Handout 6b: The Labour Movement in British Columbia 1840-Present

1840–1914

The labour movement started in British Columbia with the arrival of the Hudson Bay Company in the 1800s. The fur trade introduced the first waged workers to the Northwest Coast. Early European commercial interactions with the First Nations people were based on trade; they were not employees of the company, but rather traders, bartering furs for manufactured goods. Nevertheless, First Nations people were soon working for wages, cutting wood, gathering food, and supplying Fort Victoria with canoe loads of coal from surface outcroppings. In addition, the HBC hired men from Britain and the Canadas to collect furs, build and maintain forts, load and sail ships, chop wood, and hunt for food. Those early employees of the HBC did not form unions, but they did attempt to improve their working and living conditions by refusing to obey orders and even going on strike. Those early job actions were not well organized, and the most vocal and militant workers could easily be isolated. The economic and social conditions throughout most of this period have very few similarities to British Columbia today.

Twelve-hour days, wages at subsistence levels, no healthcare, no unemployment insurance, no workers' compensation, child labour, and no welfare were all the realities of life. Political change was very difficult throughout that whole period. Not only did the vast majority of people not have the right to vote, but the cost of running for political office and property requirements for voting and running for office (as well as there being no legislative or responsible government until BC joined Confederation in 1871) all made it very difficult for workers to seek political power. The need to supply the new coal-powered steamships brought the first industrial workers to British Columbia. Seven miners were brought out from Britain by the Hudson Bay Company in 1849, and coal mining began at Fort Rupert on Vancouver Island. Less than one year after their arrival, the miners were on strike; the HBC had not honoured the contract. The HBC had two of them put into irons and thrown into jail. The workers' demands were ignored, so all but two stowed away on a coal ship bound for California. (At the time, it was against the law to quit your job.)

To replace the miners, the company brought in another group of miners from Britain. A few years later (1855), those miners were also on strike. One miner, Robert Dunsmuir refused to join the strike and was rewarded by the company with a grant of coal rights on 1,000 acres in the Nanaimo fields. Thus, the Dunsmuir Empire was born.

In 1858, the discovery of gold on the Fraser River transformed BC from a sleepy little company colony of 500 Europeans clustered around Fort Victoria into a mythical land of Gold, which attracted tens of thousands of fortune seekers. In the first year of the Gold Rush, between 25,000 and 30,000 newcomers arrived. The huge influx led to the creation of the mainland Colony of British Columbia in 1858. In those prosperous times, the first permanent unions appeared. In Victoria, in the 1860s, bakers, printers, and

shipwrights organized themselves into unions to "protect their rights, regulate the number of hours of work, and the amount of wages to be accepted." The rush for gold didn't last more than 20 years, but mining, especially coal mining, was to dominate labour relations until the turn of the century. The mines on Vancouver Island were some of the most dangerous in the world. Between 1888 and 1913 an average of 27 miners were killed each year. The intolerable conditions ultimately led to strikes.

The bitterest labour clashes came on Vancouver Island against the Dunsmuir company. Strikes lasting months and even years broke out in 1877, 1888, 1890, 1903, and 1912. Workers were forced to strike over issues like safety conditions, union recognition, better wages, control over weigh scales, and high prices at the company store. The strikes led to the company's calling in the militia, mass evictions, mass arrests (250 in 1913), riots, gun battles, and deportations of strikers. The government actively and openly supported the mine owners. Workers, realizing the need for political power, began to take an active role in politics. By 1890 they had elected two MLAs from Nanaimo. By 1901, miners had moved further to the left and were electing members of the Socialist Party of Canada.

The election of workers candidates spread to other areas of the province, especially to the Kootenays, where hard rock miners also elected radical workers candidates. The early strikes in the coalfields at times resembled open civil wars. In an attempt to break the strike, management employed Chinese workers as strike breakers. Oriental labour was to become a controversial and central issue in labour and political relations for decades. Chinese strikebreakers, working at wages far lower than white workers, accepting conditions far more dangerous, often laboured under the threat of deportation if they complained. In that xenophobic climate, the early labour unions called for protection from Oriental labour, including deportation and exclusion of Orientals from British Columbia. The tactic by management of divide and rule based on race was to be a cancer weakening the labour movement for years.

