

'We Are All Kin': Reconsidering Labour and Class in Calgary, 1919

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Le vaste mouvement de grèves au cours de l'année 1919 est couramment interprété dans l'historiographie soit comme un phénomène régional, typiquement représentatif de l'ouest canadien, ou comme une révolte ouvrière nationale, issue de la discorde entre les classes sociales. La situation à Calgary suggère pourtant que ces deux interprétations ne sont pas totalement satisfaisantes. Certes, les travailleurs de Calgary partageaient alors une identité et une conscience de classe, mais celles-ci étaient tempérées par une communauté de culture plus étendue et par les aspirations constantes des entrepreneurs. Ainsi, malgré une génération de déceptions économiques caractérisées par une baisse des salaires réels et un chômage élevé, les travailleurs persistèrent à miser sur le syndicalisme de métier, les réformes politiques, et la coopération entre les classes sociales. En se distinguant ainsi des deux interprétations conventionnelles, l'expérience des travailleurs de Calgary en 1919 nous invite à reconsidérer certaines conceptions établies au sujet des rapports de classe.

'We Are All Kin': Reconsidering Labour and Class in Calgary, 1919

David Bright

ON 1 MAY 1919, the Royal Commission established to enquire into Industrial Relations in Canada rolled into Calgary as part of its transcontinental tour. During the next three days, 27 witnesses aired their grievances, described social and economic conditions in Calgary, and offered Chairman T.G. Mathers their opinions about the causes of local unrest.¹ Coming just three weeks before the Winnipeg General Strike, the Calgary testimony has been used by historians to support the view that labour unrest in each city arose from similar causes and followed a similar pattern. Elizabeth Taraska's 1975 study of Calgary craft unions argued that "The war sparked a radical consciousness heretofore unknown to local organized labour...[and] produced a new working class solidarity which led to class conscious action."² A decade later, Alimohamed Damji's study of Calgary during the years 1919-24, found that "Labour radicalism bloomed in this city...primarily due to the 1914-18 Great War which created much labour unrest."³ Warren Caragata, placing Calgary's experience within a provincial context, claimed that "Rising prices, war profiteering, and the fear of post-war unemployment pushed workers to increasingly militant action."⁴ Repeatedly, historians have portrayed Calgary as an echo of the labour militancy and working-class radicalism that shook Winnipeg.⁵

¹Canada, Evidence given to the Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, 1919 [Hereafter Mathers Commission] (Calgary: 1-3 May 1919).

²See Elizabeth Taraska, "The Calgary Craft Union Movement, 1900-1920," MA thesis, University of Calgary, 1975, 46.

³Alimohamed Damji, "Militancy to Passivism: The Calgary Labour Movement, 1919-1924," MA thesis, University of Calgary, 1987, 50.

⁴Warren Caragata, "The Labour Movement in Alberta: An Untold Story," in David Leadbeater, ed., *Essays on the Political Economy of Alberta* (Toronto 1984), 115.

⁵See also Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 15; Alvin Finkel, "The Rise and Fall of the Labour Party in Alberta, 1917-42,"

David Bright, "'We Are All Kin': Reconsidering Labour and Class in Calgary, 1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 29 (Spring 1992), 59-80.

Yet a closer examination of the Royal Commission and other evidence, however, suggests a far more complex, less certain state of affairs in Calgary during labour's 'year of revolt.' This paper questions the commonly-held interpretation on two counts. First, the frequently asserted position that "Anger over conscription, war profiteering, and the federal government's clampdown on radicals...contributed to the view that a new order of society should be labour's goal" does not, in fact, appear to have been the case in Calgary.⁶ Arguments which have been advanced to account for the origins of the Winnipeg general strike should not, *a priori*, be assumed to be relevant in the case of Calgary.⁷ Second, and on related grounds, historians should be wary of overstating the actual extent of unrest in Calgary in 1919. Certainly elements of the alleged radicalism may be found, for example within the machinists' union, but these should not be held to represent the labour movement as a whole, let alone the broader working class. Calgary's sympathy strike in 1919 did not signify the advent of open class warfare in the city, but rather confirmed the majority of workers' adherence to established practices and beliefs.

