



No. 1 Planer, Day Shift, Industrial Timber Mills, Youbou Sawmill, July 1941. Back row: Sandager S. Chahl; Harbent S. Sandhu; Rasham S. Atwal; Hazura S. Singh; Sham S. Uppal; Rajmal S. Johal; Hanraj S. Bahala. Front row: Buran S. Gill; Swarn S. Sihota; Charn S. Attwal; Hardit S. Gill; Santa S. Gill; Gurbux S. Singh.

Kaatza Station Museum & Archives, N01603, IWA Local 1-80, Wilmer Gold Photo Collection, ©United Steelworkers Local 1-1937.

DARSHAN SINGH SANGHA

“Forever Canadian” union organizer

By Donna Sacuta

In 1943, Nigel Morgan, an executive member of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA), told a union meeting at the Youbou Mill, west of Duncan, that “one hundred percent of the East Indians had joined the union,” a historic victory for the union and its organizer, Darshan Singh Sangha.

For Punjabi and other Asian workers, the decision to join the union was not taken lightly. The barriers to union membership they faced were immense, not least of which was distrust of White-dominated unions whose history of opposing immigrant labour cut deep.

Racism was widespread. Government regulations that kept wages for non-White workers lower than for White workers were a form of institutionalized discrimination. At sawmills, the entirely male workforce

lived in bunkhouses on company property. Union organizers were typically prevented from meeting with workers by the owners.

The IWA—a union created in 1937 to unite workers in the forest industry—spanned the Pacific Northwest from British Columbia to Oregon. Its first president was Harold Pritchett, a 33-year-old shingle weaver from British Columbia. Pritchett embraced the radical heritage of the working-class, determined to work for a better life for all working people, regardless of race, colour, or religious or political affiliation.

While American members of the unions benefitted from US president Roosevelt’s New Deal for labour, Canadian members had no such rights. Employers were free to ignore unions chosen by the workers. Strikes were commonly broken up by police, strikebreakers

were protected, and employers freely blacklisted pro-union workers.¹

In Canada, big changes came with the Second World War (1939–1945). War required workplace harmony, and governments were willing to accept reforms to labour laws. For the first time, compulsory union recognition and collective bargaining were enshrined in law. This gave unions like the IWA leverage, and union organizing became easier. By 1946, the IWA in BC had over 25,000 members.

But for South Asian, Chinese, and Japanese workers, part of the diverse forest industry workforce, discriminatory regulations and laws remained a barrier to equality. Not having the right to vote in Canada—a basic right taken away in 1907—remained a significant grievance.



Darshan Singh Canadian with thousands of striking IWA members marching on the B.C. legislature in 1946.

Courtesy Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal.

The union knew that to be successful it needed a strategy that would bring non-White workers into the membership. The union's decision to hire organizers specifically for this task was pivotal to creating a strong union.

Darshan Singh Sangha was a Punjabi university student hired in the early 1940s to be a union organizer. He had arrived in British Columbia in 1937, in the same month he turned 19 and found work at a sawmill near Victoria. He quickly saw the barriers faced by non-White workers. "Invariably," explained Sangha, "East Indians were the first to be fired and last to be hired.

Only rarely was there an East Indian who would get any skilled jobs."²

He soon enrolled at the University of British Columbia, where he was introduced to radical thinkers. Sangha joined the Communist Party in 1938, and through the party he met the leadership of the IWA.

Sangha recalled the meeting where he was recruited to be a union organizer: "Nigel Morgan met me, and he made a proposition. 'Here is a vast industry, unorganized, Indians, Chinese, Japanese ... and the White workers working in terrible conditions, being kept divided by the bosses.' I agreed with him that I'll be ready to work with them for the IWA."³

For the first two years as a union organizer, said Sangha, it was tough going, even at Punjabi-owned sawmills. "A few people would join up. Most would stay out. They were afraid."⁴

With excellent oratory skills, Sangha was able to win over large numbers of workers. He reminded South Asian workers of their tradition of fighting against injustice.⁵ He also encouraged the union to take public positions on Indian independence, British colonialism, and voting rights in Canada, which resulted in signed union cards by those impacted. He gave passionate speeches at the union's conventions condemning anti-communism in the union and racist statements by the province's labour minister George Pearson.

