

Ep. 13: Relief Camps of the Great Depression

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:20] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that focuses on BC's rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we examine the dirty '30s and the god-awful forced labour relief camps the federal government set up to try and get unemployed single men out of their hair. We include a special focus on a little known relief camp that was a mere hop, skip and jump from downtown Vancouver in North Vancouver. Our rousing theme song, 'Hold the Fort' was the song of resistance throughout this terrible time.

Music: 'Hold the Fort' performed by Tom Hawken and his band [00:00:57] See our numbers still increasing, hear the bugle blow. By our number, we will triumph over every foe. Hold the fort for we are coming, union hearts be strong. Side by side we'll battle onward, victory will come. Fierce and long the battle rages, yet we will not fear. Help will come whene'er it's needed, cheer my comrades, cheer. Hold the fort for we are coming...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:01:46] The Depression. Ten Lost Years. The Dirty '30s. No matter what you call it, the decade from the stock market crash of 1929 to the outbreak of World War II in the fall of 1939 was by far the worst economic time in the history of Canada. Almost overnight, the bottom fell out of North America's already precarious economy, and millions of Canadians suddenly found themselves without work or prospects. By 1933, Canada's GDP had fallen 42%. Close to a third of the country's workforce, through no fault of their own, was unemployed. Yet governments, obsessed with balancing their budgets, refused to provide any relief to single unemployed men. They were left to survive on odd jobs, charity, breadlines and soup kitchens. Vancouver was the end of the line for waves of boxcar riders looking for work. And with its relatively mild climate, the city was soon the unemployed capital of Canada. They were angry, frustrated and desperate, eager to be organized and fight for relief, work and wages and dignity. Mostly they were ignored by mainstream unions who focussed on their own members. Into the breach strode the Communist Party of Canada, for whom the Depression was a clear sign of the evils and failings of capitalism. In 1930, the CP established the Workers Unity League, a militant union organization that included the unemployed. They were soon leading large protests and marches to demand better treatment of those unable to find work. As numbers grew, authorities became nervous. They worried that the 'Reds' were stirring up Vancouver's restless throngs of unemployed to foment revolution.

Music: 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime performed by Al Jolson [00:03:51] They used to tell me I was building a dream and so I followed the mob. When there was earth to plow or guns to bear, I was always there right on the job. They used to tell me I was building a dream with peace and glory ahead. Why should I be standing in line just waiting for bread? Once I built a railroad, made it run, made it race against time. Once I built a railroad, now it's done. Brother, can you spare a dime. Once I built a tower to the sun....

Rod Mickleburgh [00:04:46] To get them off the streets and away from the lure of the Workers' Unity League, the federal government established a network of work camps. Most were in the BC interior, far from the bright lights of Vancouver. Only by going to one of these camps could single unemployed men receive any kind of assistance. They were provided with bare-bones accommodation, skimpy meals and meagre compensation for six days of hard labour. By 1935, their pay was down to just 20 cents a day, a pittance for all the work they did, building roads, airports and other projects. In truth, they were little more than slave camps. With workers crammed together under these dreadful conditions,

the camps proved perfect organizing territory for the Workers' Unity League. The league's Relief Camp Workers' Union soon had a foothold in camps all over the province. Their leader was the legendary driven communist Arthur Slim Evans. Over the years, his fierce commitment to working class struggle had led to numerous jailings, a kidnapping and a gunshot wound during a miner's strike in Colorado that left him with a permanent limp. Jean Sheils, Slim Evans' daughter was interviewed by Sara Diamond sometime around 1980. Here she talks about her upbringing and memories of the Depression.

Jean Sheils [00:06:18] I was born in Vancouver in 1927. Probably my earliest recollections are of being evicted. I was seven years old, going to school, and my father was in jail. He had been convicted of Section 98 of the Criminal Code, which I'm sure you know, was brought in during the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike to get good trade unionists out of the way. We had so many unemployed with us. Usually anywhere from 30 to 40 stayed at our home day and night, fed by neighbours, by donations. And it was, believe it or not, a good time. Wonderful people, young men, really. The Irish, I think, stole my heart. To this day, whenever I hear Kevin Barry, I go back to remembering them. As for the rest, I certainly remember going to my father's trial. I remember going to see him in jail. My father was a trade unionist. His history of being a trade unionist went long before I was born. He had been a Wobbly. He had been a member of the OBU, One Big Union. And at this particular time he was a journeyman carpenter, but also the Workers' Unity League organizer for British Columbia. They organized the unemployed and the employed. There was no money. And how could you hold a meeting trying to discuss conditions when you couldn't rent a hall? And our parks were just not allowed to people. I think they knew that they had an upcoming big problem with unemployed and they wanted them off the streets, which the relief camps did for them, later on. There would be socials. They would raise money. There would be delegations to relief offices. I know my earliest recollections are going with my dad, a gunny sack. You were given food. Not your choice, but their choice. And I remember one particular time my father looked in that bag and there was rotten cabbage, and he fired it back. People would work very hard to get away from that. It wasn't a very nice thing to have to go into a store with script either, which is what relief was in those days. When you went to pay your bill, everyone knew you were on relief. And in Vancouver in those days, 60,000 households were on relief. I remember once we got some clothing and they looked wonderful. They were brand new. Until we got to look at them and they had deliberately taken scissors and made a cut in each one so that we wouldn't really have anything new. It would have to be mended.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:37] Jean Sheils then goes on to talk about the diabolical relief camps.

