

On to Ottawa Trek



BC LABOUR
HERITAGE
CENTRE

On to Ottawa Trek

by the On to Ottawa Historical Society

2002

Introduction

In the severe economic depression of 1929-39 Canadian labour engaged in many fierce battles. One of the highlights was the general strike of young unemployed single men in work camps in the province of British Columbia on Canada's west coast in April, 1935 where they laboured six and a half days a week for the paltry wage of 20 cents a day. The strikers abandoned the camps and congregated in the city of Vancouver. After two months of valiant but unsuccessful struggle for union wages, they decided to take their case direct to Ottawa, the nation's capital, three thousand miles to the east. Their journey was enshrined in history as the **On To Ottawa Trek**.

They left Vancouver on June 3. "Riding the rod" (on and in railway freight cars) across mountains and prairie they reached Regina, still only half way to Ottawa. Here they were stopped by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) on orders from Ottawa and a month later the strike was brutally smashed on July 1 in a police-inspired riot and its leaders arrested.

Their epic strike and trip captured the hearts and minds of Canadians.

While the strike was suppressed, it wasn't lost. In the federal election a few months later, the hated repressive Conservative government of Prime Minister R.B. "Iron Heel" Bennett went down to resounding defeat. The new Liberal government felt compelled to abolish the camps.

The Hungry 30's

Summary

The isolation and dehumanizing conditions of the camps created an ideal situation for organizing; workers were desperate, and they had the time and contact to figure out how to take action. Relief camp workers in B.C. formed the Relief Camp Worker's Union (RCWU) under the direction of Arthur Evans, a skilled carpenter, miner and communist labour organizer.

The RCWU demand for "work and wages" spread quickly through the camps. Through 1934, the RCWU grew into a strong, disciplined, democratic organization, focusing the hopes and energy of unemployed.

The inmates called them "slave camps". In these camps men were issued war surplus clothing, given a bunk in a tar-paper shack, fed army rations and forced to work 6 1/2 days a week for 20 cents a day.

Economic Background

From 1929-39 Canada suffered the longest and deepest economic depression in its history. The economic crisis was ushered in by the Wall Street stock market crash of Oct.24 1929. Hundreds of companies - large and small - went bankrupt and closed their doors. Thousands of people who speculated in the stock market, or invested their savings in stocks and bonds, were ruined overnight. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their jobs. Panic gripped the land.

Canadian Pacific Railway stocks, for example, which stood at \$64.75 in 1929, dived to \$8.50 in 1931. International Nickel plummeted from \$72.50 to \$4.50 in the same period.

Production also declined drastically.

By 1929 the gross value of all goods and services produced in Canada had risen to \$6.3 billion. By 1933 it had been cut by almost half to \$3.3 billion.

The gross value of manufacturing was \$4,100 million in 1929; by 1933 it had decreased to \$2,000 million.

Agricultural production dropped from \$1,900 million in 1928 to \$819 million in 1932.

Construction fared worst of all, sliding from \$594 million in 1929 to \$97 million in 1933.

In all cases these pre-war levels were not exceeded until well into the war years of 1939-45. It took another world war to end the economic depression.

Official figures placed unemployment at 26.5 percent. Labour economists placed it at 40 percent.

Once busy industrial sites were as quiet as graveyards.

For those still working wage cuts of 10 and 15 percent a year were common. Coal mines worked one day a week.

At first there was no welfare for those who lost their jobs, but when the unemployed began to organize and demonstrate they won a small measure of welfare or "relief" as it was called in those days.

People who had mortgages and no jobs simply lost their homes.

Farmers were equally hard hit. Wheat was selling at 25 cents a bushel. Farmers had their farms and goods seized and sold at auctions. In September, 1937, over 90 percent of the people of the province of Saskatchewan were on relief.

Medical services for the poor were almost non-existent.

It was a soul searing, never to be forgotten experience for most Canadians. Words cannot describe the humiliation of asking for welfare; the feeling of hopelessness and rejection by continuous

"no help wanted" signs; the heartache of being unable to properly feed and clothe the family and the consequent sense of failure as a human being; the bitterness of seeing some enjoy steady work, good food and clothes and good times while all this was denied to so many without jobs.



Among those hardest hit were the youth.

Many unemployed young men were sent to work on farms for \$5.00 a month.

Not wishing to be a burden on their parents, who often were also unemployed, thousands of young men left home and travelled by freight train from coast to coast in a vain search for work. But there were no jobs. The future seemed hopeless.

The Camps

In 1931 the B.C. government established "relief camps" for single unemployed. In these work camps, usually located in the wilderness far away from settled areas, young men were employed building roads, airports, military bases and parks. At first the pay was \$2.00 a day.

Next the camps in B.C. were operated jointly by the federal and provincial government and wages reduced to \$7.50 a month.

In 1933 the Department of National Defence took over the camps and reduced the pay to 20 cents a day plus meals, a bed and some work clothes. The men worked eight hours a day, with a 44 hour week.

The real purpose of the camps was to hide the men in outlying areas, far away from cities where they tended to organize and make "trouble" for the authorities

Conditions in the camps were deplorable. The food was often poor. Recreation facilities were lacking. Tents and bunkhouses were often without stoves. Second blankets were rare, It was a case of work, eat and sleep, What the young men suffered most from was isolation from society.

"The biggest quarrel was working for 20 cents a day, eight hours a day with nothing ahead of us but a blank wall, day in and day out," Matt Shaw, camp inmate and union leader, later testified.

