

Ep. 19 – Union Maids in Action: The 1918 Steam Laundry Strike

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:08] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, a podcast that brings to light stories of work and struggles from BC's rich labour past. I'm your unflappable host, Rod Mickleburgh. Today we go all the way back to 1918 to a strike by a group of feisty women laundry workers in the midst of the terrible Spanish flu epidemic. You will hear an account of the strike from one of the women who took part in that long ago struggle. The intense class struggles and political action of the first two decades of the 20th century were not confined to men. Although there were far fewer of them, working women did not refrain from joining existing unions or forming their own. It wasn't easy. Toiling long hours in small scattered workplaces made organizing difficult, but they proved equal to the challenge. And when they had to hit the bricks, they gave as good as they got, going after strikebreakers and doing whatever else was necessary to prevail. The strike by Vancouver laundry workers, most of whom were women, is a good example. 'Union Maid,' written by Woody Guthrie about women trade unionists is one of Woody's most well-known songs. This version is sung by the great Peggy Seeger.

Music: 'Union Maid' performed by Peggy Seeger [00:01:46] There once was a union maid, who never was afraid of goons and ginks and company finks and the deputy sheriffs who made the raid. She went to the union hall when a meeting it was called and when the Legion boys came 'round she always stood her ground. Oh, you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union. Oh, you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union 'til the day I die. The union maid was wise to the tricks of company spies. She couldn't be fooled by a company stool, she'd always organize the guys. She always got her way when she struck for better pay. She'd show her card to the National Guard and this is what she'd say. Oh you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:02:49] Fed up with their paltry pay and poor working conditions, laundry workers began to investigate joining a union in the spring of 1918. One of them was Ellen Goode, who started working at Pioneer Laundry when she was just 15. She was interviewed by Sara Diamond in 1979, a few years before she died.

Ellen Goode [00:03:12] We worked ten hours a day, sometimes 60 hours a week from 1914 'til 1918, when we decided to form a union.

Sara Diamond [00:03:24] It must have been really hot.

Ellen Goode [00:03:26] It was. And, you know, in those days we didn't wear the loose clothing that we do now. And we wore undergarments, which was always starched and the starched uniform.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:03:44] Conditions were also dangerous. Accidents were frequent. Ellen remembered a fatal tragedy in 1919.

Ellen Goode [00:03:53] It was 1918 or 1919. The early part of '19. The Peerless Laundry had what they called a drum mangles. And it had a cracked cylinder. And it was leaking steam. And the engineer was a personal friend of ours by the name of Lake and he reported to the management to close the machine down, that it would blow. And if it blew, it would scald. Well, they closed it down and they fixed it up. And Lake, Jack Lake said, I'm off the job, I won't handle it, he said, because that's going to blow. And so he quit. And

when in a day or two after, the thing blew and there was four girls -- well, one was killed and three was scalded. And we had a job to get the Peerless Laundry into our union. But when they heard about the fatality and the girls, we took up a fund. We collected and we took it over to the family of the deceased. And then the Peerless Laundry came in pretty well 100% in our union, because the union had stepped in and helped them, you know, when they needed it.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:05:37] In fact, another woman also died in hospital from her burns. Five others were badly scalded, but survived. A coroner's jury did nothing more than state that the company's engineer should be censured for allowing machinery to operate, knowing it to be unsafe. There was not a word directed against the company. Meanwhile, as union talk escalated, Ellen recalled one person in particular who spoke to the laundry workers about the benefits.

Ellen Goode [00:06:08] We had one driver by the name of Victor Midgely, who was the driver. And he, with about 10 or 12 of us talked it over, which I relayed to my father, who advised me to go ahead.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:30] Midgely also happened to be Secretary of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, and later that year, one of the leaders of the city's 24-hour strike to protest the shooting of union leader Ginger Goodwin. Helena Gutteridge was also in the forefront. Relentless in her drive for women's suffrage, social reform and trade unionism, the English-born activist had been elected president of the Journeymen Tailors Union of America in 1914. Later, she was the first woman elected to the Executive of the local Labour Council, which appointed her laundry organizer. By late July, more than 200 laundry workers had signed union cards. The next month, the International Laundry Workers Union accepted them as Local 37, covering seven city laundries.