II

IN 1983, THE UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG staged a symposium on the General Strike which saw a continuation of the decade-long debate between those who saw the event as an expression of western radicalism (for example, David Bercuson, Ross McCormack⁸) and those who interpreted it as one expression of a national labour revolt (for example, Bryan D. Palmer, Gregory S. Kealey, and Nolan Reilly⁹). The latter group claimed victory to be theirs: Reilly later wrote that "a consensus [had] emerged that the Winnipeg confrontation was only the tip of an iceberg of class

Labour/Le Travail, 16 (Fall 1985), 66-7; Allen Seager, "Nineteen Nineteen: Year of Revolt," *Journal of the West*, 23/4 (October 1984), 42-3.

⁶Finkel, "Labour Party in Alberta," 67.

⁷Standard accounts of the origins of the Winnipeg General Strike include David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (1974; Montreal 1990); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977), chapters 7-9.

⁸Bercuson, *Confrontation*, and "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 78/2 (June 1977), 154-75; McCormack, *Reformers* and "The Western Working-Class Experience," in W.J.C. Cherwinski & Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History* (Toronto 1985), 115-26.

⁹Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour* (Toronto 1983), 177-84; Kealey, "1919," and "The Parameters of Class Conflict: Strikes in Canada, 1891-1930," in Deian R. Hopkin and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and the Labour Movement: Wales and Canada, 1850-1930* (Wales 1989), 213-48; Nolan Reilly, "Introduction to Papers from the Winnipeg General Strike Symposium, March 1983," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 7-10.

conflict that stretched from Nova Scotia to British Columbia," while Kealey proclaimed that "the revolt was national in character and...its seeds were not rooted in any unique regional fermentation....The foundations of our understanding of 1919 must be built on national and international conjunctures."¹⁰ This triumph of interpretation was confirmed, Kealey has recently suggested, by the fact that Bercuson, McCormack and other supporters of the 'western exceptionalism' hypothesis subsequently moved away from labour history either into academic administration or other fields of interest.¹¹

The 1980s saw the ascendancy of the 'national revolt' interpretation of 1919. However, this has been something of a Pyrrhic victory, for it has had the effect of stifling constructive debate within the discipline. Nolan Reilly himself warned labour historians of this danger when he called for a balance between "the convergence of national class experiences" and a "sensitivity to individual locales and specific periods [that] are essential ingredients of good social history...."¹² Yet despite this warning there are signs that historians have continued to examine the experience of labour in other cities through the prism of the Winnipeg general strike, a result of which has been that historiographical debate remains fixed on the question of whether or not any particular "individual locale" resembled Winnipeg in its radicalism. There remains, it seems, nothing more to be said about 1919 than it was, across the country, labour's year of revolt.¹³

¹⁰Reilly, "Introduction," 8; Kealey, "1919," 15. See also Larry Peterson, "Revolutionary Socialism and Industrial Unrest in the Era of the Winnipeg General Strike: The Origins of Communist Labour Unionism in Europe and North America," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 115-31.

¹¹Gregory S. Kealey, "Writing About Labour," in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough 1990), 162. See also Jack Granatstein's comments in the *Toronto Star*, 24 June 1989. The debate over the nature and interpretation of the 1919 unrest is just one aspect of a wider, and well documented, debate between the new left and old labour historians. For example, see Kealey, "Writing About Labour," 160-8, and "Labour and Working Class History in Canada: Prospects in the 1980s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 67-94; Bryan D. Palmer, "Working-Class Canada: Recent Historical Writings," *Queen's Quarterly*, 86 (1979), 31-49, and "Listening to History Rather than Historians: Reflections on Working Class History," *Studies in Political Economy*, 20 (Summer 1986), 47-84; Kenneth McNaught, "E.P. Thompson vs. Harold A. Logan: Writing About Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review*, 62/2 (June 1981), 141-68; and David J. Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 95-112. Advances made in recent Canadian labour historiography are reviewed in Joanne Burgess, "Exploring the Limited Identities of Canadian Labour: Recent Trends in English-Canada and in Quebec," *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1990), 149-73.

¹²Reilly, "Introduction," 9-10.

