions. But an obstinate mine manager and a wage cut motivated workers to join the International Woodworkers of America. A six week strike by the union in 1937 erased the wage cut. The company further promised to take no action against union activists, even though that was par for the course in those days when unions had no legal rights. Yet once production resumed, Pacific Lime fired local union president Jack Hole and 22 other union supporters. Rather than strike again so soon, the IWA opted to try and overturn the firings through BC's new conciliation and arbitration process. After lengthy hearings, an arbitration board recommended that the fired trade unionists be hired back. However, with no legal requirement to recognize the IWA, Pacific Lime simply ignored the board's recommendation and that was that. At an angry public meeting, workers voted overwhelmingly to reject the board's award. On June 2nd, 1938, two-thirds of the company's 150 strong workforce walked off the job. For the IWA, the strike represented a last ditch effort to try and secure a foothold in British Columbia. Most of the IWA's focus had been on the province's loggers and sawmill workers. The union had heroic organizers and strong leaders. But try as they might, they could not force companies to recognize their union. The future would be better, but in British Columbia in 1938, it was tough slogging. Songwriter Joe Glazer pays tribute to the union in his rousing 'IWA Marching Song'.

Music: 'IWA Marching Song' performed by Joe Glazer [00:05:25] Koos Bay to North Bay, Laurel to Luntz. Kamloops to Tahsis to Trail. The Woodworkers Union, our strongest response, we'll fight 'til we prevail. Logging camps and plywood mills, fir and southern pine. Democracy, autonomy, the union yours and mine. Bosses fear the rank and file will join for victory. The International Woodworkers will fight for you and me. Wages and

pensions, children to feed. Sick leave and holiday pay. Fighting together will get what we need within the IWA. Logging camps and plywood mills, fir and southern pine. Democracy, autonomy, the union yours and mine. Bosses fear the rank and file will join for victory. The International Woodworkers will fight for you and me. [instrumental verse] When finally all people can come to their goal of jobs that are safe with high pay, the leader of workers you ought to be told, would still be IWA. Logging camps and plywood mills, fir and southern pine. Democracy, autonomy, the union yours and mine. Bosses fear the rank and file will join for victory. The International Woodworkers will fight for you and me.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:07:37] Blubber Bay turned into a strike like no other. The company acted like a law unto itself, aided by a hostile anti-union, provincial police force and an equally hostile government. Along with the usual trappings of a company store and company owned housing, virtually all private property and facilities in Blubber Bay belonged to Pacific Lime. How bad was it? Children of the strikers had to obtain a special pass from the company so they could use its roads just to attend school. Strikers were routinely denied access to telephone and telegraph services. When union leaders were able to use them, police monitored their calls and previewed their telegrams. If they wandered too far astray, strikers were often followed and thrashed by company thugs. Chinese strikers were quickly ordered out of their bunkhouses. When union lawyer, John Stanton, entered the bunkhouses with three of those evicted to retrieve some of their belongings, they were arrested for trespassing. Although the men were soon released, this was the sort of company intimidation that strikers faced throughout their valiant struggle. Strikers who lived in company housing were, of course, also evicted. Somehow, with the area under police and company rule, union members had to find a place to live and a way to survive. Fortunately, one of the few non-company landowners allowed the strikers to set up camp in his meadow just outside of town. Donated provisions, including tons of vegetables, poured in from Vancouver and other supportive communities. The Chinese strikers were particularly resourceful. They slept in shifts in their tents while deftly scrounging Texada Island for food, some produced by their own gardens. At the same time, they always travelled in groups and let it be known they weren't afraid of a fight. Nervous company vigilantes left them alone. The IWA's John McCuish saluted their resolve: "There was a lot of them. They went out on the docks and rocks and caught rock cod. They killed deer. There were quite a few peasants on the island, and they lived on them too. They were solid. I never seen such a bunch, as solid as they were". The IWA made sure they attended and voted at union meetings. As a union rep told the arbitration hearings, "there can be no differentiation between a striker, whether he be white, yellow or black". Union supporters back in Vancouver carried large signs in both English and Chinese telling prospective strikebreakers to stay away from Blubber Bay. Union demands included a base rate of 45 cents an hour for all employees, regardless of race. This harkened back to the principled stand taken by future BC federation of Labour President, Joe Naylor. Back in 1914, he stood almost alone in opposition to the labour movement's policy of excluding further Chinese immigration to BC. "Yes", said Naylor, "they did undercut union wages. But the solution was not to exclude them, but to organize them and insist that all workers be guaranteed the same minimum wage". The strike's success depended on stopping the steady flow of strikebreakers, orchestrated by the company in order to maintain production at the mine. They were protected by police. Confrontations broke out whenever Union Steamship brought in a new group of scabs. Some were actually recruited by the local police officer in charge. The worst incident took place three and a half months into the strike. As the steamer lowered the gangplank to disgorge its passengers, local union vice-president Bob Gardner yelled, 'here come the scabs among us'. A wild fracas broke out as strikers rushed forward through heavy police lines to

confront the newly arrived strikebreakers. Union member Yim Kee managed to accost one of them. A one-sided report by rookie Constable Thomas Campbell, preserved in the BC Archives, provides his account of what happened next.

