Appendix 1 Lesson: Connie Jervis

**Reading: The Hidden Legacy of Connie Jervis**

Probably when most people in present-day British Columbia think of a union leader, they picture a solidly built, middle-aged man, sometimes in a suit, occasionally wearing a tee shirt or a hard hat, pointing a finger sternly while making a speech. But, that is only a small piece of a very wide reality that has always included women as leaders, innovators and speakers. From 1918’s Minimum Wage Act initiator, Helena Gutteridge, to wartime industrial worker Jonnie Rankin, to 1970s era office workers’ leader Jean Rands, to former Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) national president Judy Darcy (now a BC Member of the Legislative Assembly [MLA]), and recent British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) president and current BC Member of Parliament (MP) Jinny Simms, women have assumed key union roles.

 First of all, she was a woman, a young woman. White women in BC had only achieved the right to vote in 1917 and in the ensuing 20 years, few women had been elected to government at any level. She was in her early 20s, in a time when all women were under great social pressure to get married as soon as they became adults and, especially if they were middle class, to then leave the world of wage labour and stay at home. Most unlikely of all, Connie Jervis was a teacher, the president of the Langley Teachers’ Association (LTA) in 1939-40. Although it was not well paid, teaching was considered a ‘respectable’ profession and teachers, certainly those working in small towns and rural areas, were required to be upright role models and to behave conservatively. No going to the pool hall, no stepping out with men of any kind, no having a quiet glass of beer in the pub, and, most definitely no continuing to teach after marriage!

Photo courtesy of Peggy McClay; daughter of Connie Jervis

In the late 1930s, Langley (now a suburb of Vancouver) was a rural community with a small and historic town center. Its residents were mostly farmers and, with very few families owning motorcars, travel was time consuming and required planning. In this period, too, Canada was teetering on the brink of another war in Europe. Indeed, war came on September 10th 1939, beginning a period of new and challenging opportunities and burdens for women and of great political pressure on unions to be ‘patriotic.’ Workers would be expected to be compliant with national goals and to curtail their previous, Depression-era militancy in the interest of a united war effort.

At this time, too, even small local school boards had considerably more power and social influence in communities than they do today. As former Langley teacher and union president Ken Novakowski writes: “School districts did not have superintendents so school boards had a very “hands on approach” for running the school district.” (1) This meant fewer professional bureaucrats and more elected officials involved in everything.

Teaching may have been respectable, but the wages were not. In fact, they were low, haphazard and discriminated against women and elementary teachers, most of them women! “The annual salary of an elementary teacher at this time was about $780 and for a senior secondary teacher $1,100. There was no common or agreed salary grid and women were paid less than men for the same work.” (2) Working conditions were often difficult, especially when the average class size was 45 and in some cases rose to more than 50. (3) Imagine that, 50 kids packed in tight rows in single, small classrooms. Think of the marking and the logistics of managing a lively class discussion!

Until 1939-40 when Connie Jervis became president of the LTA, Langley teachers along with those in many other BC districts, did not act as a group when presenting salary matters to the school board. Instead, the board set salaries arbitrarily. There was only a collective approach on the part of the board and teachers were on their own. But things were soon to change. In 1939 Jervis organized a teachers’ meeting, with the BCTF president attending, at Roy Mountain’s home. He was the group’s salary chair and together they prepared a salary case to present to the LSB. Despite new, 1937 legislation “that enshrined in law compulsory arbitration as the dispute resolution for teacher negotiations, “(4) the board turned down the teachers’ request for a raise. The next step for the LTA was obvious.

Jervis and her colleagues, fully aware of the new law, requested a referral to binding arbitration. This request was granted. “The school board, however, refused to cooperate and would not attend the arbitration hearing…” (5) The provincial government responded by appointing an individual to represent the board on the panel. Not surprisingly, the panel ruled in the teachers’ favour. That is when events became increasingly adversarial, as the following timeline shows.

* After the ruling, the school board attacked the teachers in the Langley Advance newspaper. School board chair JW Berry called compulsory arbitration **“The pistol to the head approach.”**
* The war inflamed the situation even more and teachers were called “unpatriotic” for daring to express and act on a desire for better wages.
* The board flat out refused to pay the arbitrated salary award.
* Langley’s municipal council gave its complete support to the school board thus expanding the conflict.

What transpired, sustained by a determined group of mostly women teachers, was a long and often fractious struggle. Eventually, the teachers were victorious, but not before jumping over many hurdles. Below is a chronological list of ten of these.

1. In the spring of 1940, the LTA took the board to court in New Westminster in order to enforce the arbitration award.

2. The judge ruled that the board had to pay teacher Ronald Nordham (the test case) his yearly salary increase of $42. His salary rose to $880.

3. In total, the board’s bill for all its teachers would be $2,500 over that of 1939.

4. The board reacted with hostility and, in the April 4th edition of the Langley Advance, JW Berry, claiming that teachers who requested their raise would be considered “obnoxious” by taxpayers, invited them to resign.

5. No teachers resigned!

6. On June 20th 1940, the board fired Jervis and 13 other teachers.

7. Ten of the 14 teachers were women!

8. The 14 teachers immediately appealed their dismissal to the Board of Reference, “a provincial body consisting of a representative of the BCTF, the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) and a third person chosen from the legal profession and appointed by BC’s Chief Justice.” (6)

9. The Board ruled that there was no legal case for the teachers’ dismissal.

10. The Council of Public Instruction (the equivalent of today’s Ministry of Education) ordered the reinstatement of all the teachers to their pre-dismissal positions!

Victory, it seemed, had been won. But the Langley School Board was intransigent. When teachers returned to work in September 1940, five teachers, including Jervis and Mountain, had been demoted and sent to schools in the far reaches of the Langley countryside. Although the law was on their side, the LTA’s struggle was not over yet and it was time to take direct action.

Here’s what they did. On the first day of school in September 1940, the demoted teachers showed up at the schools and in the classrooms where they had worked until the previous June. They sat at their desks. For this action they were labeled “sit down strikers” by Vancouver daily newspapers and, in an attempt to intimidate them further, Berry travelled from school to school, ordering them to go to their new jobs.

Once again, the teachers were forced to appeal to the Council of Public Instruction. It promptly fired the school board and appointed a public trustee to manage the district’s affairs. The teachers returned to their old jobs and, at last, received their awarded salaries. But the tribulation was not quite done.

The September issue of The Langley Advance “in an unusually large (for the time) headline declared **“Langley Feels the Unwarranted Blow of Gov’t Dictatorship”** and further declared the incident to be the ‘most serious in Langley’s history.” (7) While this was certainly hyperbole, it obviously reflected the views of the district’s more influential citizens. It seems also to have been designed to threaten and blame the teachers for insisting on their rights in law and for not backing down, even when faced with social disapproval. How admirable it was for the 24 year old Connie Jervis to have taken up this challenge. As her daughter Peggy McClay, a Langley teacher observed in 2006, “She bravely took on the pillars of the community with fierce opposition and little to back her up.” (8) She and her colleagues gained much that teachers and other workers can be thankful for: the beginning of the end for gender-biased salaries in the teaching profession, the satisfaction of standing up for professional dignity and legal rights, the establishment of compulsory arbitration as a resolution for salary disputes, and the knowledge that union solidarity works!



Connie Jervis (front row, second from right) and colleagues circa 1940

Photo courtesy of Peggy McClay; daughter of Connie Jervis

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Works cited:

Ken Novakowski 1939-40: The Langley affair

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