¹³For example, see Glen Makahonuk, "Class Conflict in a Prairie City: The Saskatoon Working-Class Response to Prairie Capitalism, 1906-1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring

The work of Greg Kealey and others, in stressing the national dimensions of labour unrest in 1919, has been invaluable in that it has established a broad context within which local studies can be placed. Yet it is a context which historians should seek to test and challenge, as well as confirm. A study of events in Calgary illustrates this point. For too long historians have interpreted the experience of Calgary labour in 1919 either as a sympathetic response to the Winnipeg strikers, as part of a more general western radical tradition, or more recently as just one more expression of nationwide labour revolt. Amidst these changing interpretations, little new attention has been paid to the evidence for the Calgary working class itself. Thus Caragata offered no support for his assumption that inflation, profiteering, and fear of post-war unemployment radicalized Calgary workers.¹⁴ Alvin Finkel, in his study of the Alberta Labour Party, reached the same conclusion by drawing primarily upon Ross McCormack's study of western radicalism. McCormack himself, however, focused mainly on British Columbia and Winnipeg, paying little attention to such urban centres as Edmonton and Calgary.

It seems appropriate, then, to return to Calgary and to the available evidence in order to reconsider labour's actual experiences and attitudes in 1919. Any national pattern that might exist must be built from the bottom up, not from the top down. Was there really no substantive difference between working-class life in Calgary and that in Winnipeg? Did the economic and psychological grievances engendered by World War I, as itemized by Finkel, Caragata, and others, give cause for revolt? And, perhaps above all, can the strike which did take place in Calgary in 1919 really be compared with that in Winnipeg, in terms of size, working-class solidarity, and long-term causes? If not, then how are Calgary labour's experiences to be regarded?

III

BEHIND THE 1919 ROYAL COMMISSION'S general mandate to inquire into the nature of industrial unrest lay a more specific aim. This was to gain support for the federal government's proposed worker-employer councils, inspired by and modelled on the British Whitley or Joint Industrial Councils.¹⁵ Such councils, as the British labour historian G.D.H. Cole noted, aimed to give workers "a share in the 'control of industry' as far as this could be met without any interference with the rights of property or with the capitalist system." Their aim was not to determine wage-rates

1987), 89-124; Tom Mitchell, "Brandon, 1919: Labour Relations in the Wheat City in the Year of the General Strike," *Manitoba History* (Spring 1989), 2-13; James Naylor, "Toronto 1919," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers*, 1986, 33-55.

¹⁴Caragata, "The Labour Movement in Alberta," 115.

¹⁵Canada, *National Industrial Conference, 1919: Official Report of Proceedings and Discussions* (Ottawa 1919), 18-23.

or to assist collective bargaining, but instead to promote somehow industrial efficiency and industrial harmony despite neglecting these issues.¹⁶

As a result of this underlying agenda, the testimonies given to the Commission's chairman are problematical to say the least. On the one hand, speakers were encouraged to express freely their grievances regarding economic conditions and industrial relations, and many clearly took the opportunity to do so. On the other hand, the chairman and his fellow commissioners were more interested in how such grievances related to the proposed industrial councils. Should the historian put more weight on the extempore expressions of discontent and dissatisfaction, or on the replies more narrowly-focused on the prospect of councils? In Calgary, where working-class radicalism has been alleged to be widespread, why did so few workers (six, possibly seven) come forward to voice their grievances?¹⁷ On what basis were those who did come forward selected, and how representative can they be considered?¹⁸ Thus, although historians continue to plunder Commission transcripts for proof of local and national radicalism, Bercuson's recent reminder that "Such testimony is self-selected, prone to exclamations on the part of the witness and simply not verifiable" needs to be borne in mind.¹⁹

Expressions of radicalism certainly can be found in the evidence given at Calgary, although it is not always from members of the working class. For instance, it is William Irvine — minister at the city's Unitarian church, a committed supporter of the farmer-based Non-Partisan League, and co-founder of the Labour Representation League — who presented the most detailed and sustained critique of capitalism. On being questioned if he was in favour of radical, even violent change, he replied, "In Calgary evolution means doing nothing and revolution means doing something....If that is the difference between the two I am a revolutionist."²⁰

Among the few working-class respondents who expressed similar sentiments was Robert Parkyn, carpenter and member of the local branch of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), who called for the "public ownership and control of all means of production and distribution of wealth...." Similarly, machinist George Sangster argued for a productive system based on use not profit. Jean McWilliam, a

¹⁶G.D.H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement, 1789-1914* (London 1948) reprinted 1952, 368. For the operation of Industrial Councils in Canada, see Bruce Scott, "'A Place in the Sun': the Industrial Council at Massey Harris, 1919-1929," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 158-92. Also useful is Larry G. Gerber, "The United States and Canadian National Industrial Conferences of 1919: A Comparative Analysis," *Labor History*, 32/1 (Winter 1991), 42-65.

