Syd Thompson Podcast
Transcribed by Patricia Wejr

Rod Mickleburgh [00:00:17] Welcome to another edition of On the Line, the podcast that brings to light people and events of B.C.'s rich labour heritage. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. In this episode, we feature the life and times of the formidable Syd Thompson, someone I covered and got to know during those long ago days when I was night labour reporter for the Vancouver Sun. For many years, Syd Thompson was president of both the large Vancouver local of the IWA [International Woodworkers of America] and the Vancouver and District Labour Council until his retirement in 1980. He was a union leader of the old school. When he spoke, people listened. His voice was so loud, they had no choice. At the podium, the mic was always turned away from him lest he deafen those in the room. I remember Syd's voice thundering out from behind a tense closed door negotiating session with the forest companies at the Hotel Vancouver. 'I am a simple man', Syd bellowed, 'and there's only one way to resolve this dispute and that's to put your goddamn money on the table'. The companies did. Syd Thompson's fiery trade unionism was shaped during the eight years he spent on the bum during the depression. Often in the forefront of resistance to the shabby way unemployed single men were treated, often jailed, he developed a hatred for the system that never left him. Even as he mellowed in later years, he never lost his belief in working class struggle as a way to improve society. In this podcast, you will hear Syd talking about his experiences during the depression from an interview he did with Colleen Bostwick for the Labour History Association, in 1978. You will also hear clips from an interview I did with him in 1980, just after he stepped down as the long-time president of the Vancouver Labour Council. Syd Thompson grew up in southwestern Ontario. He left school after Grade 7 to work on the family farm. That didn't keep him long. But his vagabond nature ran smack dab into the depression. Jobs disappeared overnight. Like thousands of other unemployed Canadians, Thompson rode the rails and put up in jungle camps, finding work where he could. Worst of all were the government run relief camps. They were little more than slave camps where unemployed single men were housed in miserable conditions doing hard labour for the grand total of 20 cents a day. Thompson spent a lot of time in the hated relief camps but he learned some survival tricks along the way.

Syd Thompson [00:03:15] I've been in many, many, many camps, and you were supposed to be in one camp only. If you quit, or if you got fired, this was like the Army. You were out and never to be put back in again. Well, what we used to do, and when I say we, that was a handful of us, go into a camp, you would work five days. You would get a dollar's worth of canteen tickets. You would get a dollar's worth of tobacco and you would take all the clothes that they issue you and you were issued with clothes, put them in a big gunny sack and if you had enough room you took the four blankets also and you pulled what we called a moonlight. Moonlighting today is a different thing but that was called a moonlight and you got out in the middle of the night . You caught the first rattler that you could get your hands on and get into Vancouver. And I've been in, I guess, a dozen or more camps where I did that. And if you got caught, of course, you were in jail for theft. And you got to Vancouver and you sold the stuff. And in wintertime, you got a Mackinaw that was a half decent one, you used to be able to get $5 for that. The Army boots were worth three dollars, socks were saleable, the rest of it, the pants were Army fatigue pants, nobody wanted that stuff. The Army sweaters, nobody wanted the bloody thing, the shirts, nobody want them, but the boots and the Mackinaw's in particular, they were worth money.

Music: Brother Can You Spare a Dime, sung by Bing Crosby [00:05:08] Once I built a railroad, I made it run, made it race against time. Once I built a railroad now it's done,

brother, can you spare a dime? Once I built a tower, up to the sun, brick and rivet and lime. Once I built a tower, now it's done, brother, can you spare a dime.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:05:49] With so many angry, desperate men crowded together, the relief camps were fertile ground for organizing and resistance. Syd Thompson often wound up behind bars for his activities, including 30 days in Oakalla and six months in Lethbridge, Alberta for unlawful assembly. That was a long stretch.

Syd Thompson [00:06:12] We had a riot in the -- one day we went in for supper, and the sausages were rank, and they were rank. They were sour, you know, and spoilt. And inexperienced, no sense, we should have sat right there and then and had it out in the kitchen when we were all together. But the ruckus started after we were back in our cells. And the place was in an uproar all night. Windows smashed and in the morning they dragged in the fire hose to turn the fire hose on the boys and to overcome that we plugged the toilet so that the water wouldn't drain out and then flush it and all the water would come screaming down, down the tiers and in no time at all there was a foot of water. The purpose of it is it would relieve the pressure on the fire hoses, no pressure on the fire hose. Couldn't use it. The place was an absolute shambles.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:07:19] Then came the punishment.