A new era of immigration started in the 1880s with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Also, an American labour movement was organizing in British Columbia, the Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. The Knights were based on the industrial model of union organizing, one union for all workers on a job site. The older unions in British Columbia were craft or trade unions organizing workers by craft: plumbers, printers, and carpenters. The Knights organized workers over 18 who were wage earner (excluding doctors, bankers, lawyers, saloon keepers, and Oriental workers). The Knights were working-class militants agitating for economic, social and political change: higher wages, the nine- then the eight-hour day, female suffrage, improvement in working conditions, end to child labour, free libraries, night schools, and access to English Bay, which was in danger of being sold to private holders. Nevertheless, the Knights, along with most of the labour movement, were weakened by inability to organize Asian workers. The Knights were deeply involved in the anti-Oriental movement and participated in attacking Chinese neighbourhoods.

That first attempt at industrial unionism was overshadowed by a new surge of craft unionism by the American Federation of Labour in the 1890s. By the turn of the century, American international craft unions dominated the labour movement in British Columbia. Craft unions followed the rule of supply and demand. By restricting employment in the trades to a relatively small number of workers, workers could demand higher wages. Thus craft unions tried to control apprenticeship programs, insisted on union shop, enforced limits to the amount of work done in a day, established strict controls over the type of work performed by each trade, and restricted entry to the trade. That often led to higher wages and improved conditions for those workers. Craft unions improved working conditions for their members, but according to some critics it meant that the unions organized only the minority of workers. Women, so-called unskilled workers, and most new immigrant workers remained unorganized.

The first major strike outside the mining industry was in the fishing industry in 1900. Attempts to bargain collectively over the price the canneries would pay for the fish had been frustrated by fishers being divided into different associations by race: First Nations, Japanese, and whites.

Nevertheless, by 1900, socialist ideas had convinced many white workers, that all workers, regardless of race, should be organized. By 1900, the workers were starting to choose radical socialists as their leaders. Men like Frank Rogers and William McClain, who worked for the Fishers' union, spread the ideas of class struggle and class solidarity regardless of race. Nevertheless, the owners of the canneries resorted to their old tactics of intimidation, special police, strikebreakers, arrests, spies, and ultimately intervention by the militia. The strike marked the beginning of a continuous thread of unionism in the B.C. fishing industry and a division between fishers based on race that was to last for decades. The most tragic incident in that period occurred when the United Brotherhood of Railroad Employees (UBRE), an industrial union, were on strike against the CPR. Frank Rogers, a union organizer working for the UBRE, was "gunned down by thugs hired by the CPR." Rogers was the first, but not the last, of B.C. labour martyrs.

By the turn of the century, 1900, the labour movement was firmly established in British Columbia, but it was weakened by racial divisions and the conflict between craft unionism and industrial unionism. The issue of the nine-hour day in 1889 led to the formation of labour councils, different unions in a city or geographic area uniting to co-ordinate their campaigns. Sadly, the Vancouver Trade and Labour Council also included Asian exclusion in their funding charter. The councils became centres for political, social, and economic action. By 1903 and 1905, labour councils throughout the province broke with the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), the national body (established in the 1880s), because of the TLC's refusal to promote political action and the close association with American international craft unions. The labour movement in B.C. was taking a radical turn to the socialist left.

During that period of rising tensions between labour and management, the most radical of the American industrial labour organizations arrived in British Columbia, the Western Federation of Miners, the America Labour Movement, and especially Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or Wobblies. Formed in Chicago in 1905, the Wobblies were revolutionaries arguing that the exploitation of workers could be ended only when the capitalist system was destroyed. The Wobblies sought to organize and educate all workers, regardless of craft, skill, gender and race, into One Big Union and prepare for a general strike to overthrow capitalism. The Wobblies in B.C. organized immigrants, loggers, city labourers, longshoremen and railway, construction, and Asian workers. The capitalist class launched an all-out campaign to silence the IWW. When the authorities banned public speaking in the streets of Victoria and Vancouver, aimed at stopping the IWW from educating the working class, the IWW and the Socialist Party of B.C. called free-speech meetings in the city parks. The police attacked the demonstrations with clubs and whips; fines, deportations, and jail terms were imposed. Nevertheless, in the end, the authorities backed down, and the soap-boxers were back in business. The Wobblies were involved in many other strikes and protests throughout the province and have left the labour movement a militant legacy, especially in their songs, still sung today.