Jean Sheils [00:09:41] When they first started, I think was in around '30, but in '32 they were taken over by the National Defence League. And that brought in a completely stronger system where they, at some camps, even had them marching as soldiers. They had guns in the Point Grey one. They had taken a lot of the ex-servicemen who had come from the Second World, or First World War and they wanted them to do the marching. They wanted control of them in camps because the men were complaining about the work, about the food, about the isolation, about the lack of any kind of medical care for them. And I suppose they thought those that they were training to be soldiers or keeping up their training might keep the younger ones down and the more organized ones down from raising heck in the camps. They worked in very isolated areas, airstrips. Some of the work was really useless. It was just to keep them busy. Most of it was pick and shovel type of work. No medical care, no compensation for injuries. No radios, no books. They did

nothing for the boys as far as their education in life. They were just sick, sick places to put anybody. With no hope.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:25] Not all relief camps were located in the wilderness far from Vancouver. Few know there were also relief camps in Point Grey, White Rock and North Vancouver. Unlike the Interior camps, where make-work projects were the order of the day, these camps were built for military purposes. Thanks to research some years ago by Donna Sacuta, we now know a lot more about the relief camp located in North Vancouver, on what was the military's Blair Rifle Range. Donna talked about her findings with On the Line researcher Patricia Wejr. She happened to live close to the former rifle range and got curious.

Donna Sacuta [00:12:06] It's a wooded area in our neighbourhood -- we always called it the rifle range. And I didn't know anything about its history beyond that. And it just so happened that someone in our local neighbourhood had written a question on a neighbourhood newsletter saying, how come we can't build a trail between our neighbourhood and the next one over through that rifle range? What's the deal with that? And I thought, well, that's a good question and it just happened to be at a point in my life when I had some time on my hands and thought, well, I'm just going to do a little checking because I like stories like that. So I started to look around and reading as much information as I could glean. And I went to a book and it mentioned in just a brief mention in a paragraph about an unemployed camp during the Depression. And then my alarm bells went off because I thought, really? I didn't know that. I knew it was a rifle range but what did it have to do with unemployed camps in the Depression, which is something I knew a little bit about from university days. So before too long, I had dived in with both feet and began to discover that it was more than just an unemployed camp. It was one of the very notorious Department of National Defence relief camps during the 1930s. It was called the Blair Rifle Range, named after a military fellow by the name of Blair. It was built in the 1920s by the military. And when they were casting around for projects that they could put unemployed people to work at, the military came up with a number of projects. There were a total of 162 projects across Canada run by the military during the Depression for unemployed, single unemployed men. 73 of those were in British Columbia, and only four of those were actually tasked with building rifle ranges for the military. So the rifle range was already there, but what they decided to do at Blair was to expand it, to make it bigger and do clearing and building and flattening of the land to make it a bigger asset for the military.

Patricia Wejr [00:14:52] Were the conditions a bit better at those ones?

Donna Sacuta [00:14:56] No, the National Defence camps were considered slave camps by the people who lived there. Under the terms of their operation, the men were provided with bunkhouse accommodation, military clothing, military rations and medical and dental care. They were given army garments that were called 'near the point of condemnation' that had been in storage since 1918. They were assigned to work for eight hours a day, five and a half days a week. And for that, they were given an allowance of 20 cents a day. So when the history was told of the camps, we were always told that they were located in places far away from the public so that they weren't in the eye of the public, where they weren't influenced by some of the radical ideas that were around. So I was very surprised to learn that this one in North Vancouver existed, because that would have been probably one of the closest to the Vancouver population at the time. So that's surprising.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:13] Meanwhile, events were moving quickly in the relief camps that were out of town. As anger grew over the slave camp conditions and military style rule, Slim Evans and the Relief Camp Workers' Union declared a strike. Their rallying cry was "work and wages". By rail, by road and by foot, 1500 relief camp workers poured into Vancouver. It wasn't easy to feed, house and maintain order for such a rootless group. But the Communist-led union was equal to the task. They raised money with regular tag days and what became known as tin-canning. Men wearing sashes reading "When do We eat?" worked four-hour shifts at busy street corners, holding out tin cans for cash donations. The public was supportive. One Saturday, they raised \$5,500. Slim Evans, who had been up for 48 hours organising the blitz, called in police to safeguard the cash until the banks opened on Monday. Cheekily, Evans told them it was Moscow gold. That spring, downtown streets were regularly overrun by hunger marches, demonstrations, large public rallies and boisterous snake dances. That year's May Day parade was the biggest ever. And on Mother's Day, the left wing Mothers Council led a huge march to Stanley Park to show support for "our boys". There they formed a giant heart around the young relief camp strikers. That evening, mothers across the city took them in for a good meal. One event planner observed that this was, quote, "something of real value instead of the usual bourgeois, maudlin..." After six weeks, however, despite all this public support, the strike was getting nowhere. On May 18th, Evans upped the ante. The striker's four divisions marched off as usual. Two headed to local department stores, one to the ferry depot for West Vancouver and one to Main and Hastings. That's the site of the Carnegie Centre today. But then it was the city library. All of a sudden, in they went rushing up the stairs to the archive section on the third floor and barricading themselves against eviction. A large crowd of supporters gathered outside. The boys inside lowered baskets to those below, who filled them up with food and drink and some medicine for those who ate a little too much. Jubilant snake dancers took over Hasting Street, accompanied by the strikers rallying song.

