

## Ep 22 - Darshan Singh Sangha: A Human Spirit that Transcended Boundaries

Transcription by Patricia Wejr

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:00:19] Welcome to another episode of On the Line, the popular podcast that brings to light stories from British Columbia's rich labour heritage. Today, we chronicle the exploits of someone who made a huge contribution to the early organizing efforts of the International Woodworkers of America and campaigned relentlessly for justice for South Asians like himself during the 1940s. That man is Darshan Singh Sangha. Yet few British Columbians outside the province's large South Asian community know anything about him. It's a captivating story that stretches from the Punjab where he was born, to Canada and then back to India.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:01:09] Darshan Singh Sangha came to B.C. as a student in 1937, the month he turned 19, leaving behind the hunger and poverty of his family's small farm in the Punjab. Like so many other Sikh immigrants, he first found work in the lumber industry at a sawmill in Victoria owned by well-known entrepreneur Kapoor Singh, after his uncle put in a good word for him. Once the young Darshan was taken on, however, his uncle was fired. For Darshan, it was an early indication of the ruthlessness of mill owners at the time. As he put it later, for Kapoor Singh, my uncle was an old horse. He was 60 and he got a new 20 year old horse in his place.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:01:56] After earning enough money for his tuition, Darshan enrolled at the University of B.C.. There he met a number of progressive minded students who ignited his passion for social justice. He joined the Young Communist League and became active at Vancouver's historic gurdwara on Second Avenue, speaking out in favour of independence for India. But this was Canada in the late 1930s. When immigration authorities got wind of his views, they refused to extend his work permit, something he desperately needed to pay for his studies. This forced him to search for work in Alberta. Under an assumed name, he was able to find a job at a grim sawmill, 300 miles north of Edmonton, working nights on the green chain, a place he subsequently referred to as the hell of Canada. After a few months, he moved on to sawmills in northern B.C. While up north, he learned of a Vancouver lawyer's efforts to help illegal Sikh immigrants stay in Canada. So he returned to the city to help raise funds for their legal cases. And in 1939, more than 300 South Asians, including Darshan, won the right to permanent Canadian residency. He was also becoming more active in the Communist Party. At the same time, his own experiences had convinced him something had to be done to improve working conditions and end racist pay scales in the mills that saw South Asian, Chinese and Japanese mill workers paid less than white workers. As he took on these issues, he became an exceptionally good speaker, able to communicate clearly what he wanted to say. So it was no surprise he caught the attention of leaders of the IWA. Clear audiotape of Darshan Singh Sangha is not readily available, but passages of recorded interviews he did, have been read for us by Harinder Mahil. Here he talks about meeting with regional IWA leader Nigel Morgan, who wanted to recruit him as an IWA organizer.

**Harinder Mahil** [00:04:11] Nigel Morgan met me and he made a proposition. He said here is a vast industry -- unorganized: Indians, Chinese, Japanese and the white workers working in terrible conditions, being kept divided by the bosses. I agreed with him that I'll be ready to work with them for the IWA. That's the time from which my baptism took place. So when I entered the industry, I found generally that most of the white workers were being paid 40 cents an hour. Most of the Indian and Chinese were getting much less for the same work. And this was my experience when I found an Indian working for 25 cents

an hour or 30 cents an hour, while other workers getting the full 40 cents. Invariably, East Indians were the first to be fired and the last to be hired. So furthermore, I found that only rarely was there an East Indian who would get any skilled job. They would mostly get jobs in the yards, jobs loading boxcars and jobs on the green chain, the toughest jobs there. Now, this had to do with the general situation as it prevailed in the British Columbia community. Racial discrimination was stark. In the first phase, they were terribly afraid. Many, many people would come over to me. They would say, 'you're wasting your time', that this way you will become a marked man, that the bosses will get me out of the industry, that I'll ruin my chances of having any secure life.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:05:47] But Darshan was not deterred. He made it his mission to educate workers about the benefits of joining the union and the need to fight racial discrimination. It was not easy. He had many setbacks at the beginning. But over time, his fiery pamphlets and eloquence and ability to speak to South Asian workers in their own language gradually took hold. [Music interlude]