The IWA's embrace of causes important to the South Asian community also had an impact on the entire BC labour movement. Seventy-two unions and provincial politicians endorsed a resolution in 1945 to return voting rights to South Asians that was debated—and defeated—in the BC legislature.

In 1946 a tough industry-wide strike lasted 40 days. Addressing a large union rally held in Victoria in May 1946, Sangha praised union members for their determination:

The 37,000 [woodworkers] in this province knew there would be no pay cheque next week, knew there would be less food on the table, no clothes for a while and less milk for the kiddies. These are the facts we knew before we went on strike.

We are not trying to destroy the profit system, but people must come before profits. Any system that does not recognize this will fail.⁶

Sangha returned to India in 1947, stating his heart was there. His letter of resignation to the IWA noted that "the greatest achievement of the IWA was the uniting of all woodworkers—White, Indian, Chinese, Japanese – irrespective of race and color."⁷

Sangha was murdered near his ancestral village in



Members of the IWABC District Council in Vancouver in 1943. L to R: Mark Mosher, Ernie Dalskog, Darshan Singh Sangha (standing), Winnefred Williams, Bert Melsness, Harold Pritchett, Hjalmar Bergren, Nigel Morgan, Jack Lindsay, Perry Smith.

Dave Pritchett Collection, I.W.A. Archives, Kaatz Station Museum.

Punjab by Khalistani extremists on September 25, 1986. At a memorial held in the IWA Hall in Vancouver one month later, his friends and comrades remembered their young colleague. Most of them used the name he came to be known as after he returned to India: Darshan Singh Canadian.

Clay Perry, legislative director for the IWA in Canada, spoke passionately at this memorial: “Darshan Singh was known in Canada as a Punjabi, and known in Punjab as a Canadian, indeed as The Canadian. We should do what we can now to correct that curious division and call him forever Canadian here. He fought for and was an example of a human spirit that far transcends those boundaries.”⁸

The legacy of Darshan Singh Sangha and his union, the IWA, on BC’s labour movement is profound, yet remains hardly known.

After the organizing drives of the 1940s, the union’s leadership more closely reflected the diversity of its members. Decades later, the IWA continued to play an important role in encouraging non-White workers to join unions. One example was the creation of the Canadian Farmworkers Union in BC in the 1980s. The initial connections with farmworkers were made by South Asian sawmill workers who sought support from union leaders they knew in the IWA.⁹

In August 2023, the BC Labour Heritage Centre and the Hari Sharma Foundation installed a bronze heritage

plaque next to the IWA Archives at the Kaatz Station Museum, in Lake Cowichan, dedicated to remembering Darshan Singh Sangha and the union’s fight for equality for all workers regardless of race. ■

Endnotes

1. Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2018), 100.
2. Clay Perry and Harold Pritchett, “Interview with Darshan” in *Darshan: A Book on Darshan’s Life and Contribution*, ed. H. Daudharia (Darshan Singh Sangha ‘Canadian’ Heritage Foundation, 2004), 50.
3. Sangha, quoted in Perry and Pritchett, “Interview with Darshan,” 50.
4. Sangha, quoted in Perry and Pritchett, “Interview with Darshan,” 54.
5. Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal, *Darshan Singh Canadian* (Burnaby: BC Labour Heritage Centre, 2023), https://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Darshan-Singh-Canadian_web.pdf, 9.
6. Sangha, quoted in “Strikers at Park Rally Appeal for Victoria Citizens’ Support”, *Times Colonist*, May 17, 1946, 2.
7. Sangha, quoted in Sadhu Binning and Sukhwant Hundal, “Ten Years of Darshan in Canada” in *Darshan: A Book on Darshan’s Life and Contribution*, ed. H. Daudharia (Darshan Singh Sangha ‘Canadian’ Heritage Foundation: 2004), 27–28.
8. Clay Perry speech at Darshan Singh Sangha memorial, October 12, 1986, quoted in Binning and Hundal, *Darshan Singh Canadian*, 23.
9. *Union Zindabad! Interview with Harinder Mahil, IWA, Part Two*, (Burnaby: BC Labour Heritage Centre) video, 53:41 minutes, posted May 13, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/647930201>.



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