Ellen Goode [00:07:22] We set up a meeting with some of the delegates of officials of different unions, like the shipbuilders, the engineers. They came and more or less gave us a summary of what we could expect and what we would go for, and it was an anonymous vote. I think there was about 250 men and women there because we had men working, that was washers, like in the washroom.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:08:01] But contract negotiations, led by Gutteridge and International President Herbert Shuttleworth, ran into trouble over the union's demand for a weekly wage of \$13.95. On September 3rd, the hard-nosed laundries issued an ultimatum. The workers had five days to quit the union or leave their jobs. At a mass meeting at the Labour Temple, which still stands at Homer and Dunsmuir, union members voted to strike. Picket lines went up the next morning on September 9th. Eighty per cent of the 280 strikers were women, many of them young. Despite virulent opposition from the laundry owners, they gave no quarter. The trade union movement rallied to the cause, holding dances and whist nights to raise funds. Unions were also asked to kick in donations from their own members, and many did. By the end of October, the strike fund was close to \$7,000. That provided strikers with \$7 a week and a decent \$15 a week for those with dependents. The laundries tried to lure Chinese laundry workers away from their own workplaces, but not one crossed the picket line. When people worried that unwashed laundry might increase the spread of the deadly Spanish flu, the union took out large ads in the newspaper with a remarkable offer.

Ellen Goode [00:09:31] So the unions run an ad stating that we would man any laundry, free of wages, 24 hours a day for people with the flu in their home, which we received no

response for. We wanted to man the General Hospital, which was working the ten hours a day. We wanted to go in and finish the 24 hours a day to keep the hospitals sanitary. But there was no response to it.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:10:11] On the strike front, steam engineers, who were in a different union, walked out in sympathy. One laundry was forced to shut completely while the other six tried to operate with reduced hours using strikebreakers. The strikers didn't make it easy for the scabs, who were often met with rotten tomatoes, heckling and large crowds outside laundry entrances and exits. They used other tactics, too. Ellen Goode:

Ellen Goode [00:10:40] The longshoreman used to come up and the Peerless Laundry was the worst, I think. And they used to line the girls up inside, and then they would bring private cars, like the bosses cars and that. And the girls would get into them. And then they'd take off, you see, and they'd drive them to the nearest streetcar. But we had some of our longshoremen that would come along with their hooks and they would give the signal and they'd rip a tire. And while the air was going out, we were doing all the yelling so's they wouldn't know. And of course, they would drive off, and they'd have a ripped tire. And this time, a group of picketers was coming back from the Peerless. They didn't have money for car fares so they walked. Some of them are on the bridge and coming under Granville, the other half had crossed over and was going down Pacific, toward the Star and Pioneer. And then they started to yell. Well, I was on the corner of Pacific and Granville. I was not in the... But some man came along and he said to me, you're an innocent bystander. I said, in a sense. I'm still one of them. And there was a shop on the corner and he pulled me in. And he said get in here, here comes the police. And they took in about eight. But the judge didn't -- they had to appear before court -- and I went to go to hear the court hearing. And they wouldn't let me up. The police barred me from going up. Of course I think they knew me like, and knew that I was on the Executive and things like that. And I said the case was going to get thrown out anyway. So about 15 minutes, the girls came down with a reprimand from the judge to act like ladies instead of hooligans.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:12:44] Not all strikers got off so lightly. Ellen recounts what happened to striker William Geofray when a young female street breaker was accosted by picketers.

Ellen Goode [00:12:55] It's just come to my mind of the injustice of some of our courts. An event happened with a girl that worked in one of the laundries and she walked with a limp. One evening she was coming down Richards Street when some of the picketers met her and they started to holler and carry on. And she ran up the steps and into the Holy Rosary. Amongst the picketers was a driver, a laundry driver. He went up about four steps and tried to quieten them down. But he was taken in and he was given two years because the court claimed that he had crippled this girl by chasing her. So this driver, I can't remember his name, spent two years for something that was uncalled for. But the laundry workers did stand by him and for the two years that he was in jail, they gave him a laundry driver's wages, union wages. One thing is that justice is not always given where it should be.