It wasn't long before protest strikes began to develop. Demands were made for better food, fresh meat, new potatoes and one package of tobacco every three days.

Organize! The Relief Camp Workers Union

Summary

The isolation and dehumanizing conditions of the camps created an ideal situation for organizing; workers were desperate, and they had the time and contact to figure out how to take action. Relief camp workers in B.C. formed the Relief Camp Worker's Union (RCWU) under the direction of Arthur Evans, a skilled carpenter, miner and communist labour organizer.

The RCWU demand for "work and wages" spread quickly through the camps. Through 1934, the RCWU grew into a strong, disciplined, democratic organization, focusing the hopes and energy of unemployed.

The Relief Camp Workers' Union

The men asked for help from the labour movement and the Workers Unity League (WUL), a left wing trade union centre led by Communists, came to the rescue. It helped the relief camp workers organize a conference in Kamloops, B.C. in July, 1933, where the Relief Camp Workers Union (RCWU) was launched.



Its aims included:

- Win union wages
- Organize all relief camp workers into a "militant union" and to lead struggles for higher living standards, relying on the strike weapon to achieve its aims.
- Campaign for social insurance programs such as compensation for sickness and disability and non contributory unemployment insurance Support "International proletarian solidarity" against "capitalist exploitation."
- Gain recognition of the union and its committees by the authorities and the right to hold meetings in the camps.

It came out strongly against military control of the work camps.

All of these demands were consistently turned down by the Department of National Defence. The union was banned in the camps and any man found carrying a union card or



union literature was immediately fired and blacklisted. Many were jailed.

Strike!

Summary

In the spring of 1935 the Relief Camp Workers' Union went on strike. Filling the streets of Vancouver, shouting "Work and wages!" and "When do we eat?", they demanded real work and pay, better food, clothing and shelter, and an end to military discipline. They were also trying to negotiate an unemployment insurance scheme, and observance of worker's compensation laws.

They demonstrated, paraded, held picnics and public meetings, and raised money with "Tag Days". Occupying the Carnegie Museum for one day, they negotiated a few day's relief, which ended the occupation. Public support was overwhelming for "our boys"



"When do we eat?"

In December, 1934 the union called a general strike. Between 1200 and 1500 men took part.

A delegation led by Matt Shaw was sent to Victoria, the seat of the provincial government, to enlist its support.

The union's demands included:

- Work with wages of 40 cents an hour, a seven hour day and a five day week.
- The work camps to be taken out of the control of the Department on National Defence.
- Compensation for injuries sustained on the job.
- The right to vote in provincial and federal elections.

The reply of the provincial government was that it could do nothing; the federal government was responsible.

The Department of National Defence retaliated by evicting over 1,000 men from the camps. The evicted men made their way to Vancouver, joining other camp workers who had previously been blacklisted.

Here they engaged in demonstrations and parades and other actions to win public support and bring pressure on both levels of government.

After negotiations and a promise from the provincial government that it would pressure Ottawa to give the blacklisted men meals



and shelter, and that it would ask Ottawa to investigate their conditions, the RCWU decided to call off the strike at the end of December. The December strike was a dress rehearsal for a bigger strike yet to come. The strike showed that neither the union nor the men were yet ready to successfully carry through a general strike. They went back to the camps to strengthen their ranks for the next struggle.

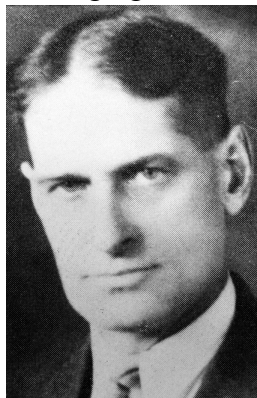
The April 1935 General Strike

In April, 1935, after much careful planning, preparation and organizing, the union called another general strike. Their central demand was work with wages. They were determined never to go back to the 20 cents a day "slave camps."

This time they decided to leave the camps and congregate in Vancouver. Some 1800 to 2000 joined the exodus. Here for two months they carried on a struggle that became a model of discipline and tactical brilliance.

Arthur Evans

Evans, born in Toronto in 1890, already had a long record of labour and strike activity in the U.S. as well as Canada, which included the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the U.S., and in Canada the One Big Union (OBU), the United Mine Workers of America, the Workers Unity League and the Mine Workers Union of Canada.



He was totally dedicated to the welfare of working people and completely fearless. He had become immensely popular in the labour movement and highly respected as an excellent organizer, a rousing public speaker, a brilliant tactician, He was a Communist and proud of it. Evans had all the qualities required to lead the relief camp struggles and the workers loved and respected him.

As the District Organizer of the Workers Unity League, Evans had one seat of the executive of the RCWU and became actively involved in the April general strike right from the beginning.

A Model of Discipline and Tactical Brilliance

The union's leaders included Earnest (Smokey) Cumber, Matt Shaw, Malcolm MacLeod, Ronald Liversedge, James "Red" Walsh, Perry Hilton, Lionel Edwards, Steve Brody, Bob "Doc" Savage, Mike McCauley, Bill Davis, Gerry Winters, Jack Cosgrove and Steward "Paddy" O'Neil.

The union established an 80 member Central Strike Committee that met every morning at 9.00 a.m. Sub committees were set up to deal with their many needs, such as publicity, membership, and of course finances to provide food. A key sub-committee was the Strategy Committee composed of Evans, Walsh, Savage, McCauley, O'Neil, Winters, Cosgrove and Davis.