Syd Thompson [00:07:20] First of all, they weeded it out by the guys that plugged their toilets and flushed them. That was easy to see. Then isolated them and those of us that were in that position went on a hunger strike that went on for three days, had nothing to eat, but a little salt and water. Then we got hauled up before the warden and I remember I got six days in the black hole on bread and water. And it was a black hole and bread and water. Pitch black. Night time they would give you one blanket to sleep on. Anyway, I wound up pulling sugar beets and this guard, he was a real squirrel, and hot out there, and we would drink about every five, ten minutes, you know, and a fellow who was a Scotch guy who was the water boy, he would look after the water pail. The water pails were the way down to the other end, and this one day I said, Scotty, go and get the water pail will you. The guard said, no, don't you get the water pail, he said, god damn it, you guys are drinking every five minutes. I threw down the hoe, I said, if he don't go, I'll go and I went and got the water pail. And at noon, I'm up before the warden again. So he tells his story, and he really laid it on. And I tell my story that the guy is overdoing it and told him that I swore a curse. And I said yes, I went to get the water pail, I said, took a drink, and surely the guard then started to drink, blah, blah. The warden asked the guard, he said, and he said what is he like otherwise? And this guy, he had a slow way of talking. He said, he's a communistic agitator. He's all the time talking communism. The warden said, I'm not interested in his politics he said, I want to know how he's working. So he let me off.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:09:09] The slow-talking guard had it right. Thompson had joined the Communist Party. In those days, the CP was the main organization fighting on behalf of the unemployed. In the winter of 1937, he became an early organizer for the IWA. One of his first targets was a logging camp outside the small Alberta community of Winfield.

Syd Thompson [00:09:34] The first place that I went to, he'd been in a camp and there was a drunken Irishman runnin' this bloody camp. The secretary of the union was a little fella, he wore glasses and he was a preacher's son and he looked every part of it, you know, meek and mild. I picked one bunkhouse and then I went around all the other bunkhouses and said we're havin' a meeting. So, they all come in the bunkhouse, and I started talkin'. And I nicely got started and the door flew open and there he was, the

bloody boss. Starts screaming and hollering, get out, get out. I said I ain't getting out. The law gives me the right. I said, if you want me out of here, fella, you're gonna have to call the police. I ain't moving. And Jesus, that stumped him, you know. And he got out. I organized the whole camp. The secretary there, he was busy all night signing up. And after a while, I laid down in the bunk to have a rest, and about 11 o'clock, the door flew open again. And here he was again with the police, the RCMP. There was a constable there by the name of Pook. Constable Pook. We called him Constable Puke. And he was a monstrous bastard with his goddamn buffalo robe on, you know, and he was as ugly as a bear. He was called out from the town all the way to come into that goddamn hole in the middle of the night, and he said, what's going on here? And the secretary was sitting there peeking over his glasses, and I jumped out of bed. I said, we're organizing the place. And he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and the ass of the pants, and out the door I flew. Out into the goddamn snowbank.

Musid: We're Gonna Roll the Union On performed by the Almanac Singers [00:11:10] If the boss gets in the way we're gonna roll right over him, we're gonna roll right over him, we're gonna roll right over him. If the boss gets in the way, we gonna roll right over him, we're gonna roll the union on. We're gonna roll, we're gonna roll, we're gonna roll the union on. We're gonna roll, we're gonna roll, we're gonna roll the union on...

Rod Mickleburgh [00:11:21] That was organizing in 1937. When World War II came along, Thompson wasted no time signing up to fight fascism. After five years with the Canadian Army, much of it overseas, he wound up in the IWA in Vancouver, as outspoken as ever, blasting away at the union's moderate leadership. He branded regional president and later head of the CLC, Joe Morris, Nickel Joe, for a contract providing only a five cent raise, battled constantly with his successor, Jack Moore, and won a fierce fight himself against the union establishment to become president of the IWA's largest local in Vancouver. He did not make peace until the early 1970s, when the union's new leader, Jack Munro, convinced him that the IWA was better off with them working together. In my interview with Syd, I asked about some of the union struggles he had been involved in, both internally and against the forest companies.

