

# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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## The Labour Movement in British Columbia 1840–1914



[1 First Economies](#)



[2 Indigenous Workers](#)



[3 Children at Work](#)



[4 Age of Steamers](#)



[5 Miners vs. Dunsmuirs](#)



[6 Gold Fever](#)

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<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup>. 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 (1840—1914) 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<sup>3</sup>, 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<sup>4</sup> 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<sup>5</sup>.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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In 1858, the discovery of gold on the Fraser River transformed British Columbia 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<sup>6</sup>. 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 most bitter 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.



<sup>7</sup>[Won Alexander Cumyow](#)

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. Asiatic labour was to become a controversial and central issue in labour and political relations for decades<sup>7</sup>. 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 Asian labour, including deportation and exclusion of Asians 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 Asiatic 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

# Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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<sup>8</sup>[Trouble on the Line](#)

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-Asiatic movement and participated in attacking Chinese neighbourhoods.



<sup>9</sup>[The Fishermen's Strike](#)

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<sup>8</sup>.



<sup>10</sup>[Where the Fraser River Flows](#)

The first major strike outside the mining industry was in the fishing industry in 1900<sup>9</sup>. 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<sup>10</sup>. 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.



<sup>11</sup>[Bows and Arrows](#)

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 Trades 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

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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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<sup>11</sup>.

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.



<sup>12</sup>[Vancouver Island War](#)

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.<sup>12</sup> 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 return to 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.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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<sup>13</sup>[Mattie Gunterman](#)

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<sup>13</sup>.

*Adapted from the article (Labour Movement) written by Mark Leier for the Encyclopedia of British Columbia. Cited in "Youth, Unions, and You" a BCTF Lesson Aids publication*  
[https://www.bctf.ca/classroom-resources/details/youth-unions-and-you-a-secondary-teacher's-guide-to-labour-studies-for-b.c.-schools-\(2001\)](https://www.bctf.ca/classroom-resources/details/youth-unions-and-you-a-secondary-teacher's-guide-to-labour-studies-for-b.c.-schools-(2001))

**To see a full listing of all the lessons, videos and podcasts created by the BC Labour Heritage Centre go to [Educate - Working People Built BC](#)**

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**Answer the following in complete sentences:**

1. Explain how Robert Dunsmuir was able to 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? Explain.
9. List the demands of the early labour movement that have been won.