Ep. 8 – Uniting Woodworkers Across Ethnic Divides
Transcript by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:20] Welcome to another episode of On the Line, a podcast produced by the BC labour Heritage Centre, designed to shine a light on the rich labour heritage of British Columbia. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. This is Asian Heritage Month. Last month was Sikh Heritage Month. Both groups are justly celebrated for their contributions to the fabric of British Columbia. At the same time, they also suffered many years of exploitation and discrimination, much of it in the workplace. For many reasons, including the racist policies of many unions, they were very hard to organize. But one union, the International Woodworkers of America, met the challenge head on. This is the story of three remarkable Asian Canadian organizers, hired specifically by the IWA, to break down racial barriers and bring woodworkers of all races into what was then BC's biggest union.

Music: 'The Greenhorn Song' performed by Jon Bartlett [00:01:26] One day I thought I'd have some fun and see how hookin' chokers was done, since Duncan Logging had begun, I tackled a boss that night. He says my chokerman's bit the dust. His head is bashed in and his legs are bust and though with luck, he'll live, I trust, of chokers he hates the sight. We hit the river the very next week - that Duncan country looked awfully bleak. Of that I will not even speak. It's just a great big bog. The mosquitoes are huge and so are the fleas. We only have rotten cedar for trees, and every step, it's mud to the knees, and that's where I learned how to log. They hauled me from bed at about midnight, breakfast was only a sniff and a bite...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:02:22] By the end of the dirty thirties, the IWA had barely anything to show for their tenacious organizing drives in BC's lucrative forests industry. With governments, legal authorities and the law stacked in favour of determined anti-union employers, the union could not win. Nor did it help that many forest industry workers were employed in remote, far flung logging camps.

Music: 'Way up the Uckletaw' performed by Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat
[00:03:15] Come all your bullneck'd loggers and hear me sing this song, for it is very short and it will not take you long. We had blankets for the travel and biscuits for to chaw. We were in search of pitchbacks way up the ucletaw. We're leaving Vancouver with sorrow, grief and woe and heading up the country, 'bout 100 mile or so. We have blankets for the travel and biscuits for to chaw. We were in search of pitchbacks way up the ucletaw. [instumental verse] We hired fourteen loggers and we hired a man for saw. We hired a greenhorn cook, and he ran the hotcakes raw. We had blankets for the travel and biscuits for to chaw. We were in search of pitchbacks way up the ucletaw. We had blankets for the travel and biscuits for to chaw. We were in search of pitchbacks way up the ucletaw...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:04:29] Another difficulty was the diversity of the workforce. Racism had prevailed in BC since the first arrival of Chinese workers in the 1880s, and the labour movement was part of it. Attitudes were fuelled by unscrupulous employers who hired ethnic Chinese to work for low wages and used them as strikebreakers. Members of the Asiatic Exclusion League, which included the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, were among those responsible for the notorious riot against Vancouver's Chinatown and Japantown in the fall of 1907. Demands for Asian exclusion continued in the BC labour movement for a long time. That demand included workers from South Asia, although often referred to as Hindus, the vast majority were Sikhs from the Punjab area of India. The forest industry in particular had large numbers of Asian Canadian workers. Sawmills and

logging companies took advantage of actual laws that allowed employers to pay them less than white workers doing the same jobs. They used ethnic labour contractors to supply them with low paid Chinese, Japanese and South Asian workers. In return for finding them jobs, the contractors took a slice of their pay. This notorious system was known as the tyee. Even mill owners who were South Asian themselves took advantage of the law to pay their Asian workers less than non-Asian. In the 1920s, Mayo Singh and Kapoor Sidhu established a racially diverse community on Vancouver Island known as Paldi. The town was built around their large sawmill that employed Sikhs, Japanese, Chinese and whites. In many ways, Paldi stood as a model of harmonious race relations. But a closer look showed that the owners were still typical bosses. In 1936, the IWA had tried unsuccessfully to organize the mills at Paldi and nearby Hillcrest, citing them as two of the worst wage discriminators in the province. So race remained a huge obstacle to worker unity. But the IWA, spearheaded by its leaders, Harold Pritchett and Nigel Morgan, both members of the Communist Party, had never embraced Asian exclusion. They believed in organizing Asian workers, not keeping them out. This was the same progressive policy advocated in the past by other socialist organizations, most notably the Industrial Workers of the World and the One Big Union movement. As union organizing finally opened up during and after World War II, the IWA concluded that the best way to break down racial hurdles in BC sawmills was to hire Asian Canadian organizers. It was a groundbreaking decision. Roy Mah, later a prominent leader in Vancouver's Chinatown, was hired to organize Chinese Canadian lumber workers. As part of his job, he put out the first Cantonese union newspaper in North America. Mah had signed on after volunteering to fight for a country that denied him the vote. All told, he brought an estimated 2500 Chinese Canadians into the IWA. Roy Mah talked about his experiences some years ago with well-known chronicler Paul Yee.