The strikers divided their ranks into four divisions, each of about 400 men. Each division had a captain and was assigned a hall in which his division could bed down for the night. The divisions held meetings every day. The divisions in turn were divided into groups of twelve, each with a leader. Among other things this was a method of exposing and expelling undercover agents sent in by the police to disrupt the strike.

Their activities were many and varied:

A delegation sent to the mayor succeeded in winning an \$1800 grant for meals.

A conference to support the strike was held on April 7 with delegates from 42 organizations that included trade unions, ethnic organizations, women's groups, the Communist Party and the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), Canada's social democratic party.

A meeting at Cambie Street grounds on April 8 drew thousands of people.

A street corner collection on April 13 described as "the greatest tag day in the history of Vancouver" netted \$5,000 from supportive citizens. Police arrested some taggers but they were

replaced as fast as arrested. Not without a sense of humour, Evans asked for and received police escort to take the collection to the bank.

On April 14, another meeting at Cambie Street Grounds attracted 3,000.

A demonstration by strikers held in the Hudson's Bay store on April 23, was attacked by police, resulting in nine arrests.

Following this attack, the men assembled in nearby Victory Square where Mayor Gerry McGeer read the "Riot Act" which required immediate dispersal. The men marched off in orderly fashion. A delegation sent to interview the mayor was also arrested.

That evening the police raided the headquarters of the union and seized banners, placards and papers.

On April 28 a huge meeting at the Arena in support of the strikers drew a record-breaking audience of over 16,000 people.

On April 29 the Longshoremen and Street Railwaymen staged one and two hour strikes in support of the relief camp workers.

The May Day (May First) parade that year attracted over 35,000 people including 3,000 students who left school to show their support for the cause of labour and the relief camp strikers.

Indicative of police mentality at the time was a report by Colonel Foster, Chief of Police, to mayor McGeer stating that the parade consisted of " ...notorious criminals, foreigners of a low type, communistic organizations intent upon destruction.." A straw poll of citizens early in May by the strikers posing the question "Do you wish to abolish the relief camps and are you in favour of granting immediate relief to the strikers?" resulted in 26,972 voting yes to both questions, 512 voted for the abolition of relief camps but no for immediate relief, and there was 162 spoiled ballots.

On May 12 a Mother's Day parade to Stanley Park drew thousands. "Bring a hamper and adopt a boy for a day or two" was the slogan. The mothers responded generously to the appeal.

There were between 7,000-8,000 people attended a meeting on Cambia Street Grounds on May 16.

On May 18, in a dramatic move that caught the authorities completely by surprise, 250 strikers occupied the City Public Library and Museum at the corner of Main and Hastings (now known as the Carnegie Centre) for eight hours. Special care was taken that nothing would be damaged. By this time the strikers had exhausted all their funds and were without food. They left when the police and mayor gave an undertaking that the strikers would be given food for the weekend. In the meantime thousands of people gathered around the museum and library to bring food and demonstrate their support.

On May 25 the strikers sent another delegation to the mayor seeking immediate relief. The mayor said he would grant relief to the men at the rate of \$1.05 a day if they gave an undertaking to go back to the camps and send a delegation to Ottawa. The strike delegation agreed to put these proposals to the strikers if relief was granted at once. The mayor agreed. Two days later, on May 27, a delegation of strikers again met McGeer and informed him that a mass meeting of strikers had unanimously rejected his proposals. A furious mayor threatened they would get their heads knocked off and land in jail.

It was in Vancouver that the strikers developed their famous snake parade where they marched and weaved from one side of the street to the other like the fabled Chinese dragon.

On to Ottawa!

Summary

The federal government refused to negotiate with the strikers, despite the strong public support. At a huge organizing meeting, strikers voted to take their grievances to Parliament Hill.

On June 3, 1935 the first group climbed on board the boxcars and left Vancouver. Others joined the trek in Kamloops, Field, Golden, Calgary and Moose Jaw.

The trekkers were met at each stop with offers of food and shelter from women's groups, service clubs, labour councils, churches, unions and caring citizens.

More than 2,000 unemployed workers had massed in Regina by mid-June. Thousands more in Winnipeg, Thunder Bay and Toronto were waiting to join.

The Trek begins

By the end of May the strikers had reached a dead end. Their resources had run out. They knew they could not continue in the same way much longer.

All their efforts aimed at compelling Ottawa to negotiate their demands had failed. City and provincial authorities refused to finance a delegation to Ottawa to see Prime Minister R.B. Bennett. Although they had received tremendous support, both financial and moral, from trade unions and the public, they knew this could not continue indefinitely.

A ballot on "Do you wish to continue the strike?" resulted in 623 voting to continue, 272 for ending it, with 16 spoiled ballots.

Then out of necessity arose a brilliant new tactic. The proposal was that all the strikers go to Ottawa in an organized body via freight trains and place their case directly before the prime minister.

"I put the idea before a full meeting of the strikers," said Arthur Evans. "The response was very enthusiastic. If applause could do it, they would have taken the roof off the building."

Arthur Evans was the unanimous choice for Trek leader. George Black was his second in command, and Jack Cosgrove was appointed Trek marshall.

The plan was to stop off at various cities on the way to Ottawa for much needed rest, for meals and to win support for their cause.

In the discussion that followed it was made clear that self discipline would be the key to gaining public support along the way. They decided to leave on June 3. An "On To Ottawa" steering committee was elected with Art Evans as the leader. The Vancouver media was notified and wires sent to the labour press throughout Canada.