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:06:29] A vivid illustration of how things were changing took place in 1945, when Darshan went to the Vancouver Island sawmill of Youbou for a bunkhouse meeting, with its predominantly Sikh workforce. The mill superintendent came in, took Darshan to his office and ordered him to leave. But when the superintendent came outside, he found 80 mill workers standing there in the rain. In no uncertain terms, they told him that if Darshan left, they would leave too. The superintendent gave in. The bunkhouse meeting resumed and the mill was soon unionized. As news of the event spread, organizing took off among South Asian woodworkers at other mills. The IWA recognized Darshan's abilities by electing him as a trustee of the union's powerful District Council, the first person of colour to hold such a post. In addition to his union activities, Darshan campaigned passionately for the right to vote, then denied to all ethnic Asian residents of Canada. The IWA strongly supported their demand. In 1943, union President Harold Pritchett had accompanied a delegation of locals Sikhs, including Darshan, to press the government in Victoria for the right to vote. The saga of Darshan Singh Sangha is relatively familiar to members of today's South Asian community. In a recent interview for the Union Zindabad Labour History Project, B.C. Labour Minister Harry Bains, a former elected officer of the IWA, talked about his organizing feats. He refers to him as Darshan Singh Canadian because that is how he was known to millions of people in India, for reasons that will be explained later in the podcast.

**Harry Bains** [00:08:24] And our workers knew that they needed somebody to be on their side. And because they didn't have the right to vote and they had no rights as equal to other workers. Many of them were paid less wages than their white counterparts, and it was based on race, some of the rates, other than based on what occupation you are doing, what job you are doing. And so they knew that there's discriminatory practices by the employer. They knew that they were not treated with respect and dignity. They knew that they needed some organization. They need to be united in order to exert their rights. And I think IWA did a real good job. I think, through the work of Darshan Singh Canadian and others to bring that awareness. And I'm advised that the South Asian workers were almost the first ones to say yes to the union in those days. Although the employer hired them and kept them behind their gates, hoping that they would not have access to the union. I know one of the sawmills here in New Westminster, they had their own gurdwara because there were about 500 workers, but they were all given quarters in the sawmill, built by the employer and hoping that they would not have access to the union or exposure to the union. But lo and behold, to their surprise, they were the first ones to sign for the union. And I think probably many thanks to Darshan Singh Canadian and those who

brought that awareness, who could go in there, sit with them in their lunchrooms and talk to them about the benefit of the union. Because they knew what the issues were, but they didn't know how to deal with them. And Darshan Singh Canadian and other union leaders of the day were able to show that when we are united, we can deal with those issues. And they saw the result of that because they would not only help them in their workplaces, but they also became their champion for them to go and lobby on behalf of the community, to get them the right, the right to vote.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:10:31] After bringing them into the tent, Darshan's next big challenge was to help galvanize them for the decisive IWA strike of 1946. As they headed into negotiations that year, the IWA was not only a strong union with close to 20,000 members, it was one that had embraced workers of all races. That was then a rarity among B.C. unions. The IWA's far-reaching leaders had not only hired Darshan Singh Sangah, but Roy Mah to organize Chinese-Canadian workers and Joe Miyazawa to bring Japanese-Canadians into the forest union. All three had been successful. No longer could employers play the race card to divide their workforce. In an interview many years later, Roy Mah said Darshan made the greatest contribution of all. 'I was only an organizer', said Mah, 'but Darshan was for many years a trustee in the District Council and part of the upper layers of the leadership'. [music interlude]

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:12:11] The union's demands were ambitious: a wage increase of 25 cents an hour, a 40-hour week, and union security. When the forest companies offered a measly increase of 12 and a half cents an hour, the IWA wasted little time launching the largest strike the province had ever seen. On May 16th, the forest industry was shut tight from the coast through the interior and up to Prince George, as well as logging and sawmills on Vancouver Island. Even non-union forest workers joined in the strike. The next evening, Darshan Singh Sangah was among a number of speakers at a large public rally in Victoria's Beacon Hill Park. The Victoria Times colonist quoted part of his eloquent speech.