Music: 'Hold the Fort' performed by Tom Hawken and his band [00:18:55] We meet today in freedom's cause and raise our voices high. We'll join our hands in union strong, to battle or to die. Hold the fort, for we are coming, union hearts be strong. Side by side we'll battle onward, victory will come...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:19:31] Vancouver's hard-nosed mayor, Gerry McGeer, already notorious for his ludicrous reading of the riot act to a large crowd of peaceful protesters at Victory Square, gave in to the strikers' demands for the first time. The city agreed to feed and house the strikers, all 1500 of them. Even if it was only for the weekend, it was something. But the victory over Gerry McGeer was short-lived. As morale and number of strikers began to thin, along with public donations, it was clear that something more had to be done. At a mass strategy meeting, someone suggested taking the protests directly to Ottawa. The strikers roared their approval. Slim Evans quickly endorsed the plan. They had hit the strategic motherlode. A few nights later, on June 3rd, 1935, in the dark of the Vancouver rail yards, hundreds of strikers boarded boxcars and headed off into the night, bound for Ottawa. It was the beginning of the legendary On to Ottawa Trek, an event so audacious and extraordinary it has come to symbolize the Depression. No one was happier to see the boxcars pull out than Gerry McGeer. All those single unemployed Communists were now someone else's problem. So what happened at the nearby Blair Rifle Range and the relief camp workers there who were directly under the thumb of the Canadian military. Did they take part in the strike, too? Donna Sacuta was determined to find out. She sought out the military files relating to the relief camps that are housed with Library and Archives Canada. Rather than go all the way to Ottawa, she paid for them to be digitized. And here's what she found.

Donna Sacuta [00:21:18] The question that came to my mind was did the people at the Blair Rifle Range participate in the relief camp strikes? And while I couldn't find any reference to them in any of the news reportings at the time, as I went through the monthly reports, it became very clear that, yes, indeed they did. The reports were that the strength of the camp, which meant the number of people living there, had declined to the extent that they couldn't perform the work that the military wanted them to do during those months in the spring of 1935.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:21:56] Thanks to Donna's research, the relief camp at the Blair Rifle Range is now memorialized by a historical plaque. It was one of the first to be put in place as part of the Labour Heritage Centre's province-wide plaque project to commemorate significant events of BC labour history. One person we know who did take part in both the strike and the On to Ottawa Trek, was Red Walsh. He was interviewed many years ago by Howie Smith. I think it's fitting to leave the last word to Red Walsh, who was not only in the forefront of the relief camp workers union. Like many, he went on to fight in the Spanish Civil War and survived. But that's a story for another day.

Music: 'I Don't Want Your Millions Mister' performed by Tom Hawken and his band [00:22:40] I don't want your millions, mister. I don't want your diamond ring. All I want is the right to live, mister...

Red Walsh [00:22:53] You worked eight hours a day for 20 cents, 20 cents a day. And the food were pretty bad. It wasn't very good. And the camps were controlled by the army, federal government.

Howie Smith [00:23:06] You said you're working eight hours a day in the camp for 20 cents a day. What kind of work were you doing?

Red Walsh [00:23:11] Road work.

Howie Smith [00:23:13] This is how a lot of the roads in BC got built?

Red Walsh [00:23:16] Yes. Hope Princeton Highway was built by slave labour.

Music: 'Nine Pound Hammer' performed by Tom Hawken and his band [00:23:24] This nine pound hammer, is a little too heavy. Got it for my size, for my size. So roll on buddy, don't you roll so slow. How can I roll, when the wheels don't go...

Red Walsh [00:23:46] Relief Camp Workers' Union. We had a union and we organized a general strike, all camps in BC in the spring of '25, in April.

Howie Smith [00:23:58] Now, what led up to that organizing?

Red Walsh [00:24:02] Well, we wanted the wages. That was the big factor in the camps. And everybody was passing the buck. The city government, the provincial government, they had no control over the camps. So we can't do anything. You have to see the federal government about that. Couldn't contact the federal government, so we organized a trek to Ottawa.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:24:28] We hope you've enjoyed this look back at these young, unemployed but valiant British Columbians tossed on the scrap-heap by society, who said

no more to working as a slave for 20 cents a day. Thanks to Donna Sacuta, now Executive Director of the B. Labour Heritage Centre, for her research; to Sara Diamond and Howie Smith for their interviews and to Patricia Wejr and Bailey Garden of the podcast crew who helped put this all together. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.