It was decided that twenty would be sent ahead as advance parties to organize welcomes in the cities they would visit. Evans agreed to go to Kamloops and Golden, their first scheduled stops, to organize receptions for the Trekkers.

An unauthorized tag day was held on June 2 to which citizens contributed \$1500. Twenty of the taggers were arrested. A picnic was held the following day. Evens drafted a leaflet, 30,000 copies of which were distributed. It appealed for support and asked citizens to gather at the rail yards on the evening of June 3 to give the Trekkers a send-off "in their determined fight for the right to live as human beings."

The response on the evening of June 3 was a large crowd of over 2,000 well-wishers.

Singing labour songs the Trekkers climbed up the iron ladders of the box cars and seated themselves as best could on the tops of box cars for the long overnight cold ride to Kamloops. A second group was scheduled to leave the following morning. In all over 1600 Trekkers were on their way to Ottawa.

Their favourite song while on strike in Vancouver and as they left this evening was the old labour battle song "[Hold the Fort](#)", which they were to make famous at all their subsequent stops:

*Hold the fort for we are coming
Union men be strong!
Side by side we'll battle onward
Victory will come!*

The Trek was on!

Hold the Fort

The Trekkers arrived at Kamloops, B.C. the next day stiff, sore, tired and hungry. In two groups they marched in orderly fashion to camp quarters that had been arranged for them in Riverside Park. When they found the preparations were inadequate, they quickly took matters into their own hands, canvassed citizens and businesses, and soon there was enough food for all.

In defiance of a ban by local authorities they held a Tag Day. They stayed for two days in Kamloops, while they waited for the second contingent of strikers from Vancouver to catch up.

Between Kamloops and Golden, the boys on the boxcars had to endure the trip through the Connaught tunnel under the Rogers Pass; more than five long underground miles, it was a slow, suffocating trip with the men breathing in dirty, brown, acrid, sulphurous fumes, covering their mouths and noses with handkerchiefs and rags.

In Golden, Evans arranged a happy reception for them when they arrived on June 6. Lodging was at the Auto Park. A local committee had been set up to collect food and a public meeting arranged for the evening which was addressed by Evans.

"We went among the farmers," Evans said, "and collected foodstuffs and butter and eggs. I wired to Calgary for 800 loaves of bread. We got four cords of wood, borrowed every wash tub in town, prepared everything and then cooked a big stew that night

sufficient for the body of Trekkers, with enough left over for the next day."

Two Trekkers who had been drunk that day were expelled from their ranks. One turned out to be an agent of the police.

Evans was called back to Vancouver by the Workers Unity League and Black was elected to temporarily take his place as Trek leader.

The trip from Golden to Calgary once more included going through the two spiral railroad tunnels that went through the heart of Cathedral Mountain in the Kicking Horse Pass. When they emerged, many of the trekkers were feeling sick, but all were happy that they had made it.

Calgary

Their next stop was on June 7 in the city of Calgary, Alberta. Calgary was a city in which the labour movement was strong and support for the Trekkers was equally strong.

The Calgary City Council agreed that the Trekkers could be housed at the Exhibition Grounds. But the Trekkers needed more than a place to sleep, They were without funds and food. They decided more militant action was needed.

When A.A. Mackenzie, chairman of the Alberta Relief Commission refused to grant them meal tickets, they picketed and



surrounded his office and let him know that he would not be able to leave until relief was provided. After an exchange of telegrams with the provincial government and Ottawa, the chairman finally capitulated and agreed to supply meals tickets for the weekend. The "seige", which the press described as hostage-taking, had lasted for 3 1/2 hours.

The mayor refused to grant the Trekkers permission to hold a Tag Day but they held one without permission and without police interference and raised \$1300. Many donations of food and clothing also came from citizens.

Cheered by their successes and by additions to their numbers by relief camp workers from Edmonton, the Trekkers happily left Calgary after a three day stay for their next stop. They carried with them a batch of 2400 sandwiches donated by Calgary wellwishers.

Swift Current, Medicine Hat, and Regina

In Swift Current they just stopped for a meal donated by the city.

The next halt was at Medicine Hat, Alberta, where the Trekkers made a 24 hour stop, staying at Athletic Park. Cooking facilities and food were provided for them by city authorities.

Here Evans joined them once more. He had come all the way from Vancouver by freight train.

A Trek leader, Steve Brodie, gave this account of Evans' arrival:

"I was tending night fires with a group and smoking and drinking coffee. Out of the shadows at the entrance came a man. Somebody looked up and said, "Well, here's Arthur."

"He had pulled on a pair of overalls over his suit. His face was black with soot and his eyes were red from cinders and tiredness. He looked at me and said, "Steve, for god's sake, give me a cup of coffee, please." Then he told me the story.

"He always took precautions because his life was under surveillance by the police at all times. He had someone drive him to a small station near Vancouver where he got on the train. Even then he had to be careful he would not be trapped. He hadn't gone very far when he saw in the same coach two men, obviously policemen. He knew his chances of getting through to join the Trek at Medicine Hat were absolutely nil. He knew there was going to be an arrest.

"When they made the next stop he casually walked out of the railway car and went into the restaurant which every station had in those days of the steam engine. He stopped at the counter long enough to order a sandwich and a cup of coffee, knowing that he was being observed from the train coach. Then he went through a side door, took off uptown, ran ahead of the train, got into the "jungle" area where freight and passenger trains were normally boarded by rodriders, and jumped on the tender of his own train.

"His manoeuvre was successful. He rode the tender all the way. It was two o'clock in the morning when the train arrived in Medicine Hat."