¹⁷Perhaps in anticipation of such a query, Kealey cites the instance of Edmonton railway machinist E.J. Thompson, who dismissed the Commission as "nothing but a 'talkfest' and 'camouflage' for the anti-labour Union government." Kealey, "1919," 13.

¹⁸In Calgary, on frequent occasion the Commission chairman reiterated his concern to hear from all those who wished to speak.

¹⁹Bercuson, *Confrontation*, 202.

²⁰Mathers Commission, testimony of Rev. William Irvine.

boardinghouse landlady and organizer of the city's Next-of-Kin Association, told the chairman that "if they ask us, 'Are we in favour of a bloody revolution,' why any kind of a revolution would be better than conditions as they are now."²¹ Given statements like these, the established notion of a radicalized labour movement in Calgary appears to be supported by the evidence given to the Mathers Commission.

But if the responses made regarding the proposed industrial councils are considered instead, however, the picture becomes less clear. Of the 27 men and women questioned, 15 (16 if Mayor Reuben Marshall is included) represented the interests of business and industry. All, with the singular exception of lumber dealer W.H. Cushing, and the Liberal public-works minister, endorsed the proposition. Cushing was indifferent rather than hostile.²² Of the remaining 11, six spoke on behalf of the organised labour movement and five as individuals on behalf of the city's working population.²³ The nature of the responses by these representatives of the city's labouring population ranged from the hostile through the equivocal to the generally supportive.

Strong opposition to the councils was voiced by Sangster and Parkyn, both of whom were members of the SPC, and by the two clergymen who testified. Irvine, since arriving in Calgary in 1916, had been a vocal and high-profile critic of the type of society engendered by industrial capitalism, and his stance was thus perhaps predictable. The same might also be said of Reverend A.E. Smith, a visiting left-wing, communistic Methodist from Manitoba.²⁴ This is not to invalidate such opposition, but rather to set it within a broader context. Jean McWilliam and Mary Corse, both of whom were women delegates to the Calgary Trades and Labour Council (CTLC), also expressed reservations about the existing economic system, although in contrast to other speakers they emphasized problems of consumption

²¹Mathers Commission, testimony of R.H. Parkyn; George Sangster; Jean MacWilliams (sic).

²²Mathers Commission, testimony of J.R. Brodie; A.E. Cross; W.H. Cushing; R.J. Deachman; S.J. Fee; Jesse Gouge; J.H. Garden; W. Henderson; Fred L. Irving; P.D. McLaren; W.F. McNeil; R.C. Marshall; M.B. Morrow; W.B. Nicholls; John Shanks, John K. Thomas. A detailed study of business attitudes in Calgary during this period is needed; however, see Maxwell Foran, "The Civic Corporation and Urban Growth: Calgary 1884-1930," PhD dissertation, University of Calgary, 1981.

²³The former were J.J.H. Booth (Telegraphers' Union); Mrs. George (Mary) Corse (Women's Trades and Labour Council); R.H. Parkyn (Carpenters' Union and Trades and Labour Council); George Sangster (Machinists' Union); Walter Smitten (Secretary, Alberta Federation of Labour); and F.J. White (Typographical Union). The latter, were Rev. William Irvine; Jean McWilliam; Louise McKinney (Alberta MLA); Clifford Nicholls (postal worker); Rev. A.E. Smith.

²⁴For details on Smith's political values and beliefs at this time, see A.E. Smith, *All My Life: An Autobiography* (Toronto 1977).

rather than production.²⁵ More supportive of the proposal were postal worker Clifford Nicholls, who saw such industrial councils as "a stepping stone" towards better industrial relations, and telegrapher J.J.H. Booth, who believed "that Industrial Councils would tend towards, not only harmony in the industry, but...[also] to efficiency, that is, the men would feel they knew what they were working for."²⁶

There can be no doubt that World War I had a significant social and economic impact upon the workers of Calgary, as elsewhere in Canada. But, it is also important to remember that this impact often reflected the intensification of pre-war distress, of problems that had their roots in the structure of industrial-capitalist development. Certainly, many of those who testified to the Commission in Calgary emphasized this fact. Low wages, high prices, and periodic unemployment were each identified as long-standing grievances, which had characterised even the boom years of 1903-12.²⁷ Alberta MLA Louise McKinney claimed that "our unrest is not new. We had it here before the War, and the day was simply put forward a bit by the advent of the War." Her statement found echoes in evidence given by McWilliam, Sangster, Nicholls, and Mayor Marshall.²⁸ A year earlier, Marshall's predecessor M.C. Costello had made much the same observation:

