Lesson: Trouble on the Line

**Lesson Activity 1: History and Chronology of the 1902 Telephone Workers strikes.**

**Brief History of the Telephone and Its Introduction to British Columbia**

**1875**- Alexander Graham Bell successfully transmitted sounds over what was to become the telephone. One-to-one telephone systems did not require switchboards, multi-users did.

**1878**- The first telephones were installed in British Columbia on Vancouver Island. Small companies appeared within a short span of time across the province. Where feasible, the telephone companies used the existing telegraph poles and wires

**1880**—Victoria and Esquimalt Telephone Company was formed, acting as an agent for Bell Telephone of Canada

**1881**- In British Columbia boys were often the first operators. In addition to working the switchboard, they swept the floor and collected the fees from the customers. Shortages in collections were taken out of their meagre wages of $10 per month

**Establishment of New Westminster and Burrard Telephone Company**

**1883**-- Telephone service was established between Port Moody (the western terminus of the just completed Canadian Pacific Railway-CPR) and New Westminster.

**1886**—Telephone service was moved to Vancouver when the CPR moved its western terminus from Port Moody to Vancouver. The company was renamed New Westminster and Burrard Inlet Telephone Company (it was previously named the Port Moody and Burrard Inlet Telephone Company)

**1886** – Dr. Lefevre, a surgeon with the Canadian Pacific Railroad, purchased shares in the telephone company, joined the Board of Directors, and became actively involved in the day-to-day management

**1888-1890**- women started working as operators, they were more polite than boys and could be paid the same wages as the boys

**Unionization of Telephone Workers at the New Westminster and Burrard Telephone Company**

**1901**—lineworkers working for New Westminster and Burrard unionized as Local 213 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Linesmen constructed the physical plant of the telephone network, set the poles, strung the wire, installed the switch board and kept everything in working order. Wire work was hard, dangerous and involved long hours. The proliferation of poles and electric wires across each city created a major safety problem for the linesmen….there were few regulations requiring the separation of telephone lines from “hot” wires. On more than one occasion sagging telephone wires touched a hot wire and electrocuted a man working on a connecting line miles away.

**Fall 1902**--- In the fall of 1902, the women operators at New Westminster and Burrard Telephone Company joined Local 213 as a women’s auxiliary. The women’s group operated as a sub-local which was independent of the men.

**Telephone Strikes of 1902**

**September 1902**—A dozen linesmen objected when management instituted a new operating procedure and insisted that the men provide their own tools.

**September 16, 1902**—the linesmen walked off the job. The company attempted to blacklist the workers, discouraging other companies from the hiring the strikers. The strike continued until the company agreed to the workers’ demands. A summary of the resolution is provided below. The resolution of the strike was as follows:

* 1. **Union Recognition** of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers;
  2. Reinstatement of the striking workers;
  3. A promise of **no discrimination** (meaning that the company would not discriminate against them as a result of initiating and participating in a strike;
  4. A promise to furnish all tools except those electrical workers customarily owned themselves;
  5. Notification to other companies that the dispute had been settled;

Soon after the settlement, there was a major misunderstanding over what **recognition of the union** meant. The union was of the view that “**recognition** meant that the union had the right to bargaining with the company in the name of its members.

The company disagreed, saying that it meant nothing more than the company recognized that a large number of its employees were members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

The first strike set the stage for further bargaining between the company and the two groups of workers: the linesmen and the operators. Over the fall of 1902, both the linesmen and the telephone operators formulated their bargaining demands.

**Operator Demands**

* The operator demands were: a wage increase of $2.50 per month, sick leave with pay (operators had to pay the wages of their replacement if they were ill) and an end to the company’s use of unpaid trainees.

**Linesmen Demands**

* Wage parity with linesmen in Seattle. (The Seattle linesmen had just won the 8 hour day with a new wage rate of $3.25 per day)

**November 25, 1902**- union demands were submitted to the company

**November 26, 1902**- The Superintendent of the company (Kent) responded by saying they would have to await return of the key owners, William Farrell and Dr. Lefevre.

**November 26, 1902** (later in the day) - both the linesmen and operators commenced a full scale strike at the Vancouver operations of the company. The switching technology meant that the operators’ strike paralyzed the city’s telephone network. Almost all subscribers had to contact the central offices’ switchboard to be connected by an operator.

The linesmen’s strike a few months earlier had not disrupted telephone service. However, the operators’ strike paralyzed city telephone service and became an immediate and pressing public issue.

**Company Response to The Strike –** Superintendent Kent accused the union of making impossible demands with almost no notice of strike while the key directors were out of town. He further accused the union of forcing the women out on strike. This infuriated the union who felt the company was trying to deny them the recognition they had won in September.

**November 28, 1902**- operators in New Westminster went on strike, shutting down the New Westminster switchboard. A few days later linesmen in Victoria, members of Local 230, struck the Victoria and Esquimalt Telephone Company in support of their fellow union members in Vancouver.

**November 28-30, 1902**—a group of Vancouver businessmen proposed that they would take control of the company thus permitting the resumption of telephone service until the return of the company directors. The union accepted the scheme but the company refused to agree.

Public opinion, which had been sympathetic to the operators, swung solidly in favour of the union.

**November 29, 1902**—The company places ads in the local paper recruiting strike-breakers to work as operators.

**December 1, 1902**- The business community publicly laid the blame on the company in a letter that was published on the front page of the Daily Province.