On June 13 the Trekkers arrived in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, where they were greeted by a large body of citizens, and provided with meals in restaurants by the authorities. They stayed over and held a public meeting that evening addressed by Evans and other Trek leaders as well as local citizens.

Their next (and last stop as it turned out) was at Regina, Saskatchewan, the capital city of the province, where they arrived on June 14. Here they were joined by 500 more men from the Dundurn relief camp.

"Halt the trek"

Prime Minister Bennett ordered the police to halt the Trek at Regina. This was done over the protests of provincial premier James Gardiner who legally was in charge of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in the province.

The police were ordered to prepare to use revolvers, gas grenades, spare batons and handcuffs. Railway police were ordered to cooperate with the RCMP. Orders were given to bar all exits in and out of Regina. Hundreds of RCMP from other provinces were shifted to Regina. The city was placed under police seige.

The Commissioner of the RCMP in Saskatchewan later boasted to a Royal Commission investigating the Regina events that he had "considerable experience with demonstrations and strikes and the use of force against rioters."

Hugh Guthrie, the federal minister of Justice, charged in the House of Commons in Ottawa that the Trekkers "were a distinct menace to the peace, order and good government of Canada."

Evans and a delegation of strikers meanwhile met several times with Premier Gardiner, whose main concern was to get the Trekkers out of his province before any serious trouble developed.

The public was solidly on the side of the Trekkers. Over 6,000 citizens in this small city gave the Trekkers an enthusiastic welcome at a public meeting on June 14. The speakers included the national secretary of the CCF, church and trade union leaders and Evans. The meeting by resolution demanded that "the marchers be allowed to proceed on their way to their goal."

A Tag Day for the Trekkers raised \$1,446.

The Trekkers Strike Committee decided that they would defy the ban and continue on to Ottawa on June 17.

The Strikers' Delegation to Ottawa

Summary

By the time the trekkers reached Regina, Bennett decided it was time to put an end to this "insurrection". The CPR was ordered to ban the trekkers as "trespassers". The federal cabinet directed the RCMP to bolster troops in Regina to disperse the trekkers.

Meanwhile, the trekkers met with government ministers in Regina, who proposed that a small delegation continue to Ottawa. A public meeting of the trekkers voted to send eight members to Ottawa, including Arthur Evans.

This delegation met with Bennett on June 22. Bennett called the strike a revolution, whose purpose was to destroy law and order.

Evans presented the strikers' demands, but the meeting disintegrated into a heated exchanges with Bennett calling Evans a thief, and Evans calling Bennett a liar. Negotiations ended.



Meeting with Bennett

As a delaying tactic the federal government sent two federal cabinet ministers to Regina to meet with the Trekkers. The cabinet ministers proposed that the Trekkers send a delegation to Ottawa to meet with Prime Minister Bennett. A full meeting of the Trekkers considered the issue, The men were under no illusions; they knew that Ottawa wanted more time to prepare to forcibly crush the Trek.

But they also realized that a refusal to meet with Bennett would be used as a propaganda weapon against them by the prime minister. So 3,000 Trekkers heatedly debated for two hours before they reached unanimous agreement to send a delegation to Ottawa, provided the federal government pay their expenses and provide the Trekkers with three restaurant meals a day and

lodging in the meantime. The Trekkers' decision was presented to the two cabinet ministers at the Hotel Regina with a crowd of thousands of Regina citizens to back them up.

The trekkers delegation of eight under the leadership of Evans included "Doc" Savage, Pete Neilson, "Red" Walsh, Jack Cosgrove, "Paddy" O'Neil, Mike McCaulay and Tony Martin. It met with Bennett on June 22. The meeting was one of the most dramatic in the drama-filled labour struggles of the 1930's.

Bennett, accompanied by some of his cabinet ministers, did most of the talking for the government. The meeting lasted over an hour. The Trekkers were not offered seats, they had to stand the whole time. Bennett wanted to know where they were born, hoping no doubt to find a "foreigner" in their ranks. Evans presented the case for the Trekkers, being constantly interrupted by the prime minister.

The Trekkers noted that behind Bennett and his cabinet was a curtain that did not quite reach to the floor, revealing the boots of an RCMP guard. Apparently the Prime Minister feared trouble, which was the last thing on the minds of the well-disciplined Trekkers.

The reply of Bennett and his ministers to the Trekkers was that there had been absolute contentment and happiness in the camps until "you agitators came in and agitated the people to leave the camps." Asked if his government would recognize camp committees elected by the inmates to take up grievances with the camp authorities, Bennett replied: "You are not going to have any Soviet committees." Continuing he said " You have no anxiety for work, you have not tried to get work."

Now it was Bennett's turn to be interrupted by angry Trekkers. Losing his temper Bennett called Evans, who had served time in prison for leading a strike of coal miners in the Drumheller Valley in Alberta, a "thief". Evans with equal anger retorted

"You're a liar." a comment that made newspaper headlines across Canada.

The meeting ended with no agreements and nothing accomplished. The interview was just one more incident in a steadily mounting confrontation between the strikers and the government.

Trapped in Regina

Returning to Regina the strikers' delegation was met by the entire body of the Trekkers. Evans reported briefly to the men and again that night to a public meeting of 7,000 people.



They came back to find that Prime minister Bennett had broken his solemn agreement that the men would be given three meals a day until the delegation returned. The meals had been cut off before they returned.