...most of our financial difficulties have for their tap root the pre-war conditions...and to a very large extent the day of reckoning has been merely postponed and threatens when it comes to be just so much more dire.²⁹

Calgarians' evidence to the Mathers Commission, then, provides a somewhat ambiguous picture of working-class radicalism within the city. Several of the workers who were prepared to voice their grievances in public also supported the Commission's proposal for industrial councils. Similarly, 'progressivism' rather than 'radicalism' might better describe the call for government control of production and profits. Other testimonies, notably those of William Irvine and Jean McWilliam, did challenge the prevailing capitalist system of production and may be indicative of a wider, unspoken radicalism among workers. Yet, taking the evidence as a whole, it is far from clear that in Calgary the 1919 Royal Commission revealed "a clarion cry for change," as Kealey has put it.³⁰ To explain the am-

²⁵David Bright, "Bonds of Brotherhood?: The Experiences of Labour in Calgary, 1903-1919," MA thesis, University of Calgary, 1990, 122-8. This aspect is treated in greater detail in Bright, "Bonds of Brotherhood," 122-8. See also Patricia Roome, "Amelia Truner and Calgary Labour Women, 1919-1935," Linda Kealey & Joan Sangster, eds., *Beyond the Vote: Canadian Women and Politics* (Toronto 1989), 89-117.

²⁶1919 Royal Commission, testimonies of Clifford Nicholls and J.J.H. Booth.

²⁷Bright, "Bonds of Brotherhood?," 10-37.

²⁸1919 Royal Commission, testimonies of MacWilliams, R.C. Marshall, Nicholls, and Sangster.

²⁹Quoted in John Herd Thompson, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918* (Toronto 1978), 58.

³⁰Kealey, "1919," 12.

bivalence of the response of workers in Calgary, it is necessary first to set the economic impact of the war within a longer context and second to consider workers' more general response to the war itself.

IV

AN ANALYSIS OF REAL WAGES during Calgary's boom years — roughly 1903-1912 — suggests that this was not a period of general prosperity for labour. Reported wage figures are available for three groups of skilled craftsmen — construction workers, metal workers, and printers — who together accounted for nearly 40 per cent of the city's labour force and who formed the dominant unions in the city.³¹ Of the six crafts that made up the building trades, only three (carpenters, electricians, and painters) made gains in real wages over the course of the decade, while for the others the losses could be considerable, such as the stonemasons whose 1912 wages were more than 30 per cent down from the 1903 level. (See Appendix I.) Similarly, among the five metal crafts only sheet metal workers were better off in 1912 than they had been ten years previously. The real wages of printing workers were notably better at the end of the period, yet even within this group the rate of increase peaked in 1909, declining thereafter. Unskilled workers, such as factory hands and builders' labourers, saw their pay continually lag behind the rate of inflation.³²