Syd Thompson [00:12:44] Well, there have been a number of IWA struggles. I guess my biggest struggle in life was to become the president of the IWA local. That was 22 years ago. It was one of the dirtiest, rottenest political fights that anybody ever got involved in the labour movement in this province. And there's been lots of nasty fights. I won that fight. And I guess that probably stands out more than anything else. We've had numerous struggles in the forest industry. In fact, in the early days, almost every set of negotiations was war of one kind or another. Our settlements were so miserable and cheap that there was literally no other way of doing it. We've overcome that over the years where we get good settlements now. And the whole approach has changed. Management is different, and I guess the union is different because we get different results in different settlements. But from among those struggles, it's pretty difficult to pick any particular one out. I remember people like Nathan Nemetz who was involved in negotiations, who on more than one occasion would get me in the corner and lay the wood to me. We would have half the industry around our ears here, and he was hell-bent and determined to get the guys back to work before there was a settlement, or before he could have sensible negotiations, and I would keep telling him, well, there are some bloody things that took place long before you arrived on the goddamn scene, and they have to bloody well be resolved. And I had an understanding with Nemetz that he understood that, and I had the greatest respect for the man and every time we had him, we got good settlements and he was the kind of a

force that played a part in helping, in my opinion, settle down negotiations in the forest industry

Rod Mickleburgh [00:14:43] I wondered if the labour movement had changed, or it was Syd Thompson who had changed.

Syd Thompson [00:14:48] Well, I suppose that nothing stands still in this world, including me. Of course, we change and alter. The labour movement has changed and altered. The society in which we live has altered. As I pointed out earlier, we can now get settlements, good ones, sometimes without all-out war. In fact, frequently without all war. Twenty years ago, this seemed impossible. We have, and I quote, and go by the IWA, that's what I understand, an all together different leadership than we had 20 years ago, leadership now that brings results in my opinion and in those years they didn't. So all of that has changed and of course people change with that. You wouldn't accomplish anything if you didn't. That doesn't mean to say that you're less militant or that you are less prepared to fight, I just don't believe that. Certainly when you get older you should get wiser and I think you do, it's like the bloody jackass who stumbles over a rock, he has enough sense not to do it the second time, and the same with human beings in the labour movement. So you become smoother, and you can get results a little easier, and then they say, oh, the guy is losing his marbles, he's lost his fight, and blah blah blah, and on and on it goes. Well, I don't think that that takes place whatsoever.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:10] Syd Thompson retired at a time when some younger workers were embracing various brands of far-left socialism. He said he didn't have a problem with them speaking out against their union leaders.

Syd Thompson [00:16:21] If they didn't say what they said, I would be highly disappointed in the young fellows. Young people, above all else, have fight and should have rebelliousness in them. If they haven't got that, then we're in bad shape. And they must be allowed the opportunity to say their piece in the labour movement. Leadership has to lead, and I've always advocated that. And I don't think anybody can ever say that I was a weak kneed leader. If I saw a thing a certain way, I pushed it.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:16:55] But he said he had no time for their ideology.

Syd Thompson [00:16:58] And I don't agree with the Maoists. Trotskyites, the Marxist-Leninists, and there is a variety here today, it's like the alphabet soup, I think they're all on the wrong track. The labour movement is not prepared to accept that philosophy. I learned that many, many years ago. The Marxists and the Leninists throughout the world believe that the labour movement should be used as an instrument for political purposes. Working people in the western world resent that, don't want any part of it, and I have yet to see where that philosophy is successful. Where the system has been overthrown, it's always been where there is no labour movement. Russia, China, Cuba. In fact, the labour movement in Cuba opposed Fidel Castro almost until the very last minute and played no part in overthrowing the system there. And where you have a strong labour movement, working people object to their movement being used in that bloody fashion. They want pork chops, they want steaks on the table, they want bacon and eggs. They want a good house to live in and they are not interested in revolution. That's the philosophy of the labour movement in the western world and in that sense leadership comes into conflict with the young guys who say bullshit on that stuff, that's not what we want, we want to turn the system upside down and I repeat, working people don't want any part of that.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:18:24] Of course, when he was younger, Syd Thompson embraced radicalism himself. As you have heard, he joined the Communist Party during the depression and remained a leading member of the CP for more than a dozen years. Eventually, he quit the party and switched to the CCF, which merged with the labour movement to form the NDP in 1961. Thompson was in the forefront of the merger campaign. But he said he has no regrets over his time in the Communist Party.