The federal government in the meantime had used the absence of the strike leaders to set up a special camp, which the RCMP commissioner termed a "concentration camp," in Dundurn, Saskatchewan, in preparation for the arrest of the Trekkers' leaders and the imprisonment of all the men involved.

The Trekkers were now in a dilemma.

They realized they couldn't get out of Regina by truck or rail. All exits were blocked. A test run by the Trekkers and their supporters using trucks had resulted in the arrest of the occupants and the confiscation of the vehicles.

They had run out of funds for meals. The mood was one of anxiety.

Assistant Commissioner Wood of the RCMP warned the citizens of Regina that anyone assisting the Trekkers in any attempt to leave Regina would be liable to arrest. On June 28 in a press statement he warned that anyone who assisted the strikers with food, shelter or transportation would be charged under an order-in-council just passed by Ottawa under the Relief Act. As it turned out later no such order-in-council had ever been passed!

The Trekkers made clear time and again that under no circumstances would they accede to the demand of the government that they disband and voluntarily agree to go into a concentration camp in nearby Dundurn.

They recognized that they faced an impasse and realized that soon force would be used against them to smash the Trek.

Evidence later made public confirmed that the RCMP had already made extensive plans to arrest the Trek leaders and smash the Trek by force.

In an effort to avoid any trouble the Trekkers now made a major compromise. They agreed to call off their Trek provided the government sent them back to Vancouver in a body and from there to the relief camps from which they had come. The Trekkers also asked assurance that there would be no arrests.

On July 1 Evans and other Trek leaders spent the whole day meeting with the head of the RCMP, a representative of the federal government and the premier of Saskatchewan. The meetings got nowhere. The head of the RCMP told them that if they refused to go to the special camp prepared for them they would have to face the consequences.

The Regina Police Riot

Summary

The strike was in serious trouble. The trekkers could not advance eastward with the CPR ban, and the RCMP would not allow the Trek to disband unless all trekkers agreed to go to the Lumsden,

Saskatchewan, Relief Camp. Arthur Evans and the trekkers strike committee negotiated an agreement with Saskatchewan Premier Jimmy Gardiner for the strikers to return to their homes, or to a relief camp of their own choosing.

Before the plan could be put into effect, the RCMP and Regina city police, under orders from Prime Minister Bennett, attacked a public meeting of about 1,500 Regina citizens and Trekkers. By the end of the evening of July 1, 1935, one person was dead, another would die later of injuries received that evening, several hundred more were injured, and thousands of dollars of property damage left downtown Regina in ruins.

Police Attack, July 1, 1935

The Trekkers and citizen support groups had decided to call a public meeting on the Market Square on the evening of July 1, Dominion Day, to bring the public up to date on what had happened so far. It was attended by about 1,500 people of whom 300 were Trekkers. The main body of the Trekkers had decided to stay in their camp at the Exhibition Grounds that night.

The meeting began at 8.00 p.m. Three large vans were parked on three sides of the square concealing RCMP riot squads. A whistle was blown and out charged RCMP. City police did likewise, having also been concealed in a nearby garage. The police began indiscriminately clubbing everyone within reach.

The attack caught everyone by surprise but then anger took over. People grabbed anything available to fight back - stones, sticks, and anything else lying around.

Then RCMP on horseback also charged into the crowd with their clubs.

Driven from the Square, the battle continued in the surrounding streets for four hours.

Evans and other Trekkers on the speakers' platform were arrested by a body of police in plain clothes.

The police began firing their revolvers above and into groups of people. Tear gas bombs were thrown at any groups that gathered together.

In the course of the battle plate glass windows in stores and offices were smashed. However, with one exception, there was no looting.

Some Trekkers and their citizen supporters covered their faces with wet handkerchiefs to counter the effects of the tear gas. They barricaded streets with cars.

Finally the Trekkers who had attended the meeting made their way individually or in small groups back to the Stadium where they were quartered.

When it was over, 120 Trekkers and citizens had been arrested and one plain clothes policeman killed. Trekker Nick Schaak would later die from the beating he suffered at the hands of the police. Hundreds of local citizens and Trekkers who had been wounded by police gunfire or otherwise injured were taken to hospitals or private homes. Those taken to hospital were also arrested.

Property damage was considerable.

The police claimed 39 injuries in addition to the one in plain clothes who had been killed.

The Stadium was surrounded by constables armed with revolvers and machine guns. Next day a barbed wire stockade was erected around the stadium. The Trekkers in the stadium were denied any food or water

News of the police-inspired riot made the front page in newspapers across Canada.

About midnight one of the Trek leaders telephoned Premier Gardiner who agreed to meet their delegation, led by Mike McCauley, the next morning. The RCMP were livid when they

heard of this. They took the men to the police station for interrogation but finally released them so they could see the premier.

Premier Gardiner sent a wire to Prime Minister Bennett accusing the police of

"precipitating a riot" while he had been negotiating a settlement with the Trekkers. He also told the prime minister the "men should be fed where they are and sent back to camp and homes as they request" and stated his



government was prepared to "undertake this work of disbanding the men." An agreement to this effect was subsequently negotiated.

Prime Minister Bennett was satisfied that he had smashed the Trek and taught the citizens of Regina a lesson. Gardiner was happy that he was getting rid of the strikers from Regina and the province.

The federal minister of justice made the false statement in the House of Commons on July 2 that "shots were fired by the strikers and the fire was replied to with shots from the city police."

During the long course of the trials that followed no evidence was ever produced by the Crown that strikers had ever fired any shots.