In 1910, with a $50 grant from the Vancouver and District Labour Council, the British Columbia Federation of Labour was founded. The new federation attempted to co-ordinate the labour movement's activities throughout the province. The new organization quickly took up the fight for the eight-hour day, endorsed industrial unionism, embraced socialism, and began organizing under its first president, J.C. Watters.

The most violent labour clash in B.C. took place in the coalfields of Vancouver Island, 1912–13. The initial cause of the 1912 strike was a gas explosion that killed 32. When two miners reported gas in another mine, they were dismissed. Fellow workers demanded that they be reinstated. The company retaliated by locking out the miners. Miners all over the island downed their tools in solidarity. Management resorted to tactics they had used in the past to break the strike. In Cumberland, Chinese miners were threatened with eviction and even deportation if they didn't work. In that bitter environment, riots, gun battles, burnings, and clashes between strikers and scabs escalated. The government sent in special constables and the 72nd Regiment to aid the company. Over 250 were arrested, including Labour MLAs and the leader of the newly established British Columbia Federation of Labour. The strike continued for over two years . Eventually the United Mine Workers of America, after providing $16,000 a week to a total of more than one million dollars, ran out of money. The workers, faced with this reality, called off the strike. The settlement guaranteed improvements, but the employers reneged on the agreement.

The labour movement, along with all other sections of society, was shaken by the outbreak of World War I (1914). The war divided the labour movement. Some workers supported the war; others denounced the war as a clash between the ruling classes of

the imperialist powers and urged workers to resist and not allow themselves to be used as cannon fodder for the profits of the capitalist class. Needless to say, the capitalist class was not divided and looked forward to the enormous profits to be made through war production. The jingoism that surrounded the war led to government repression of the anti war movement: peace activists, socialists, and the Wobblies were arrested, and many were deported.

The first years of the war resulted in the weakening of the labour movement. Union membership was almost cut in half between 1913 and 1915. As the war economy expanded, labour shortages made it easier to win strikes, and the government encouraged employers to settle with the workers to keep war production from stalling. The rapidly growing economy was soon wracked by inflation, and workers had to organize to keep up with the increase in the cost of living. As a result, union membership increased, and strike activity became frequent.

The labour movement in B.C. is famous in Canada for its militant and socialist roots. British Columbia by the 1880s had the highest proportion of unionist to general population. In company mining towns where class differences were easily observable, unsafe working conditions, low wages, easy communication, and the necessity of solidarity led to a labour history that at times verged on class war. Division between workers based on race, industrial unions or craft unions, socialist vs. non-socialist, often divided workers and weakened their common objectives. Nevertheless, many of the great demands of labour were eventually met: eight-hour day, safety conditions, old-age pensions, universal suffrage, minimum wage, and an end to child labour. The early workers in British Columbia made many sacrifices, and those sacrifices led to our living and working conditions in British Columbia today.

Adapted from the article (Labour Movement) written by Mark Leier for the Encyclopedia of British Columbia.

Labour History Vocabulary
Define the following:

Bartering
Worker's Compensation
Stow away
Socialist
Militia
Xenophobic
Craft Union
Industrial Union
Labour Council
Apprenticeship
Collective bargaining
Soap boxes
Eviction
Trades and Labour Congress
Capitalism
Jingoism

Comprehension Questions:

1. Explain how Robert Dunsmuir was able acquire his coal empire.
2. Discuss the impact of the Gold Rush of 1858 on British Columbia
3. Evaluate the tactics used by the mine owners to break strikes
4. Why do you think labour unions fought for changes that were not strictly workplace concerns?
5. Why was Frank Rogers murdered?
6. Compare and contrast craft unions and industrial unions
7. What was the impact of World War I on the labour movement?
8. Which union movement was the most radical and why?
9. List the demands of the early labour movement that have been achieved?