**Harinder Mahil** [00:13:01] I'm here as a partisan. I am of the union and for the union. It's been part of my life for quite a while. I'm here to excite you. I ask you to join me to seek the truth. The 37,000 woodworkers in this province knew there would be no paycheques next week. Knew there would be less food on the table, no clothes for a while, and less milk for the kids. These are the facts we knew before we went on strike.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:13:29] Darshan went on to point out that trade unionists had made sacrifices during the war when wages were pegged while prices rose and after the war too, because income taxes were unchanged, while taxes on excess profits were cut.

**Harinder Mahil** [00:13:45] We're not trying to destroy the profit system, but people must come before profits. Any system that does not recognize this will fail.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:13:54] Darshan also appealed to other industrial workers, as well as white collar workers, to support the woodworkers strike.

**Harinder Mahil** [00:14:02] If we suffer, you will suffer. In our victory lies your victory.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:14:07] Three weeks into the strike, an arbitrator recommended a wage increase of 15 cents an hour, a small reduction in the workweek and some improvement in union security. The union rejected the proposals, underscoring its intention to continue the fight by organizing a mass march on the B.C. legislature. Led by members

of the union's Women's Auxiliary, 3000 strikers and their supporters converged on the Leg. There had never been anything like it. CBC reporter Jim Nesbitt got caught up in the flavour of the protest and filed this colourful, sympathetic report over the radio.

**Jim Nesbitt** [00:14:49] This is Jim Nesbitt from Victoria. I have just come from the legislative buildings where I saw thousands of striking B.C. woodworkers lined three-deep. They had come to petition the government to do something to end the strike, which has kept 37,000 persons idle more than four weeks. The loggers, many with their wives, some with their children, waited patiently, quietly on the rain-soaked streets beside the Queen Victoria Memorial and the bubbling fountain, while their leaders conferred with the cabinet inside the massive granite seat of government. From all parts of Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland came these men and women. From the deep woods where the tall timbers point to the sky; from the docks where BC's rich wood is loaded for all the world, where housing is now so sorely needed; from the roaring sawmills with their deafening noise now still; from the picketed lumber yards. These men want 25 cents an hour more, a 40-hour week, full union security. As they marched, they chanted 25 40, union security. In the crowd were high riggers, the aristocrats of the trade, the men who climb hundreds of feet to top the forest giants to make of them the all-important spar trees. There are bullcooks and whistlepunks, fallers and buckers, donkey men, edgermen, sawyers and boys who pile the lumber. Mostly they were young and well-muscled. They were all there. The workaday representative of BC's richest industry locked in deadly paralysis now since May 15th, a paralysis that has been slowly and surely stifling B.C. and spreading even farther afield. The men and women -- the women in slacks and bandanas -- carried placards. Hundreds of placards, which said 'away with Drew's Gestapo'. 'No profits from blood'. 'Franco hates labour, too'. '40 hour week for happier home life'. 'We want the check off, not the brush off'. 'What did the Atlantic Charter promise labour' and 'veterans fight again'. The marchers were orderly, but they cheered loudly and chanted in unison. They stayed on the sidelines, away from the traffic. There were plenty of police about, but they had nothing to do. Victoria is quietly tense. This staid capital is not used to playing host to groups of loggers. That honour usually goes to big Vancouver, which is town to all B.C. woodsmen. It is to Vancouver they go on their semi-annual sprees at Christmas and in summer when the woods are too dry to work. They came to Victoria today not on a spree, but on deadly serious business, the business of their living. [music interlude]

