

Ep 2: The 1931 Fraser Mills Strike

Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:06] Welcome to another episode of On the Line, a podcast that aims to bring British Columbia's rich labour heritage to life. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we are focusing on a fascinating strike that took place during the dark years of the Depression. Overnight, the bottom had fallen out of the economy. Production stalled, markets dried up, and millions of Canadian workers were soon on the dole. It was a terrible time. Workers who did keep their jobs had their wages cut to levels not seen since the end of World War I. Many unions seemed to give up. How do you fight back against owners, many of whom were struggling themselves, when the ranks of the unemployed were full of workers glad to take a job -- any job -- no matter how low the pay.

Music: 'Everybody Works but Father' performed by Bill Murray [00:01:24] Every morning at six o'clock, I go to my work, overcoat buttoned up 'round my neck. No job would I shirk. Winter wind blows 'round my head, cutting up my face. I tell you what I'd like to have, my dear old father's place....

Rod Mickleburgh [00:01:40] Union membership and the number of strikes fell dramatically. But every now and then, despite all the economic turmoil swirling around them, workers took a stand. It happened at the vast Fraser Mills lumber plant on the north shore of the Fraser River, 15 miles east of Vancouver, in what is now Coquitlam. When they were hit with their fifth wage cut in 20 months, employees said 'enough is enough.' They voted to strike. On the morning of September 17th, 1931, hundreds of fired-up workers surrounded the mill. When General Manager Henry Mackin tried to drive through the pickets, they surrounded his car, rocking it back and forth. One cheeky striker popped the cigar out of his mouth before he was allowed to pass. The mill workers had recently joined the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union, which was an affiliate of the militant Communist-led Workers Unity League. But few were interested in Communism. They had more immediate concerns than a revolution by the working class. They wanted their wage cut rolled back, an increase in rates for shingle weavers, less overtime and better working conditions. In the words of union President George Lamont, "We intend to fight the Fraser Mills Company not on the basis of Communism, but on the basis of bread and butter."

Rod Mickleburgh [00:03:17] The Fraser Mills strike stands out for another reason. Its workforce was a proverbial rainbow of ethnic diversity. The largest group among them were French Canadian. Their roots went back 20 years to when the Western Canada Lumber Company first began recruiting workers from Quebec. They soon formed a distinct community, Maillardville, named after their first parish priest. There were also Brits, Scandinavians and other Europeans. More significantly, there were also sizeable numbers of Japanese, Chinese and South Asian workers. It was this sort of racial mix that had doomed so many strikes in the past. White hostility and outright racism towards Asian workers kept them out of their unions. That made it easier for them to be used as strike breakers, exploited by both companies and notorious labour contractors who controlled their employment. That did not happen at Fraser Mills. Apart from the fact the strike took place at all in the thick of the Depression, the coming together of all workers, regardless of their background, made the confrontation at Fraser Mills a remarkable chapter in BC labour history.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:04:45] The leader of the strike was a 27-year-old shingle weaver named Harold Pritchett. He began working in local sawmills at the age of 15, working ten hours a day for the princely sum of 10 cents an hour. By 1931, he was a committed trade

unionist, veering strongly towards the left in his politics. Just six years later, Harold Pritchett was elected president of the brand new International Woodworkers of America, the IWA, the first Canadian to lead an international union. But Harold Pritchett cut his leadership teeth at Fraser Mills. He embraced the view of the Communist Party that race had no part in working class struggle. Under his leadership, Japanese, Chinese and South Asian workers were all represented on the strike committees. Women also played a large role. They presided over the union's large community kitchen, helped organize social events and often joined in the picketing. Fraser Mills was arguably this province's first strike where diversity was a unifier and not a divider. [Voices and horse hooves in background]

Rod Mickleburgh [00:06:09] Of course, in those days, no strike was easy. On day one, police showed up in force, half a dozen on horseback to try and keep pickets from blocking the road into the mill. Many were members of the Unemployed Workers Association who had been brought in by the Workers Unity League to bolster the picket line. Tensions increased on day two as even more police showed up. Cars crossing the line were bombarded by rocks and pieces of wood. A streetcar transporting non-union longshoremen to the docks had its windows smashed, although no one was hurt. On day three, police moved in and arrested ten pickets. Eight were charged with unlawful assembly, two with assaulting a police officer. Machine guns were mounted at the mill gates. Armed security guards patrolled the grounds, while police kept pickets under constant surveillance. There was also a war in the pages of Vancouver's daily newspapers, a verbal war. When the conservative anti-union 'Vancouver Province' referred to the large number of pickets as a mob, the Vancouver Sun's popular columnist, Bob Bouchette, took issue, in the male-oriented vernacular of the time.