John Mabbott voicing Constable Campbell's account [00:12:07] Kee attacked one of the scabs, showering him with blows about the face and head. While carrying out the arrest, Kee kicked me on the shins and drove his elbow into my stomach. The women and white pickets were shouting encouragement to the Chinese to keep on fighting the police. The Chinese were endeavouring to take Yim Kee away from me, and while I was struggling, I was struck on the side of my head and was momentarily dazed.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:12:37] On the dock, police used clubs and tear gas to drive the strikers back. As they tried to escape, police chased after them while strikers and company employees hurled rocks at one another. All told, 11 strikers and company men wound up in hospital across the water in Powell River. 23 strikers were arrested and herded into the small local jail. That night, Bob Gardner was taken into a private room and severely beaten by Special Constable Andrew Williamson. He wound up with four broken ribs. Gardner was subsequently sentenced to four months in Oakalla for illegal assembly. It's been reported many times that the trade union leader, weakened by his injuries, died in prison from the flu. The IWA long considered him their first labour martyr. But recent research by Donna Sakuta of the Labour Heritage Centre reveals a slightly different story. Bob Gardner, whose father died in a Nanaimo coalmining accident, actually passed away in 1945 at the age of 51 from heart trouble. However, in an extraordinary move, the BC government recognized that the beating he received from Constable Williamson did contribute to his early death. They awarded his widow \$5,000 in compensation, no trivial sum in those days. As for Williamson, in a rare judicial turnabout, he would wind up in Oakalla himself, given six months for inflicting grievous bodily harm on Bob Gardner, who remains a martyr to the cause of labour. When word of the one-sided confrontation reached Powell River the next day, 40 members of the Pulp and Sulphite Workers journeyed over to the island to warn the police commander that if his men didn't cool it, 400 of them would be back. "And we won't fool with you bastards". The day after that, 60 striking seine boat skippers dropped anchor at Blubber Bay on their way to a demonstration in Vancouver. They left in the morning, buoying the strikers with a chorus of defiant horn blasts. Despite this kind of support and the strikers own tenacity, the arrests from the dockside clash eventually did them in. Not only did they lose their leadership, defending those arrested drained the union of funds and energy. Charged with rioting and unlawful assembly, strikers were tried in Vancouver in groups of four. They were like show trials. 12 were convicted, with most sentenced to six months of hard labour in Oakalla. This was the sort of injustice and stacked deck that unions still faced in beautiful British Columbia on the eve of war with Germany. In Victoria, meanwhile, CCF members of the legislature demanded a judicial inquiry into police tactics and the police itself. Comox MLA Colin Cameron, who regularly visited the strikers, led the way. He accused police of drunkenness, brutality, attempted bribery and luring strikers into ambushes to be attacked. A reporter for the Vancouver Sun was impressed by his eloquence on behalf of the workers.

John Mabbott voicing Vancouver Sun reporters account [00:16:08] Mr. Cameron does not look like the kind of man to fight the class war. If you were to close your eyes, you would think his accents were those of an English barrister practising in rather dull civil suits. But when he gets out of his memorized, purple passages, when he gets going on the class war, he makes you think of the insistence of a terrier that won't be shaken off. This wasn't the traditional pointing with pride and viewing with alarm, the pumped up,

sympathetic party stuff. This was the stuff of class struggle. The basic economic issues that are being fought out all over the world today. It wasn't pleasant to have the reality thrust upon us so suddenly like this.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:57] Despite Cameron's impassioned plea and the filing of affidavits by individual strikers, citing specific examples of police misbehaviour, Premier Duff Pattullo wasted no time rejecting the CCF's call for an inquiry. He defended the police. What kind of police do you think you'd have if they were afraid of a judicial inquiry every time they acted? He told the Opposition to put the blame on the strikers and their supporters, calling them ruthless extremists. With local leaders in jail, it's coffers drained and Pac Lime operating normally, the IWA decided further resistance was futile. After 11 months, picket lines came down and the IWA virtually disappeared in BC. Yet just 20 years later, once legislation was passed that forced employers to recognize and bargain with unions, the IWA was the most powerful union in the province. The Battle of Blubber Bay is a reminder of how much we owe those workers and unions of the past who kept fighting, no matter how many times the forces of so-called law and order and anti-union companies and governments beat them down. Thanks for listening and thanks as always to Bailey Garden and Patricia Wejr, the other members of the podcast crew. On the Line would not be possible without them. John Mabbott was the rookie police constable and the reporter for the Vancouver Sun.. And a special tip of our podcast hat to Donna Sacuta for updating the story of Bob Gardner. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.