



Connie Jervis

Film Summary: In 1939, Connie Jervis, 24 year old president of the Langley Teachers' Association, led a successful fight for improved system of wages and compulsory arbitration.

Curriculum Application:

Social Studies 10 and
Social Justice 12

The Essential Question:

To understand the challenges and strategies of collective bargaining as a means of improving working conditions for labour groups.

Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions for the vignette provides a short lesson option. (15 Minutes)
2. Small group activity to develop an understanding of the key vocabulary and terms.
3. Small group activity that leads into a class discussion on the vignette.
4. Individuals or small groups of students work on creating newspaper style articles on the issues presented in the vignette and supporting print materials.

Learning Standards

1. To understand part of the story of the long road that BC teachers took to achieve full rights as both unionists and professionals. **Continuities and Change**
2. To appreciate that, in the words of English historian Sheila Rowbotham, women's accomplishments, contributions and leadership at all levels of society have been "hidden from history." In each successive generation, what has been buried must be exposed. **Perspective**
3. To understand that discrimination against women, even in matters of wage equality, took determined, sustained effort to overcome. **Cause and Consequence**
4. To be aware of arbitration as a dispute mechanism and the great effort expended, largely by women, to have it recognized for Langley teachers. **Significance**

Materials and Resources Provided

- [“Connie Jervis” Episode 2- Working People – A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- Lesson Activity 1: Vocabulary Activity
- Lesson Activity 2: Teaching suggestions and guiding questions
- Lesson Activity 3: Re-writing and Righting the Langley Advance
- Appendix 1: Hidden Legacy

Additional Suggested Materials

- [“These were the reasons....” Chapter 7 and 8](#)
- [The Langley Affair 1939-1940](#)
- [BookletNewWestminster.pub \(labourheritagecentre.ca\)](#)
- [Victoria Teachers Strike 1919 \(labourheritagecentre.ca\)Temp\mso85C0.tmp \(labourheritagecentre.ca\)Temp\mso85C0.tmp \(labourheritagecentre.ca\)](#)
- [Podcast: Episode 5 The New Westminster Teacher Strike 1921](#)

Vignette Questions

1. How many teachers were employed by the Langley School board in 1939?
2. How old was Langley Teachers Association President Connie Jervis at the time of the dispute?
3. What actions did the Langley School board take when the teachers sued the board for failing to respect the arbitration award?
4. How did the Langley School Board respond to the order of the Department of Education to pay their teachers the arbitration award?
5. What methods did the teachers use to defend the re-assigned teachers?
6. What was end achievement of the Langley Teachers’ strike that impacted future labour disputes?

Lesson Activities

1. Students will benefit from the preliminary vocabulary and terminology work. This may be either an individual or a group task. In the latter case, divide the vocabulary list (Lesson Activity 1) into sections that are consistent with the number of groups in the class, assign each group a section to research and define and then have each group report the definitions to the whole class.
2. In small groups students will create responses to questions from the Question Bank (Lesson Activity 2) about the Vignette: Connie Jervis and the reading The Hidden Legacy of Connie Jervis (Appendix 1). Students will present their ideas to the whole class to spark discussion.
3. Students will engage in “Re-writing and Righting the *Langley Advance*” and its perspective on Connie Jervis, the Langley Teacher’s arbitration struggle and the rights of workers (Lesson Activity 3) Teachers may choose to refer to “Lesson Activity 2: Teaching suggestions and guiding questions” to help structure this activity. Students will produce newspaper articles on the issues and events narrated in both the vignette and the reading *The Hidden Legacy* (Appendix 1) the assignment could be completed as individual, pairs or small groups.

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Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by Marcy Toms

Lesson Activity 1: Vocabulary

Lesson: Connie Jervis

Vocabulary and terminology: Students should use context, prior knowledge and reliable reference works to define each of the following:

1. sit down strike:
2. stereotype
3. patriotic:
4. compulsory arbitration:
5. binding arbitration:
6. fractious:
7. chronological:
8. test case:
9. Chief Justice:
10. intransigent:
11. public trustee:
12. solidarity

Lesson Activity 2: Teaching Suggestions

Lesson: Connie Jervis

Teacher Resource: Question Bank

These questions are designed for use in whatever way works best for the class. Use as many or as few as needed and deal with individually, in small groups or with the whole class.

1. Define Arbitration as it relates to labour disputes. This might require a Web search. In either small groups or with the whole class, Brainstorm everyday situations that might benefit from this mechanism, whether or not they are relevant to labour issues. Display the definition and some scenarios on small posters.
2. Explain how the arbitration method is different from the model previously used in Langley.
3. Why did women teachers earn less than men for doing the same work? (Inference)
4. What social norms and expectations for women did Jervis and her colleagues come into conflict with as they fought for a salary increase?
5. The teachers were called “unpatriotic.” A. What had they done? B. Why might the board have chosen to use this particular slur?
6. The Langley School Board engaged in what might be called a ‘media war’ to attack the teachers. A. Provide two specific examples of the tactics the board used, noting particular word choices. B. Determine whether the board’s tactics were fair and justified by the situation.
7. Describe specific ways the LSB found itself on the wrong side of the law and explain why you think the LSB was willing to go that far to deny the arbitration award.
8. Connie Jervis and her colleagues engaged in what Vancouver newspapers called a “sit down strike.” For the profession, the era and the gender of most of the activists, this could be considered a very radical action. Do you agree? Define “radical action” and justify your answer with sound reasoning, referring specifically to the social expectations of teachers, of women and the political spirit of the era.
9. In what ways did Connie Jervis play against the traditional stereotype of a union leader?
10. Was it just or unjust for the Council of Public Instruction to fire the Langley School Board? Support your answer with direct reference to the reading.
11. Beginning with a definition of solidarity, explain how solidarity worked for the Langley teachers.