John Mabbott voicing Bob Bouchette's Vancouver Sun piece [00:07:41] Our spinster of Victory Square -- huh, that's The Province -- cannot understand why 700 rough, uncouth, sweaty fellows should halt the wheels of industry in this unladylike way. To spend week after week in backbreaking toil in exchange for the bare means of existence becomes too much, so they strike as they have done at Fraser Mills. I think they have every reason for doing so. They have absolutely nothing to lose, and a strike is one way they have of bringing their condition to the attention of the public.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:08:21] At this point, however, with the mill already shut tight, the strike committee decided further confrontations with police were counterproductive. They reduced the number of pickets to 25 a shift. This was not a sign of weakness or flagging spirits. When the arrested strikers made their first court appearance, 150 workers and supporters gathered outside. And they were not the only ones there. According to 'The British Columbian' newspaper, 50 children of school age marching two abreast were brought from Millside, led by a determined looking lady with a stout stick. There were still occasional dust-ups with police on horseback. On these occasions, strikers might well have taunted the Mounties with refrains from the popular 1920 song 'Horsey Keep Your Tail Up'. The jolly tactic was first used by workers at the nearby Barnett Mill in Burnaby, who were also on strike.

Music: 'Horsey Keep Your Tail Up' performed by The Romaine Orchestra [00:09:27] Horsey keep your tail up, keep your tail up, keep you tail up. Oh horsey keep your tail up, keep the sun out of my eyes. Horsey keep your tail up, horsey keep your tail up, never mind about the flies. His mane is long and his hair is thick, he really has an artful kick. Horsey keep your tail up, horsey keep your tail up. Keep the sun out of my eyes.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:42] Meanwhile, there were so many committees, it was hard to keep track. Bumming committees gathered donations in Maillardville and downtown Vancouver. Social committees organized picnics, sports events, dances with French-Canadian fiddles flying and beer making to keep the fun level high. Skills were bartered to provide basic services such as shoe repairs, haircuts and supplying firewood. And there were the crucial food committees. Single men were fed at outdoor tables, their meals prepared by wives and mothers who ran the well-stocked kitchen. Harold Pritchett's insistence that the mill's Asian workers were represented on all relief committees also paid off. Japanese farmhands from Hammond donated vegetables. Chinese farmers contributed daily supplies of chickens, eggs and vegetables. There could be no better example of the benefit of including Asian workers in a union rather than excluding them, as much of the labour movement had for years. The striking union soon added two new demands: an end to the appalling company housing provided for South Asian employees and an end to the company's use of labour contractors to supply them with Asian workers, which kept their wages 10 cents an hour below the rates paid to white mill workers. At a mass strike support meeting in New Westminster, Japanese mill hand, K Moriyama, outlined their grievances. The contract system, he said, meant that Japanese workers had to go through a Japanese boss who, for all intents and purposes, was an agent for the company. Workers were hired and fired at will. They had no protection. If they joined the union, they could be blacklisted, Moriyama told the large crowd, yet join the union they did.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:50] No group was more solid than the large contingent of French Canadians. Besides the company and the police, they had to confront another foe, the Roman Catholic Church itself. Their parish priest, François-Xavier Teck, was no fan of strikes. This one, he thundered from the pulpit was the work of Communists and radical revenge. He refused to let the union hold events at the parish hall. And that wasn't all. More seriously, Father Xavier Teck warned members of his flock that if they did not surrender their union cards, they would be denied absolution of their sins at confession. This was a big deal for his devout parishioners. Yet only a few union cards trickled in. Most stood firm in favour of the strike. Said one:

Marc Gamelin voicing Maillardville parishoner [00:12:54] Father Teck is a good priest. We do what he tell us -- on Sunday!

Rod Mickleburgh [00:12:59] The union also helped out. A fleet of Model-T Fords was rounded up to drive churchgoers to Sunday mass in New Westminster, where there was a church with a more sympathetic priest. The strike kept going. After three weeks, the union got a boost. The Canadian Western Lumber Company was hit by another walkout. More than 300 workers went on strike at its lumber operation in Comox, on Vancouver Island. This prompted the owners to soften their previous hard line. They offered to restore the wage cut that was the major reason for the Fraser Mills strike. They further agreed to increase the rate for shingle workers, reduce mandatory overtime and there would be no discrimination against members of the union. All in all, it was not a bad offer, but it did not recognize the union. It did not provide a closed shop. Nor did it end the contract system for Asian workers. The company also demanded that all employees vote on the offer by a secret ballot using the mails. Elected officials from nearby Coquitlam and Burnaby were called on to arrange the vote. It so happened that one of them was the Reeve of Burnaby, William Pritchard. Yes, that William Pritchard—longtime socialist, a former leader of the revolutionary, One Big Union, and the guy who spent a year in Manitoba's Stony Mountain Penitentiary for his support of the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. But those credentials cut no ice with one fiery Communist speaker who denounced William Pritchard as quote: a tool of the capitalists, unquote. Feeling their oats after taking on the company tooth and

