Lesson: On-to-Ottawa

Lesson Activity 1 # On to- Ottawa Introduction

**Historical Context**

The On-to-Ottawa Trek ranks as one of the most important events in Canadian labour history. In the 1930s, with so many unemployed, the focus of working-class organizing became the unemployed. The social safety net: unemployment insurance, welfare, universal medical care, and worker’s compensation didn’t exist in the 1930’s. The “Dirty Thirties” led to a marked swing toward radical left-wing organizations, from block committees, growth in memberships of the Communist Party of Canada and a new socialist party: the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF). The three divisions of unemployed, led by Slim Evans, left Vancouver for Ottawa in 1935 to demand action from Bennett’s Conservative government were part of that radical workers movement. The “Dirty Thirties,” with its strikes, unemployed workers’ unions, riots, occupations, street demonstrations, sit-ins, a dramatic increase in unionized workers, the rising popularity of socialism, the CCF, and the almost universal feeling that classical capitalism had failed, will have long-term consequences that will help shape contemporary Canadian society

**On to Ottawa Trek-Introduction**

The On-to-Ottawa Trek in the summer of 1935 captured the hearts and minds of Canadians. The Depression of the 1930s—The “Dirty Thirties”—was a time of despair and fightback. Thousands of people were thrown onto the streets without jobs, without money, without savings, without hope. By 1932, more than one-third of the labour force was unemployed. There was no unemployment insurance in those days. Those who were working also suffered. Employers could cut wages and increase hours without fear of strikes. Families broke up. Men left home to look for jobs. Boys were cut off their families’ relief on their 16th birthday. They travelled the country on freight cars to look for work and food. In 1932 the federal government set up relief camps in isolated areas for unemployed single men. Over the next four years, more than 100,000 young Canadians lived in those camps. The camps were run by the army. Pay was 20 cents a day, the food was bad, accommodations poor, and the workers were denied the right to vote.

The relief camp workers in British Columbia were organized into the Relief Camp Workers Union. They wanted “work and wages.” The union demanded an increase in wages, a five-day workweek, unemployment insurance, and Worker’s Compensation coverage, the right to vote, and to have the camps taken out of control of the Defence Department. In 1935 about 1500 workers left the camps in B.C. to protest the bad conditions. They gathered in Vancouver over several weeks. The relief camp workers organized a trek to Ottawa by freight car to protest directly to the federal government. Starting with 1500 in Vancouver on June 3rd and joined along the route by more unemployed, 2000 trekkers reached Regina two weeks later. In Regina on July 1 (Dominion Day), citizens and trekkers were brutally attacked by the RCMP and city police on orders of Conservative Prime Minister R.B. (Iron Heel) Bennett.

The trek was stopped. Its leaders were arrested. But the trekkers maintained their unity and organization. They won the right to return to their homes as a group in railway passenger cars.

Within months, the Tory Bennett government was defeated. Soon after, the relief camps were abolished. Although the trekkers didn’t make it to Ottawa, they won their battle. They raised people’s spirit to fight for jobs and a better life. They helped change Canada.

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