Lesson Activity 3: Re-writing and Righting the Langley Advance

Teaching notes and strategy for Re-writing and Righting the Langley Advance

Overview: Individuals, pair or small groups will work to produce newspaper articles on the issues and events narrated in both the vignette “Connie Jervis”, the reading **The Hidden Legacy** and **The Langley Affair** to create perspectives on Connie Jervis, the Langley Teacher’s arbitration struggle and the rights of workers in this time period.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

1. Divide the class into heterogeneous groups of 4 or 5 students each. Each will be a newsgroup responsible for **Rewriting and Righting the story of the Langley Affair**.
2. Each group will create a three or four word newspaper name. The only stipulation is that each name uses the word Langley.
3. Within each group, particular roles (Editor, feature writer, news reporters, editorial / opinion writer, labour issues reporter) may be assigned or, more simply, each student might be required to write a short article based on information from the reading and Heritage episode.
4. Read, highlight and discuss the reading. It could be debriefed and vocabulary dealt with as a whole class before moving into the small groups.

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

5. Based on the material provided, each student will assume a particular assignment that addresses any one of the following topic areas.
 - A. A reasonable way to determine teacher salaries.
 - B. Recognizing the equal work of women teachers.
 - C. The school board won't give up.
 - D. Teachers take the board to court and beyond.
 - E. Teachers engage in direct action and they won't give up, either!
 - F. Teachers have rights, too.
6. Either individually or in small groups, students will also create pithy headlines to call attention to their articles. "Teachers Take Action" – "School Board Defies the Law" - "Board Chair Blows a Gasket." (Far better to have the students do this than use the examples, but they are the kinds of headers one might encourage!)
7. An editorial or opinion piece might be expected to be particularly lively and partisan.
8. Research, write (3, 4 or 5 paragraphs only using direct references and specific examples), proof read, and publish in the form of small booklets.

The Hidden Legacy of Connie Jervis

Probably when most people in present-day British Columbia think of a union leader, they picture a solidly built, middle-aged man, sometimes in a suit, occasionally wearing a tee shirt or a hard hat, pointing a finger sternly while making a speech. But, that is only a small piece of a very wide reality that has always included women as leaders, innovators and speakers. From 1918's Minimum Wage Act initiator, Helena Gutteridge, to wartime industrial worker Jonnie Rankin, to 1970s era office workers' leader Jean Rands, to former Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) national president Judy Darcy (now a BC Member of the Legislative Assembly [MLA]), and recent British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) president and current BC Member of Parliament (MP) Jinny Simms, women have assumed key union roles.

First of all, she was a woman, a young woman. White women in BC had only achieved the right to vote in 1917 and in the ensuing 20 years, few women had been elected to government at any level. She was in her early 20s, in a time when all women were under great social pressure to get married as soon as they became adults and, especially if they were middle class, to then leave the world of wage labour and stay at home. Most unlikely of all, Connie Jervis was a teacher, the president of the Langley Teachers' Association (LTA) in 1939-40. Although it was not well paid, teaching was considered a 'respectable' profession and teachers, certainly those working in small towns and rural areas, were required to be upright role models and to behave conservatively. No going to the pool hall, no stepping out with men of any kind, no having a quiet glass of beer in the pub, and, most definitely no continuing to teach after marriage!



Photo courtesy of Peggy McClay; daughter of Connie

In the late 1930s, Langley (now a suburb of Vancouver) was a rural community with a small and historic town center. Its residents were mostly farmers and, with very few families owning motorcars, travel was time consuming and required planning. In this period, too, Canada was teetering on the brink of another war in Europe. Indeed, war came on September 10th 1939, beginning a period of new and challenging opportunities and burdens for women and of great political pressure on unions to be 'patriotic.' Workers would be expected to be compliant with national goals and to curtail their previous, Depression-era militancy in the interest of a united war effort.

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At this time, too, even small local school boards had considerably more power and social influence in communities than they do today. As former Langley teacher and union president Ken Novakowski writes: “School districts did not have superintendents so school boards had a very “hands on approach” for running the school district.” (1) This meant fewer professional bureaucrats and more elected officials involved in everything.