Roy Mah [00:08:01] I was a district representative for all of BC except the Interior. Well, I edited the paper for them in Chinese. And then also, I also was organizing. I'd go around to the camps and try to organize them because they were working at 40 cents an hour and some of them, less, as little as 25 cents, whereas a white boy getting 60, 75 cents. You see there was quite a spread in the wage differential. So my pitch to them was that, no, equal work for equal pay. I said, if you join the union, this is what you're fighting for. This is where we can help you.

Paul Yee [00:08:43] Did did many Chinese join?

Roy Mah [00:08:46] I'd say I got 80% of them. Because they were hired by Chinese contractors. The labour contractor wasn't too friendly towards me, I remember, yeah. But that's understandable because the labour contractor hired them, they'd get a cut, you know, of their wages and, you know. I don't know... what the the firm paid the contractor even... but I know, that that's the take home pay.

Paul Yee [00:09:14] Was the IWA one of the first unions to try and organize amongst the Chinese?

Roy Mah [00:09:19] Yes.

Paul Yee [00:09:20] Why were they so interested? I mean organized labour for a long time earlier, had been very much opposed to the Chinese. You know, they said they'd lower wages and unfair competition and...

Roy Mah [00:09:30] But then this 20% is a sizeable chunk of the working force. And you can't ignore them or leave them out. Because if you leave them out, then they'll always be working under, you know, undersell their labour to the boss.

Paul Yee [00:09:48] So they figured it'd be better to pull them in than to sort of leave them as enemies.

Roy Mah [00:09:53] That's right. It's just a matter of convincing them. A lot of them were sceptics, you know, they were hesitant and they don't know, you know, some of them were afraid that the boss might find out and fire them, you see. So, you know, they were so accustomed for years they were, you know, sort of treated as doormats, you know. They don't know the difference anyway because, you know, that's their way of life for so long. Then you say, gee, they were so accustomed to receiving 40 cents. Suddenly they offer them 85 - that's double! You know, in those days that's the equivalent to say a jump from $500 to a thousand, you know. Like that was reality for them. We showed them. We showed them, you see. We showed them the contract after they first signed and look at. But there were some hold-outs, a few hold-outs. As I say, I couldn't get them all. You know, there were 80, 90%. Some of them, you know, I don't think so much for religious reasons as for, you know, Chinese are penny pinching, eh, you know. They hang on, you know... at that time there were so many at only 40 or 50 a month. And then union dues. They wouldn't join because they were only working for 30 or $40 a month.

Paul Yee [00:11:16] I suppose it's only human nature, you know, you get all kinds of people.

Roy Mah [00:11:20] I got the most of them. See the bulk of them. They were very friendly towards me. They treated me nice. You know, whenever I go into a camp, oh they treated me as guest, special guest, invited me to dinner and I joined them for dinner.

Paul Yee [00:11:36] How did the white workers feel about, you know, the Chinese joining the union?

Roy Mah [00:11:39] They wanted them to join. They don't want them to undercut their labour, you see.

Paul Yee [00:11:44] Smart men.

Roy Mah [00:11:45] Yeah. But we did and not just organizing, that just raised their [unclear] I used to, you know, I used to be like a one-man success. I used to write letters for them, handle their family problems, and, you know, interpret for them, take them down to immigration or take them, you know.

Paul Yee [00:12:01] Did all of this, performed...

Roy Mah [00:12:04] All for their one dollar and a half a month. It wasn't part of the service, quite an inducement. I get them to join you see, you have problems, you have trouble? I'll look after them for you.

Music: 'The Greenhorn Song' performed by Jon Bartlett [00:12:26] I've worked in the cities, I've worked in the mines. I've sat in jails a couple of times. If again, I helped chokers, I've made up my mind to put one right around my head. For setting chokers, you get no

relief. You only have bruises and all kinds of grief. So here is my thesis and you'll find it brief. I think I would rather be dead.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:12:54] Darshan Singh Sangha was a dynamic young Sikh, recently arrived in Victoria, who found work in the city's sawmills in the late 1930s. The exploitation and discrimination he found on the job turned him into a Communist. A few years later, Nigel Morgan asked Darshan to take on the task of organizing the large number of South Asian sawmill workers on Vancouver Island. Darshan accepted. In a later interview in Punjabi with SFU professor Hari Sharma, Darshan spoke at length about how his societal awareness had been developed at university and working in sawmills.