Syd Thompson [00:18:55] The days when I was a young fella, practically all of the left was in the communist movement. And the communist movement, I think, played a constructive role in organizing the unorganized. They certainly played a role here in the forest industry. They played a roll in the CIO, both in the States and in this country. But as the horrendous bloody crimes of Stalin surfaced, and the close link between the communist movements throughout the world with Soviet foreign policy, all respect for the communist movement went by the bloody board in this part of the world. It's a non-entity today. And the young people now don't have anything to do with that movement. They go in other directions. They wouldn't touch the Stalinist Communist Party or the Communist Party that aligns itself with the Soviet Union with a 10-foot pole. And all of that has changed. And again, a guy like me, certainly you change. You change with events. We're products of the world that we live in. We don't live in bloody vacuums. And I suspect that if I had to do it all over again in the '30s, I would again join the Communist Party, which I did. The system was in a horrible bloody mess and no other parties had a solution. The CCF wasn't even in existence when I was on the bum at first in 1930 and '31. It didn't come into being until 1932.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:20:28] We talked at a time when Ronald Reagan had just been sworn in as President of the United States and Margaret Thatcher was wreaking havoc in Britain. So, despite changes that had produced better contracts in the forest industry, he was not optimistic about the future.

Syd Thompson [00:20:45] Oh, I have an unholy fear of what's in store. The western world is in a terrible mess. And that's no secret. Anybody with a half an eye should be able to see that. And I listened today, like everybody else, about a new president being inaugurated in the United States. There are no easy answers to today's problems. I am convinced that the politicians don't have answers. And those that think they have answers and try them, invariably it's at the expense of working people and the poor. The Conservatives in England are on a disastrous route for working people. Nine percent unemployment, guaranteed 13 percent unemployment by the end of this year. And many politicians and economists figure that it will reach 18 percent before it levels off. And this is a deliberate policy. Christ, Churchill years ago at one time said that what Britain needed was 12 working people for every 10 jobs. Well, old lady Thatcher is accomplishing that and this is the road they're on and working people they suffer. The guy that's out of work, the guy that's on welfare, the poor, are getting it in the bloody neck and I suspect we're going to go the same route in North America here. They don't know how to get out of this mess and they unload the economic troubles on those that are already overburdened with them, the poor and the working people.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:22:16] After his nearly 30 turbulent years with the IWA and 20 years as head of the Vancouver Labour Council, I asked Syd Thompson if it was a tough decision to step away from the movement that had dominated his life. Not a bit, he said.

Syd Thompson [00:22:32] I've left the IWA last summer and I really don't miss the place.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:22:39] Not a bit?

Syd Thompson [00:22:40] Not really. I'm enjoying every bit of my retirement and I keep active doing things. I've always loved to read and I have no problems putting in the time and this stuff that you have to work in order to be happy in this world is a crock of crap. This is employers' propaganda, lock, stock and barrel. You don't need to work for somebody to be happy. You can live a beautiful life without it. Just look at the rich. They spend all their time living off of somebody else's bloody work rather than their own.

Rod Mickleburgh [00:23:13] Thompson was a bit more reflective in his interview with Colleen Bostwick, noting that he married late in life at the age of 45. That was because of the depression, he explained, and the fear of having a wife and kids with no ability to support them. Now, he said, I have two children, a boy and a girl, and a fine wife. It just turned out perfect. Syd Thompson died in 1992 at the age of 77, silencing a legendary voice of the B.C. labour movement.

Theme musid: Hold the Fort [00:23:51] ...for we are coming, union hearts, be strong!

Rod Mickleburgh [00:23:58] We hope you've enjoyed this look back at one of our most prominent and controversial labour leaders. There was no one quite like Syd Thompson. Thanks to Colleen Bostwick, now Colleen Fuller, for her early interview with Syd Thompson. I did the later one in 1980. Brother Can You Spare a Dime was sung by, of all people, Bing Crosby. Roll the Union On was written by African American organizer, John L. Handcox and sung by the Almanac Singers, featuring Pete Seeger. Thanks to the other members of the podcast crew, Donna Sacuta and Patricia Wejr, and producer John Mabbott, who put it all together. I'm your host, Rod Mickleburgh. We'll see you next time, On The Line.