**December 1-3, 1902**- Heavy rainstorms tangled wires and knocked down wires in most of the outlying areas, leaving only the downtown business centre telephone system still working. Although the company managed to recruit a few strike-breakers as linemen, the system continued to deteriorate throughout the strike.

**Early December, 1902**—The company and the union attempt to reach an agreement. The two outstanding issues were union recognition and the fate of the strike-breakers. In the end, the union got closed shop and the strike-breakers who wanted to stay had to take out membership in the union.

**December 12, 1902**- The seventeen (17) day strike is resolved.

**December 15, 1902**—The contract is signed

**Results of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 213, 1902 Strikes**

**Strike #1 September 1902: Linemen walked off the Job after New Westminster and Burrard insisted that the men provide their own tools (Operators were not on strike during this period)**

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| **Issue In Dispute** | **Results/Resolution of Dispute** |
| 1. Requirement That Workers Provide Their Own Tools | 1. A promise to furnish all tools except those electrical workers customarily owned themselves; |
| 1. The promise that all strikers would be reinstated (workers had no job security or protections from taking strike action and could be dismissed by company or not rehired for projects) | 2. Reinstatement of the striking workers |
| 1. Fear of discrimination as a result of striking | 3. A promise of **no discrimination** for taking strike action |
| 1. The company would not recognize the IBEW as having any legal status/would not represent them as the sole bargaining agent of the workers | 4. The company recognized the IBEW |
| 1. No clear negotiating process – Union proposed that an agreement that an Arbitration Board be established to settle disputes in the future. | 5. The proposal was set aside for consideration in the future. |

**Strike #2—November 26, 1902 – Operators and Linemen walk off the job – The strike lasted approximately 2 ½ weeks – (Contract Signed December 15, 1902)**

**RESULTS FOR OPERATORS**

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| **Issue** | **Terms and conditions before the strike** | **Final result: Terms and conditions in the New**  **December 15, 1902 contract** |
| **Union Membership** | Employees not required to be members of the union  Non-union employees could be hired to undermine the union | All employees are in the union both operators and linesmen  Non-union members could not be hired to undermine the union  Union recognition was confirmed |
| **Wages** | $15 per month | An immediate increase of $2.50 per month given to every operator who had been six months of her present salary.  Scheduled increases every six months until the top limit was reached. ($30 per month after two years, June 1904)  Assistant Chief Operators and Long-Distance Operators: $32.50 per month in the first year and $35.00 per month thereafter |
| **Trainees** | Trainees could be required to work for up long periods without pay | Trainees could be placed on probation for no longer than 10 days then they started at the $20 rate |
| **Sick Leave** | Operators were required to pay the wages of the person who replaced them in the event of an illness | 3 days sick leave per month with pay |
| **Hours** | Not clear from the research. It was likely an 9 hour day with a 6 day work week (54 hours) | Eight-hour work day with an approximate 47.3 hour work week (1 in 6 Saturdays is a holiday), although the company reserved the right to request that they work Sundays |
| **Rotating Saturday Afternoon** | Operators were supposed to have one Saturday afternoon in six as a holiday, but the company rarely gave them this half-day because of the constant shortage of operators | The rotating Saturday afternoon for operators was retained with a promise by the company to hire enough staff to allow the operators the time off. This meant that the operators had one Saturday afternoon in six as a holiday |

**RESULTS FOR LINEMEN**

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| **Issue** | **Terms and conditions before the strike** | **Final Result: Terms and conditions in the New December 15, 1902 contract** |
| **Union Membership** | Employees not required to be members of the union  Non-union employees could be hired to undermine the union | The union won a closed shop. All employees were in the union, operators and linesmen  Non-union employees could not be hired to undermine the union. Union recognition was confirmed. |
| **Scope of membership and contract coverage/**  **Exempt staff** | Not specified | The contract applied to “all electrical workers”, including the operators and exempted only the chief inspector, the general foreman, the chief day and night operators and the very small office staff |
| **Max Hours**  **Wage rate** | 9 hours per day ov  $3.00 per day/ $0.33 per hour | 8 hours per day  $3.20 per day for journeymen/$0.40 per hour  (Same hours as Seattle but $0.05 per day less) |
| **Ratio of apprentices** | No ratio established which meant the company could use cheaper apprentice labour to replace journey men | A ratio of one apprentice to every two repairmen was written into the contract along with the stipulation that apprentices could not install telephones |
| **Fear of Discrimination against strikers** | Open to employer to discriminate against employees who supported the strike | No discrimination against strikers |
| **Process for Dealing with grievances and complaints** | No process | Company recognition to a union appointed grievances committee |
| **Duration of contract** | No set term | 1 year |
| **Renewal of Contract after term** | No provision | Automatic renewal unless one month’s notice given |

**Conclusions**

The telephone had become an important service for Vancouver business by 1902. At that point there were over 1,000 telephones in the community, many of them rented to business.

The union achieved great success given the challenges of the time. The wage rates for operators jumped ahead of those in other parts of Canada such that the Vancouver workers’ starting rate in 1903 was $2 per month more than the starting rate at the commencement of the Bell operators’ strike in February 1907. In Vancouver, the maximum rates in 1903 were $30 per month after two years, while in Toronto those same rates were $25 per month after three years.

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