Hari Shama and Darshan Singh Sangha, [00:13:34] [dialogue in Punjabi]

Rod Mickleburgh [00:14:19] He was more than ready for the challenge. Workers who had resisted previous IWA organizing efforts responded to his persuasive pamphlets and speeches in their own Punjabi language. Soon they were flocking to join the union. Darshan Singh Sangha stayed with the union for the rest of his time in Canada. He became a District Trustee for the IWA, the first non-white to hold such a position in the union. Fundamental to the IWA's organizing drive was a vow to end wage discrimination against Asian workers. The message was spelled out by the Union's Ladies Auxiliary float in the Canada Day Parade in Duncan in 1945. The float displayed a large, bold banner proclaiming 'Equal Pay for Equal Work for All'. The IWA also gave strong support to campaigns by Asian Canadians for the right to vote. When the Khalsa Diwan Society went to the BC legislature in 1944 to lobby for the vote, IWA president Harold Pritchett and Darshan Singh Sangha went with them. Both groups finally got the vote in 1948. After the war, wage discrimination against Asian workers, that had been in place for so many years, also came to an end, along with the infamous tyee system of ethnic labour contractors. In later years, as racist immigration restrictions were lifted as well, thousands of South Asians came to BC. Many found work in the province's sawmills. But the IWA could not erase all the problems. Newcomers were usually assigned to backbreaking, lower paid jobs on the green chain or unloading boxcars. Skilled jobs were reserved for others. In an interview with Co-op Radio in the 1970s, IWA activist Gilbab Johal and Harinder Mahil talked about the difficulties union organizers continued to have with newly arrived South Asian workers.

Dilbagh Johal [00:16:27] First of all, there are hardly any unions in Punjab where most of the people come from, most of the Indian workers. I think when people or Indian workers get jobs here, they want to establish themselves, regardless of a union or a non-union mill to work at. I think the main problem comes that they don't know what their rights are under the union agreement. So basically because of two problems. The first one is the education which is lacking on the part of the union. Secondly, because the language problems.

Harinder Mahil [00:17:07] Problem is that people come from India. They were not organized in a union over there because most people from India come here, farmers. They were farmers in India, and here, they don't understand very much about the union beforehand. And the second one is that most people, come from India, they were mostly office workers in the government offices or some teachers or they were not in the labour force. .

Dilbagh Johal [00:17:40] I think that's the first problem, regardless if you work in a union mill or a non-union mill. But I do feel that there are a lot more problems in the non-union plants because there's no job security and they can get rid of you any day they want. And the wages are a lot less. And it's to the extent that East Indian workers are getting lower

wages than the Anglo-Saxons and East India workers are on menial jobs while the the whites or Canadians or Anglo-Saxons are on the machine job. And to some extent, it's true in the union mills also. I mean, there are a number of mills where East Indian workers are mainly on green chains or on other such jobs where it just bull work which is required of them. It's either I think employers think that they cannot think or cannot do the machine job.

Music: 'The Green Chain Song' performed by Rika Ruebsaat [00:18:43] You live a life of leisure. You live a life of ease in your mansion in the country, or your yacht upon the seas. Does your conscience ever picture on the tablet of your brain, the sad thought of men in misery pulling lumber off the chain? When the pond is full of timber, the jackladders running wild and the sawyer in his carriage has the bandsaw set and filed. From the headrig to the trimsaw, through the planer moves the train. Of that endless pile of lumber out upon the long green chain...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:19:29] The third Asian Canadian organizer hired by the IWA was Joe Miyazawa. He found his way to the union in unfortunate circumstances, having been removed from the BC coast by internment. He wound up working at a sawmill in Kamloops with a number of other Japanese Canadians. Inspired by his father, who had been active in the Japanese Camp and Mill Workers, Miyazawa led a successful drive to organize the mill. When the war ended, he signed on as an IWA organizer in the West Kootenays, where many Japanese Canadians had remained after internment had run its course. One of the first Japanese Canadians allowed to return to the West Coast in 1949, Miyazawa eventually became the union's associate director of research and a tireless advocate for human rights, both at home and internationally. In an interview after leaving the IWA in 1965, Joe Miyazawa talked about his union organizing experiences.