Prime Minister Bennett further added to the misrepresentation by stating in the House of Commons the same day that the Trek was "not a mere uprising against law and order but a definite

revolutionary effort on the part of a group of men to usurp authority and destroy government."

Little did they know what the political repercussions of their forcible suppression of a protest movement against the relief camps would be.

Aftermath

Summary

The Trek was disbanded, following the terms of the agreement the strikers negotiated earlier with the province. A federal inquiry found that the tragic events of Dominion Day in 1935 were caused by revolutionaries, not instigated by the RCMP. The people of Canada threw out Bennett's conservatives in that year's general election. The relief camps were shut down, and the seeds were sown for a new welfare system, including unemployment insurance.

Many trekkers, radicalized by the Depression, volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Others stayed in Canada to fight for progressive causes such as union rights, unemployment insurance, social welfare and medicare, until the fight with the fascists in Europe called them to war.

The Return Home

The Trekkers had travelled to Regina on freight trains; they returned home on passenger trains, "riding the cushions" as they called it, with all expenses paid by the government. They left Regina on July 5 in two "B.C. Specials" headed west with over 400 men on each train, One stopped in Calgary and the other in Edmonton to discharge men who had come from these cities. A supply of food was placed on both trains. Another 200 Trekkers elected to return east and went to Toronto.

They left Regina with their organization intact and their heads held high.

On arriving in Vancouver their first acts were to donate the food that was left over to striking longshoremen and to join them on the picket line.

A public meeting held a few days later at the Arena to hear their reports attracted 3,500 people.

Aftermath

Four major events dominated the next period.

1. The first was the trials of those arrested and the powerful campaign of protest waged across Canada demanding their release.
2. The second was the appointment of a Royal Commission into the events of July 1.
3. The third was a federal election held in October.
4. The fourth was the municipal election held in Regina in November.



Trials and protests

Even before the trials took place, tens of thousands of people joined in the campaign demanding their release.

Resolutions passed by a meeting of 13,000 people massed in front of the Parliament Buildings in Winnipeg, Manitoba, condemned the police attack of July 1 and demanded the release of those arrested.

A protest meeting of 6,000 in Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto passed similar resolutions. So did large meetings in scores of other cities.

In July charges were dropped against over 70 of those arrested; leaving 33 still to be tried in court and denied bail.

Four - Evans, Black, Cosgrove and Edwardson - were charged under Section 98 of the Criminal Code with belonging to an unlawful organization, the Relief Camp Workers Union.

Early in August the four Trek leaders were finally granted bail for a total of \$34,000. The bail for 32 others was set at \$68,000.

After his release on bail Evans toured Canada to raise money and develop support for those arrested. Undaunted with threats of charges of contempt by a judge, Evans continued to speak in public.

The campaign for the release of those arrested went on until the middle of 1936.

By April 24 a group of Trekkers were still awaiting trial. Nine were found guilty of rioting and received sentences of up to 14 months in prison.

Earlier the charges against Evans and four of his fellow strike leaders were dropped. As Evans pointed out, they were dropped not only for lack of evidence but because of the widespread protest.

The Regina Riot Commission

In July the Saskatchewan Government appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the Regina riot. Its obvious intent was to absolve the provincial government of all blame for the events that took place and place the blame on Ottawa. Prime Minister Bennett was furious knowing that it would have an adverse effect on his party in the upcoming federal election scheduled for October. Exerting heavy pressure the federal government

succeeded in having the investigation postponed until after October.

It also succeeded in diverting the aim of the investigation which then became an effort to brand the Trek as a communist conspiracy, absolve the police for their brutal attack on July 1, and defend the federal government from widespread public criticism.

Evans and many of the Trekkers appeared as witnesses before the Commission as did scores of citizens. Evans was on the witness stand for five days, closely cross-examined by hostile lawyers and hostile commissioners.

The sittings of the Commission and the evidence presented to it provided a field day for the daily press, which revealed in anti-communist tirades and slanted reports. Statements made by Evans were distorted and he became the centre of attack by the media.

In April 1936 the Riot Commission released its 52 volume report. It whitewashed the Bennett government and its administration of the 20 cents a day relief camps. It defended the actions of the police in their brutal attack on Regina citizens on July 1. Blame for what happened was laid solely on the shoulders of Evans and the Communists. The Trek, it said, "constituted a menace to the peace, order and good government of Canada."

The Spirit of Struggle

The historic On To Ottawa Trek made a great contribution to Canadian labour and to Canada.

The Trekkers galvanized the spirit of struggle in the dark days of the Hungry Thirties when the future held little hope for working people. Their courage and resourcefulness and their self discipline won the admiration of Canadians from coast to coast.

They compelled the government to abolish the 20 cents a day slave camps.

They compelled the government to repeal the notorious Section 98 of the Criminal Code which was used to suppress political opposition and labour militancy.

They helped to expose and defeat the hated government of "Iron Heel" R.B. Bennett.

Trekkers Carry On

In the years that followed many of the Trekkers continued to play leading roles in their communities.

Hundreds of them volunteered to go to Spain in 1937 to help fight fascism, recognizing that a victory for General Franco would bring a world war that much nearer. Among those who volunteered were Paddy O'Neil, Peter Neilson, Tony Martin and Red Walsh, all four of whom had been on the Trekkers delegation to see Prime Minister Bennett. Neilson and O'Neil were killed in Spain.

"We went to Spain" said Perry Hilton, another volunteer, "because we knew what the people of Spain had gone through, how they had suffered and starved, the same thing we were going through in Canada, and we decided if



at all possible we would get to Spain to help defend democracy and their elected government. From what we learned in the unemployed movement, it was only a step to understanding the situation in Spain."