After the War

The First World War had improved the bargaining power of workers as labour shortages made it easier to win strikes. The government had encouraged employers to settle to keep production from stalling. Wages and union membership rose but so did inflation. The labour movement in BC opposed military conscription on the basis that it placed an unfair burden on working people and that the society should increase taxes on the wealthy before compelling military service. The Russian Revolution (1917) and the persecution and killing of labour leader Ginger Goodwin (July, 1918) had radicalized the working class in British Columbia. Many thought a workers' revolution was possible.

Socialists and unionists helped organize the One Big Union (OBU) in 1919. Similar to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) that had been banned for opposing the First World War, the OBU organized all workers regardless of craft and advocated the strike as a bargaining tool. The OBU quickly organized thousands of BC loggers into the powerful Lumber Workers' Industrial Union.

Employers fought back and called for "open shops" (workplaces without unions), used blacklists to keep suspected union organizers from working, and even lobbied the government to ban pro-union books and newspapers. By 1924, the OBU was, for all practical purposes, dead and other unions were under attack. Union membership in BC fell dramatically: The percentage of organized workers in BC dropped from more than 20% in 1919 to about 7% by 1934.

The economic and social turmoil created by the Great Depression of the 1930's stimulated a new waves of protest and union organizing. Most union organizing was carried out by the Communist Party of Canada founded in 1921, under the umbrella of the Workers' Unity League.

Unlike the more conservative trade unions, the Communists believed that the strike was labour's best weapon. They also organized the unemployed and relief camp workers, and led the famous On-to-Ottawa Trek in 1935 and the Vancouver post office occupation in 1938.

Despite the anti-labour laws, workers continued to join unions. Loggers and sawmill workers, for example, were quick to join the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) and elected a Canadian Communist, Harold Pritchett, as the union's first president.

In 1932/1933 a new socialist political party was formed, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. (CCF) uniting the old Labour Party, Socialist Party, important sections of the Christian movement, and farmer organizations. The CCF became the party of the Labour movement. In 1961, the CCF became the New Democratic Party.

To their credit, the labour movement recognized the evils of fascism and supported Popular Fronts to oppose fascism years before the Canadian government acted. Finally, the union movement was beginning to reject its anti-oriental stance and accept a pro–Asian and anti-racist position. For example, labour supported the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and the Brotherhood of Railway Workers began accepting black members.

By 1939, more than 12% of BC's workers were unionized, far fewer than the 1919 level but a substantial increase since the beginning of the decade. Real gains came during WWII and by the end of the war, nearly 30% of BC's workers belonged to unions. By the middle of the war, 1943, the Canadian public had a very positive attitude to social reform and workers rights. This new attitude led to changes in the law that made union organizing easier. The federal government realized that unions had become a permanent part of the economy. It also realized that strikes disrupted production and ultimately hurt profits. Since most strikes were over union recognition, the government passed a series of laws during the war, aimed at easing restrictions on union activity. Unions were granted the check-off so that union dues were collected directly from the pay cheque, and in 1946 the Rand formula required all employees to pay union dues even if they chose not to belong to the union. These measures gave unions more security and stability.

The era of post-war prosperity and the creation of the new social programs provided benefits and protection undreamed of a generation earlier. In 1956 the two main labour congresses united into the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Unionization rates climbed steadily: in 1958, more than half of BC's workers were in unions.

By the 1960's, a new wave of rebellion and militancy stimulated the labour movement. Government workers fought and won the right to organize and to strike, often by engaging in illegal strikes. New union members brought new concerns to the bargaining table and to union meetings. Many resented the transfer of union dues to international headquarters in the US, especially when the internationals refused to release the money for strike pay. Dues collected by the check-off allowed unions to hire permanent, paid officers, necessary now that bargaining and grievance procedures were complex and legalistic. But high union salaries, and officers who turned the union into a career, led many workers to believe that some union leaders were little more than bureaucrats – or, in labour slang, "porkchoppers." Pay equity and patriarchal

policies that excluded women or failed to address their concerns were now vital issues taken up by the large number of women now entering the workforce. To address these new issues of nationalism, democratization, international solidarity, and the proper representation of women, new unions were created.