Joe Miyazawa [00:20:32] I worked in the sawmills, it was the only place where we could get work, get employed in those days. I think you have to understand, you know, that -- see, I went working for the union as a full time organizer in 1946 after the big strike. And following that I travelled extensively all through the Interior. I was on the road pretty [much] all the time and of course, people I associated with were all trade union people, basically trade union people. So I was not in competition with anybody in the small business sense. I really didn't feel any kind of change, discrimination or attitude, attitudinal changes. Although, in some of the small towns in the Interior, I did sense a couple of places where I had difficulty getting a hotel room, accommodation, but it was pretty subtle. One town, I can't recall where it was now that I used to have trouble but I fixed that. I used to get the town, phone first to ask if they had a roo and they'd say yes, then I'd give them my name. But there was no other place to stay, otherwise I would not have stayed there. I think primarily operating on the basis I think that if you felt it there, you just avoided there. I didn't really have any of that kind of problem in organizing workers because to me, it didn't make any difference. Although I was first, went working for the union because of the great numbers of Japanese Canadians working in the mills in the Interior. Those who moved off the coast, that's the only place we could work. So in great numbers they worked in and around Greenwood, Midway, Grand Forks, Nelson, Slocan Valley in the Kootenays. East Kootenays, too so I travelled all the way through the Crow's Nest Pass right over to Okanagan where some Japanese had relocated. So I organized workers in the union. [unclear] was founded before the war. But it never gained any impetus until about 1944, '44, fully formed under the Wartime Measures Act, the rights of association were passed by Privy Council. Previous to that, it was very difficult. Then there was questions of certification, which came under federal jurisdiction [unclear]. So this was all evolving for everybody. Prompted the union to hire me. They figured that because of the war there'd

be big suspicion on the part of anybody else who was trying to get people to sign up and pay their initiation fee.

Interviewer [00:23:25] Were you a true believer in the union?

Joe Miyazawa [00:23:26] I am.

Interviewer [00:23:26] Were you at the time?

Joe Miyazawa [00:23:28] Yes, I was, primarily because I suppose some of it rubbed off, off my dad. But secondly, because you have to understand that very little was organized in British Columbia during the war or before the war. And it was very common in the large sawmills, places like Hammond Cedar or BC Forest Products [unclear] and all of these mills that there was always a Japanese boss who signed his own cheques to the workers and took a nickel a head, cut off of everybody for no reason except that he did the hiring. And this commonly called tyee system in the canneries with the Chinese, this was very common amongst Japanese and a lot of Japanese bosses. Not very well liked, who in the Fraser Valley, well-known who did the hiring and firing.

Interviewer [00:24:28] Okay, what about the Chinese? Who hired the Chinese labour?

Joe Miyazawa [00:24:30] Well, they had a Chinese boss and an East Indian boss. Yeah. Very convenient for the employer and very convenient --. it was a [unclear] right off the top. He said, I have ten people working, the hours are so much then he paid his hours to the guy who probably took a nickel hit to say he looked after the bookkeeping. But, you know, this was wide open to bribery because one man with a berry farm in the Fraser Valley. Never did any work on this farm. All the guys who worked for him came on Sundays and they worked his farm just to ensure that they kept their jobs. And when Christmas came, [unclear] you know, this kind of business. But that was the times and everybody was [unclear] accept it. I don't know. You have to accept these things, I suppose.

Interviewer [00:25:28] I guess it's part of tradition. It was just, you know...

Joe Miyazawa [00:25:30] Well, I suppose it's tradition in the sense that there was some language difficulties at the outset, but I questioned that. You had to work the system. And those who were in it wanted it because it was to their advantage. And so I got involved because I wanted to ensure that I got paid for the same labour as the guy next to me who was not [unclear]. There was some smatterings at that time of some people who moved to the Interior, trying to resurrect that structure. It didn't agree with my union so I became very active working in the mill when I worked there. Then I worked, I assisted on my off time in the other mills in the area.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:26:27] You rarely hear them mentioned during Asian or Sikh Heritage months, but Roy Mah, Joe Miyazawa and Darshan Singh Sangha, along with the IWA which hired them, were pioneers in bringing ethnic Asian workers into the mainstream of the BC workforce. They helped end their long history of exploitation and wage discrimination. It's a contribution that should be much better known. A final note on Darshan Singh Sangha: in 1947, he decided to leave BC and the IWA to return to India to be part of his homeland's new independence. In his resignation letter to the union, he wrote, "one of the greatest achievements of the IWA was the uniting of all woodworkers white, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, irrespective of race and colour". After returning to India, he became known as Darshan Singh Canadian.

Music: 'The Green Chain Song' performed by Rika Ruebsaat [00:27:26] ...I still won't be unhappy 'cause that green chain's worse than hell.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:27:35] Thanks to Jon Bartlett for permission to use the music in this podcast, 'The Greenhorn Song' and 'Way Up the Ucletaw', from his 2008 album, The Young Man in Canada and 'The Green Chain Song' performed by Rika Ruebsaat from the album, Now it's Called Princeton. The interview with Joe Miyazawa was conducted by the National Nikkei Museum and Heritage Centre. It is archived as part of the Japanese Canadian Oral History collection at Simon Fraser University. The Co-op Radio clip was produced by the Boag Foundation and donated to the BC Labour Heritage Centre on reel to reel tapes. Thanks too, to the Labour Radio Podcast Network for featuring us among more than 70 podcasts and broadcasts focussed on work and labour across North America. And finally, as always, thanks to the other members of the podcast team Bailey Garden and Patricia Wejr. I'm Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time On the Line.

Theme music: Hold the Fort [00:29:00]