In 1939 with the outbreak of World War II, many Trekkers enlisted in the armed forces, and many died in action.

On the home front, many Trekkers distinguished themselves as union activists and union leaders.

As a reporter of the Regina Leader-Post had observed on July 5, 1935, "They have a gospel which they will now spread no matter where they will go, where they are scattered."

Arthur Evans continued to play a leading role in the B.C. labour movement.

In 1937 he undertook a speaking tour of B.C. on behalf of the Communist Party that covered 53 localities. Its purpose was to raise funds for an ambulance for the people of Spain, then fighting off an invasion by General Franco, Hitler and Mussolini.

His last big labour effort was in the hard rock mining community of Trail in 1938-39, where he took on the powerful and virulently anti-union Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company. He helped the miners establish branches of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, an affiliate of the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO) led by John L. Lewis.

Evans died in Feb. 1944 in Vancouver, run over by a motorist after he alighted from a street car.

Keeping the Trek Alive

Summary

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Trek in 1985 there were numerous celebrations marking this great event in Canadian labour history.

*Trekkers and supporters established the **On to Ottawa Historical Society** which has produced educational resources, including a slide show and the On to Ottawa videotape, and makes presentations wherever an audience demands.*

"One of the main lessons to be learned from our Trek," said Robert (Bobbie) Jackson, who crossed Canada several times in recent years for the Trekkers, "is that if progressive reforms are to be achieved, the people concerned must engage in militant struggle in the workplace and in the community."

1985 - The 50th Anniversary of the Trek

The story of the On To Ottawa Trek was revived on its 50th anniversary in 1985 by a joint committee of Vancouver trade unionists and Trek survivors.

On April 23 a gathering was held on Victory Square to mark the anniversary of the reading of the Riot Act by mayor Gerry McGeer. This time Alderman Harry Rankin read a proclamation of good will to the unemployed from Mayor Mike Harcourt.

On June 1 a banquet honouring the Trekkers was held at the Ukrainian Hall which was one of the halls that housed the Trekkers during their 1935 general strike.



On June 5th a delegation of Trekkers and trade union leaders left for Ottawa to complete the Trek stopped in Regina in 1935. In Calgary they had lunch with mayor Ralph Klein. In Regina they attended a public display of Trek memorabilia. In Ottawa they set up a soup kitchen on the lawn of the Parliament Buildings, met with the caucuses of the Liberal Party and New Democratic Party, formerly the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, and had an audience

with Prime Minister Brian Mulroney.

On to Ottawa on stage

In 1986 surviving Trekkers and supporters told the story of the trek with daily live performances at the Folklife Pavillion at the 'Expo '86 World Fair in Vancouver. They read from an "oral history" script written by Tom Hawken, based on interviews he did with trekkers and others. The readings were accompanied by a slide show and music from the period, performed by Hawken and

other musicians. The idea to put this labour history on stage, came from Folklife Co-ordinator Gary Cristall. It proved to be very successful.

In the decade that followed, the On to Ottawa oral history / music / slide presentation went to many towns and cities across Canada. As well the show was featured at labour conventions, universities and student union conferences. The Trek once more became an attraction, this time for tens of thousands of today's generation.

The On to Ottawa Historical Society

In 1988 the trekkers formed the On to Ottawa Historical Society, primarily to help raise funds to put the history of the trek on video. Leading figures in the Historical Society included Jean Sheils, the daughter of Arthur Evans, Robert Jackson, Frank Kennedy and Willis Sharpala.

The Society, in cooperation with the Women's Labour History Project and Sara Diamond, produced the *On to Ottawa* video in 1992. It was based on the hugely popular On to Ottawa 'show' first developed for Expo '86 and was funded by donations from literally hundreds of individuals, unions and other organizations. This video is online.

2010 - The 75th Anniversary of the Trek

On June 6 2010, marking the 75th anniversary of the Trek, the On To Ottawa Historical Society partnered with the BC Federation of Labour, the Vancouver and District Labour Council, and a number of community groups to mark the event at a celebration at Crab Park, near where the Trek started on Vancouver's waterfront. The date was officially declared a day to honour the Trek, by proclamation of the mayor of Vancouver. Highlights of the event included the participation of Trek veteran Ken Hoggarth, and the installation of a permanent historical marker on the Main Street overpass, above the CPR rail yards.

In 2018, the On to Ottawa Society merged with the BC Labour Heritage Society who have committed to keeping the story of the Trek alive. A page on their website holds the videos, photos and documents passed on in 2018.

Last Words

One of the main lessons to be learned from our Trek," said Robert 'Bobbie' Jackson, who crossed Canada several times in the years before his death speaking at public events about the Trek, "is that if progressive reforms are to be achieved, people must engage in militant struggle in the workplace and in the community. In today's world where big corporations control the media, and where the power of national governments is restricted by trade treaties serving those who control the global economy, putting all our hopes in elections every four years won't solve our problems. Unity and struggle on an every day basis is the only answer."

Robert "Doc" Savage, another Trek leader, who died recently well into his eighties, felt the same way.

"We've made a lot of gains since the Hungry Thirties, " he said, "but now governments under corporate pressure are trying to roll back all our advances. They want Canada to become another Third World country. They want to take us back to the Thirties. Are we going to let them do it? That's the key question facing us today."

www.labourheritagecentre.ca/on-to-Ottawa-trek

BC LABOUR
HERITAGE
CENTRE