Unions took on a larger role supporting both domestic and international social justice movements aimed at promoting democratic government and establishing laws that protect human rights. (eg campaigns to establish laws to eliminate discrimination based on race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, religion, marital status, family status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, or age) and labour rights (promoting the rights of all workers to organize and bargain collectively for all terms and conditions of employment).

In British Columbia union successes came under attack in the 1970s and 1980s. In BC employers began demanding concessions from unions: insisting that workers give up wages, benefits and protections won in earlier decades. Successive Social Credit (right wing) governments under Bill Bennett and Bill Vander Zalm brought in changes to the labour code that made union organizing more difficult and made it easier for employers to break unions, contract out and forestall organizing drives.

In July 1983, the labour movement launched Operation Solidarity (a coalition of labour unions and community and advocacy groups) to oppose Bill Bennett's cut backs to social programs and restraint policies. Funded by the union movement, it organized one of the largest political demonstrations in BC history as tens of thousands of people took to the streets in rallies and marches to oppose government policies they believed undermined workers' rights and gutted social services. By November teachers and public employees were on strike and Operation Solidarity was planning a general strike. However, once the public employees won a new contract, labour's enthusiasm for the protest seemed to wane. At a meeting in Kelowna in November between the premier and labour leaders, the premier agreed to make small changes to his restraint program and labour leaders agreed to call off a proposed general strike. The so-called Kelowna Accord outraged many Solidarity Coalition community members, who felt it was a betrayal of the larger social aims of the movement. The labour movement decided to devote more time and money to political action, and was a key factor in the election of NDP governments in 1991 and 1996.

In 2004 in response to employer and government efforts to eliminate thousands of positions 40,000 health care workers struck. Thousands of unionists across the province defied collective agreements and walked out in support of the Hospital Employees' Union. In the fall of 2005, and in response to government's imposition of another contract, teachers engaged in a two-week strike ruled illegal by the courts. Public support in both of these "illegal" strikes was amazingly high and many supporters joined striking workers on picket lines.

In the second decade of the 21st century, the percentage of union workers continued to decline in British Columbia from 36.5 % in 1997 to 30.9% in 2011. This decline in union membership is

as a result of a range of factors, including: weakened labour laws, globalization (contracting out of the services to other countries), declines in BC's resource economy, automation and technological change, the widening gap between the rich and the workers, and the reduction in the power of the union movement. The labour movement continues to evolve in BC. Public sector unions have grown while private sector unions have declined. As a result, there are actually slightly more women in unions in Canada today because of their presence in government sectors like health care and education. The gender pay gap is very small in the public sector as a result of union protection compared to the private sector. Therefore public sector unions have an important role in addressing the gender gap in Canada.

Additionally, as the BC economy moves away from a resource based industries, younger workers in industries like fast food, coffee bars, retail, tourism, and computer services may find they need union protection to reestablish the high standard of living that BC workers fought for and won over the last 150 years.

Adapted and added to by the Labour Heritage collective, from the article (Labour Movement) written by Mark Leier for the Encyclopedia of British Columbia

LABOUR HISTORY VOCABULARY

Define the following: Labour shortage
Open Shop
Blacklist
Pay equity
Patriarchal policies
Eliminate Discrimination
Rand formula
CCF
Canadian Labour Congress
Essential services
contract stripping
gender gap

Comprehension questions:

1. How did the First World War improve the bargaining power of workers in BC?

2. Describe the ways employers fought back against the union movement in the 1920's.
3.) Why did union activity increase in the 1930's?
4.) What organizations and movements united together to form the CCF?
5.) What new organization was formed in 1956 to represent unionized labour?
6.) What was Operation Solidarity?
7.) What was the Kelowna Accord?
8.) Why did 40,000 workers walk off the job in 2004?
9.) Why did teachers go on an illegal strike in 2005?
10.) How have unions changed in the last decade in BC?