nail for three weeks, the strikers spurned the mail ballot. At a raucous union meeting, they voted unanimously by show of hands, to reject the company's offer—389 to nothing.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:15:11] Picket lines stayed up. A week later, more than 100 strikers showed up to stop non-union longshoremen from loading lumber onto the SS [00:15:21] **Ravenas** [0.0s] bound for China. Squads of mounted police, some brought in from the Cariboo, drove them back. At least a dozen strikers were injured from their swinging clubs. The union protested the police brutality to Ottawa. To no one's surprise, nothing was done. Around the same time, lumber baron HR MacMillan and other forest titans met with the provincial cabinet. They complained that those nasty unions were threatening the right of workers to work for whatever wage the forest companies offered them. And they were right. Premier Simon Fraser Tolmie, weighed in with support for the hard-done forest companies, blaming the familiar bogeymen of all strikes in those days, agitators and Communists. Attorney General RH Pooley chose to lash out at, quote, imported radicals, unquote, for causing the strike, ignoring the fact that almost all the strikers worked and lived in the community. The workers' squeeze continued. All plant operations had ceased. Office staff were sent home. The company store was closed. Tugboats tied up and the water pumps went dry. Union rowboats patrolled the river. Spirits were further roused by that huge support meeting organized by the New Westminster Labour Council, and speakers did not forget the plight of the mill's Asian workers and their wretched living conditions. A resolution was passed at the meeting demanding that, quote, the vermin-infested and unsanitary bunkhouses located in and on the property owned by Canadian Western Lumber Company and rented and occupied by Orientals and Hindus be abolished. There was also a legal victory. On November 13th, all eight strikers charged with unlawful assembly were found not guilty. The jury deliberated only 20 minutes. The two strikers charged with assaulting a cop were convicted but got off with only one day in jail. Still, after nine weeks on strike, with the company showing no signs of more concessions and Christmas just a month away, the union decided there was nothing to be gained from staying out. This time, by secret ballot, workers voted 406 to 55 to accept the lumber company's last offer, take down their picket signs and return to work. No one felt defeated. The Fraser Mills workers had managed to stay together and fight on for six more weeks to try and win union recognition. But it was not to be. In 1931 and into the 1940s, this remained a line in the sand on which industrial employers would not budge. Not until the Second World War did governments finally pass legislation that legally required employers to recognize and bargain with unions chosen by a majority of their workforce. It had only taken 70 years. And overall, the gains won by the Fraser Mills workers were nothing to sneeze at. The 10 percent wage cut was cancelled. Shingle workers got their pay hike. A cap was put on overtime, and the company agreed to meet regularly with worker committees to resolve problems. The impact of the workers' stand was seen the next time the company felt the need to cut wages. They eased the burden this time by reducing rents, and they slashed management wages, too. You can bet neither would have happened without the strike. But there was a cost. The company's pledge to not discriminate against the strikers proved as hollow as the famous tourist tree at Stanley Park. There was no return to work for union activists. Strike leader Harold Pritchett was among those blacklisted. He never worked another shift at Fraser Mills. With the Depression in full force, Harold Pritchett could not find another job for three years. He was left to support his wife and five sons on relief payments of \$47.50 a month. They lived in a shack and raised chickens. That was the toll for fighting back.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:20:04] As tough as it was for Harold Pritchett and some of the others at the mill, their experience paled in comparison with the fate of [00:20:12] **Hans Keast**. [0.5s] He was a recently arrived immigrant from Germany. As a member of the

Unemployed Workers Association, he had picketed Fraser Mills in the early days of the strike. Immigration authorities singled him out as a troublemaker and quote: someone saturated with communistic beliefs, unquote. He was deported back to Nazi Germany. There he was arrested and thrown into a concentration camp. [00:20:42]Hans Keast [0.4s] died from massive haemorrhaging while he was being tortured. He left behind a wife and child in Vancouver. They were awful time, the 1930s, and some paid a dreadful price. Nevertheless, the Fraser Mills strike is an inspiring example of working class unity in British Columbia. Against all odds, two years into the toughest economic meltdown Canada had ever seen, when many unions seemed to lose their way, a diverse group of rank and file workers set aside their racial divisions and came together to fight for better wages, better working conditions and basic respect as human beings. Despite not winning recognition of their union, they succeeded on all other fronts. The secretary of the Lumber Workers Union M Palmgren, summed up their achievements in a letter to the 'Vancouver Sun': "Instead of the Oriental scabbing on the white man, which has always been the bogey man that the lumber bosses have held over the head of the lumber workers, they have seen Japanese, Chinese and Hindus stand solid with Frenchmen, Swedes and practically every nationality under the sun. And the result is that Mackin and the Canadian Western Lumber Company had to come through with a number of the workers' demands."

Rod Mickleburgh [00:22:13] As a postscript, the same could not be said for lumber workers locked out in nearby Barnett mill. That long, ugly dispute filled with violent police incidents ended when the owners opted to close the mill rather than respond to the strikers' demands. Most of the Barnett workers remained unemployed until the outbreak of World War II. Years later, the city of Burnaby turned the site of the lumber mill into a beautiful recreation area, Barnett Marine Park. In 2018, the BC labour Heritage Centre installed a plaque at the park commemorating the heroic 1931 struggles of the Lumber Workers Industrial Union. As for the more successful and remarkable strike at Fraser Mills, it should be much better known than it is. I hope we have done it justice.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:23:09] Thanks to Bailey Garden for editing. John Mabbott provided the voice for Sun columnist Bob Bouchette, while Marc Gamelin was the worker from Quebec. This podcast is produced by the BC Labour Heritage Centre. I'm Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On the Line.