Teaching may have been respectable, but the wages were not. In fact, they were low, haphazard and discriminated against women and elementary teachers, most of them women! “The annual salary of an elementary teacher at this time was about \$780 and for a senior secondary teacher \$1,100. There was no common or agreed salary grid and women were paid less than men for the same work.” (2) Working conditions were often difficult, especially when the average class size was 45 and in some cases rose to more than 50. (3) Imagine that, 50 kids packed in tight rows in single, small classrooms. Think of the marking and the logistics of managing a lively class discussion!

Until 1939-40 when Connie Jervis became president of the LTA, Langley teachers along with those in many other BC districts, did not act as a group when presenting salary matters to the school board. Instead, school boards set salaries arbitrarily. Teachers were left to accept or reject what was offered, there was no negotiation on the part of the school board. But things were soon to change. In 1939 Jervis organized a teachers’ meeting, with the BCTF president attending, at Roy Mountain’s home. He was the group’s salary chair and together they prepared a salary case to present to the LSB. Despite new, 1937 legislation “that enshrined in law compulsory arbitration as the dispute resolution for teacher negotiations,” (4) the board turned down the teachers’ request for a raise. The next step for the LTA was obvious.

Jervis and her colleagues, fully aware of the new law, requested a referral to binding arbitration. This request was granted. “The school board, however, refused to cooperate and would not attend the arbitration hearing...” (5) The provincial government responded by appointing an individual to represent the board on the panel. Not surprisingly, the panel ruled in the teachers’ favour. That is when events became increasingly adversarial, as the following timeline shows.

- After the ruling, the school board attacked the teachers in the Langley Advance newspaper. School board chair JW Berry called compulsory arbitration “**The pistol to the head approach.**”
- The war inflamed the situation even more and teachers were called “unpatriotic” for daring to express and act on a desire for better wages.
- The board flat out refused to pay the arbitrated salary award.
- Langley’s municipal council gave its complete support to the school board thus expanding the conflict.

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What transpired, sustained by a determined group of mostly women teachers, was a long and often fractious struggle. Eventually, the teachers were victorious, but not before jumping over many hurdles. Below is a chronological list of ten of these.

1. In the spring of 1940, the LTA took the board to court in New Westminster in order to enforce the arbitration award.
2. The judge ruled that the board had to pay teacher Ronald Nordham (the test case) his yearly salary increase of \$42. His salary rose to \$880.
3. In total, the board's bill for all its teachers would be \$2,500 over that of 1939.
4. The board reacted with hostility and, in the April 4th edition of the Langley Advance, JW Berry, claiming that teachers who requested their raise would be considered "obnoxious" by taxpayers, invited them to resign.
5. No teachers resigned!
6. On June 20th 1940, the board fired Jervis and 13 other teachers.
7. Ten of the 14 teachers were women!
8. The 14 teachers immediately appealed their dismissal to the Board of Reference, "a provincial body consisting of a representative of the BCTF, the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) and a third person chosen from the legal profession and appointed by BC's Chief Justice." (6)
9. The Board ruled that there was no legal case for the teachers' dismissal.
10. The Council of Public Instruction (the equivalent of today's Ministry of Education) ordered the reinstatement of all the teachers to their pre-dismissal positions!

Victory, it seemed, had been won. But the Langley School Board was intransigent. When teachers returned to work in September 1940, five teachers, including Jervis and Mountain, had been demoted and sent to schools in the far reaches of the Langley countryside. Although the law was on their side, the LTA's struggle was not over yet and it was time to take direct action.

Here's what they did. On the first day of school in September 1940, the demoted teachers showed up at the schools and in the classrooms where they had worked until the previous June. They sat at their desks. For this action they were labeled "sit down strikers" by Vancouver daily newspapers and, in an attempt to intimidate them further, Berry travelled from school to school, ordering them to go to their new jobs.

Once again, the teachers were forced to appeal to the Council of Public Instruction. It promptly fired the school board and appointed a public trustee to manage the district's affairs. The teachers returned to their old jobs and, at last, received their awarded salaries. But the tribulation was not quite done.

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The September issue of *The Langley Advance* “in an unusually large (for the time) headline declared **“Langley Feels the Unwarranted Blow of Gov’t Dictatorship”** and further declared the incident to be the ‘most serious in Langley’s history.’” (7) While this was certainly hyperbole, it obviously reflected the views of the district’s more influential citizens. It seems also to have been designed to threaten and blame the teachers for insisting on their rights in law and for not backing down, even when faced with social disapproval. How admirable it was for the 24 year old Connie Jervis to have taken up this challenge. As her daughter Peggy McClay, a Langley teacher observed in 2006, “She bravely took on the pillars of the community with fierce opposition and little to back her up.” (8) She and her colleagues gained much that teachers and other workers can be thankful for: the beginning of the end for gender-biased salaries in the teaching profession, the satisfaction of standing up for professional dignity and legal rights, the establishment of compulsory arbitration as a resolution for salary disputes, and the knowledge that union solidarity works!



Connie Jervis (front row, second from right) and colleagues circa 1940
Photo courtesy of Peggy McClay; daughter of Connie Jervis

Written by Marcy Toms

Works cited:

Ken Novakowski 1939-40: The Langley affair
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