Music: 'Union Maid' performed by Peggy Seeger [00:14:22] This union maid was wise, to the tricks of company spies. She couldn't be fooled by a company stool, she'd always organize the guys. She always got her way, when she struck for better pay. She'd show her card to the National Guard and this is what she'd say. Oh you can't scare me I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union. Oh you can't scare me, I'm sticking to the union, I'm sticking to the union 'til the day I die...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:14:55] On one occasion, the Cascade Laundry was surrounded by a huge crowd. What the newspapers called a near riot ensued. Strikebreakers were threatened. Some automobile doors and windows were damaged. A few stones were thrown. When police showed up, they were jeered for helping the scabs. Ellen had a few close calls herself with police.

Ellen Goode [00:15:19] I know I had been picketing over at the Peerless Laundry and came across Granville Bridge and was going down to Cascade. I went down and there was a policeman walking round there, but I didn't see him. But some girl came out on the fire escape, which was over the sidewalk and emptied a teapot, which nearly hit me. And I called up to her and told her a few things. And from nowhere, this policeman arrived and accused me of causing a disturbance and told me that he had told me there was to be no hollering. I tried to tell him that I only just arrived there. And I said, if that girl came down here, I said I would show her what I would do. But we had a haven. In the lane behind the Cascade Laundry was a vacant lot owned by -- a private ownership -- which they turned over to the laundry workers. The union men of various unions put up a shanty for us because we struck in the worst time of the year from September to January. We had a stove and a coffee pot and things like that, that we could get in there and get warm and still go back on picket. So I knew if I could get onto this here lot, the policeman couldn't take me off without a warrant. So I made it and they kept me there for five hours until a longshoreman came along. Some of the girls notified the longshoreman. Came along, backed the car up, I got in the backseat and we took off before he... but I stayed for five hours on that.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:17:20] Amid growing public support for the laundry workers, the provincial government intervened in the dispute and a tentative agreement was reached on wages. But only one of the laundries agreed to the union's demand for a closed shop, the sticking point for so many strikes before unions won legal rights in 1944. Nor would the steam laundries agree to hire back all of the strikers. Strikers met to discuss the terms. The Deputy Minister of Labour actually sat in on the meeting, confident a majority of workers would accept the deal, despite the lack of a closed shop. Instead reported labour's paper, The Federation, there was "such prolonged cheering and clapping of hands that there was no doubt they knew what they wanted and were determined" to stay out. And some good news lay ahead. The Provincial Minimum Wage Board held hearings to set minimum wages for women in select occupations. Three strikers, along with the tireless Helena Gutteridge, travelled to Victoria to testify before the Board. Their testimony so moved the Board, they imposed a weekly minimum wage of \$13.75 for all women engaged in the laundry industry. That was only 25 cents below the strikers demand of \$14 and even higher than the increase accepted earlier by the union. That made it hard to keep fighting for the closed shop and laundry workers ended their inspiring four-month strike in early January 1919. But that wasn't the end of union support for the laundry workers. Eighty strikers, 60 women and 20 men, were not rehired by the vindictive laundry companies. After a pitch from Helena Gutteridge, and with the strike fund grown to \$12,000, the union movement provided financial assistance to all those blacklisted until they found work. A truly extraordinary example of union solidarity and an illustration of just how much the formidable laundry workers had touched union hearts.

Ellen Goode [00:19:38] So though we had lost our strike, we had gained in many ways. Because there was many industries and workers who were working for very small wages. We also then went out to organize and to bring women along to the unions, to work to take a more active part in it.

Music: 'Union Maid' performed by Peggy Seeger [00:20:07] What matter that the strike was lost, the fighting is further on. The ladies take the lesson home to husbands and children. They tried to ask for a real life. The judgement -- blacklisted.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:20:37] As for Ellen Goode, she eventually found work at Excelsior Laundry, which did have a closed shop and where she stayed for a number of years. She kept active in her union and the Vancouver Labour Council and later with the CCF and NDP. She remained proud of her part in that groundbreaking struggle. I hope you enjoyed hearing this eyewitness account of the laundry workers' strike that took place in Vancouver more than 100 years ago, yet another chapter of city history that should be better known. Thanks to the other members of the podcast crew Patricia Wejr and Donna Sacuta, and to John Mabbott for putting it all together. Special thanks to Sara Diamond for her interview with the indomitable Ellen Goode. One more thing, the BC Labour Heritage Centre offers teaching materials for high school classrooms on the 1918 laundry workers' strike. The materials were prepared by Janet Nicol, whose original research brought the story of the strike to light. They can be downloaded on the Labour Heritage website and at Teach BC. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.

Theme music: 'Hold the Fort' [00:21:59]