**Music: IWA Marching Song** [00:17:35] Coos Bay to North Bay, Laurel to Lants. Kamloops to Tahsis to Trail. The woodworkers union, our strongest response, we'll fight 'til we prevail. Logging plants and plywood mills, fir and southern pine. Democracy, autonomy, the union yours and mine. Bosses fear the rank and file will join for victory. The International Woodworkers will fight for you and me.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:18:14] The show of support and their strong voices failed to soften the government's attitude, and the strike soon came to an unexpected close. The federal government, not the province, ordered an end to the strike. Why? Because Okanagan fruit growers warned their crops would rot if their supply of wooden crates continued to be cut off by the union shutdown. And the feds didn't just order the strikers back to work, they ordered them back at their old wage rates. Worried what might happen next, the union called off the strike and reluctantly accepted the arbitration deal they had earlier turned down. Although they had wanted more, the IWA did win some clear gains and their 37 day strike solidified their position as the strongest union in BC. [music interlude]

**Music: There is Power in a Union** [00:19:19] There's power in a factory, power in the land, power in the hand of the worker. But it all amounts to nothing if together we don't stand. There is power in a union...

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:20:16] As for Darshan Singh Sangha, he was by now a notable figure, crusader against racial discrimination, outspoken supporter of Indian independence, prominent in the IWA and constantly in demand as a speaker. Despite all his accomplishments during his decade in BC, however, his heart remained with the masses in India. He wanted to play a role in the country's future after it won independence in 1947. He resigned from the District Council of the IWA and headed back to India. In his heartfelt resignation letter, he wrote:

**Harinder Mahil** [00:21:41] I am fully convinced that you brothers of the Canadian labour movement will leave no stone unturned in aiding the colonial liberation movement of my people and other nations. The Canadian workers would never be able to establish full freedom or social security so long as nearly half of the world in the colonies remain directly or indirectly enslaved by monopoly capitalism.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:22:06] On his return, he threw himself into Indian politics. Not long afterwards, he was Punjabi's Secretary of the Communist Party and became known as Darshan Singh Canadian, to reflect his time in Canada. Three times he was elected to the Punjab state legislature, attracting attention for his strong denunciation of Khalistani separatists. In 1986, a year after the terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182, he was assassinated by suspected Khalistan supporters near his ancestral Punjabi village. There was an outpouring of rage against the murder. Protesters took to the streets, chanting slogans such as 'Long live Darshan Singh Canadian' and 'Canadian was a martyr to peace and unity'. Outside the village school where his body lay, 20,000 supporters gathered to pay their respects. Nor was he forgotten in British Columbia. A month later, a memorial was held at the IWA Hall on Commercial Drive in Vancouver, attended by hundreds of former friends and colleagues. IWA legislative director Clay Perry, who had interviewed Darshan in 1979, told the gathering:

**Clay Perry** [00:23:26] He told me with a kind of graceful humour that he was known in Canada as a Punjabi and known in the Punjab as a Canadian, indeed, as the Canadian. We should do what we can now to correct that curious division and call him forever Canadian here. He fought for and was an exemplar of a human spirit that far transcends those boundaries.

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:24:01] Darshan Singh Sangha and his critical role in the IWA and unstinting drive for an end to anti-Asian discrimination is now recognised by the BC Labour Heritage Centre with a special plaque. It has pride of place at the Kaatza Station Museum in Lake Cowichan, unveiled jointly by the museum, the Hari Sharma Foundation and the BC Labour Heritage Centre. [music interlude]

**Rod Mickleburgh** [00:25:00] And that's it for this edition of On the Line. We hope you now have a better picture of one of the most charismatic figures from BC's labour past. Thanks to the other members of the podcast collective Patricia Wejr and Donna Sacuta for their research and help putting this tribute together. John Mabbott produced it. Harinder Mahil read the words of Darshan Singh Sangha. The recording of the Vancouver tribute to him was made by Sukhwant Hundal. The IWA Marching Song is performed by Joe Glazer and of course that's Billy Bragg singing about the power of a union. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time. On the Line.