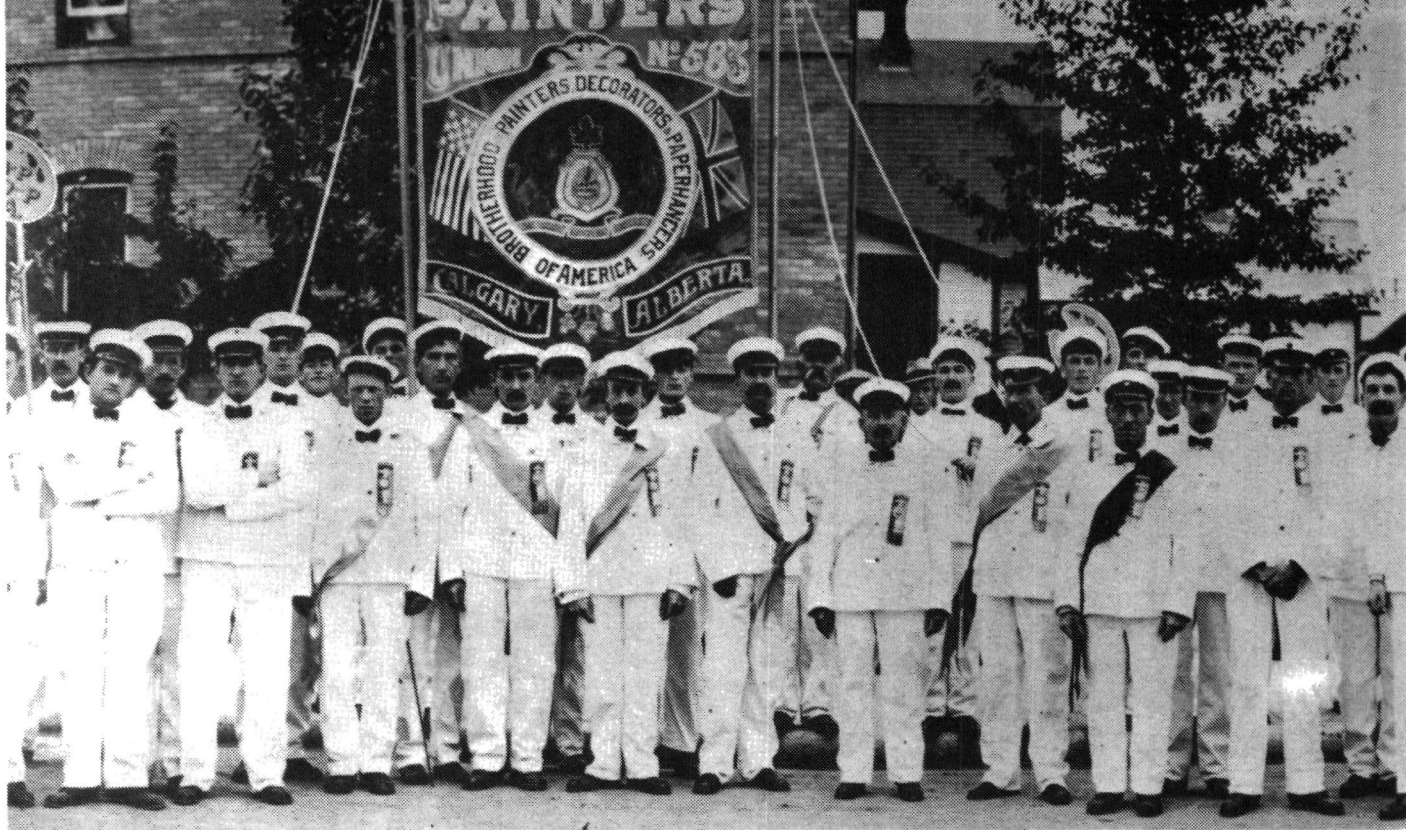
Those historians who have argued that the depression of 1913 and the subsequent experience of war radicalized Calgary labour by reversing previous prosperity therefore face the problem that real wages in the earlier period were, in fact, at best stable, and in many cases were actually declining. Labour simply did not share in the wealth created by a boom posited on real-estate speculation and capital investment, and it cannot be said that the war ended some sort of 'golden age' for workers in Calgary.

Neither can it be claimed that wage levels worsened as the war unfolded. Of the 17 trades that regularly reported wage movements to the *Labour Gazette*, not one experienced a rise in real wages during 1913-16. Even the most successful group, the boilermakers, achieved an overall increase in money wages of 11.1 per cent, compared with an increase in the prices of staple foods, fuel, and rent of 14.25 per cent (See Appendix II).

Prices rose a further 20 per cent between 1916 and the end of 1918. In the same period, virtually all groups of workers, except for the building trades, received wage increases above this rate of inflation. Most significantly, machinists, boilermakers, iron moulders, and blacksmiths — those trades most directly involved in the 1919 strike — all received higher real wages in 1919 than they had in 1913 or 1916,

³¹*Census of Canada*, 1911, vol. 6, 342-50. This figure excludes white-collar workers. For details of these trades and their unions, see Taraska, "Calgary Craft Union," 1-28.

³²The question of real wages in the pre-war period is discussed at greater length in Bright, "Bonds of Brotherhood?" 17-30.



Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators and Paperhangers of America, Local #583, celebrating Labour Day at the Labour Temple, Calgary, 1912. (Photographer: Marcell, Calgary; picture courtesy of the Glenbow Museum Archives, Calgary.)

whereas it was the building trades — those who rejected the strike call — which had suffered the greatest loss.³³ Over all, wage levels were still low in 1919, and remained grounds for complaint, but they were not in themselves the sufficient cause of any industrial unrest.

The other main concern of labour cited at the Royal Commission was the fear and the reality of unemployment. These too reached a peak well before 1919. From early 1913 to the end of 1915 there was a solid core of some 3,000–4,000 unemployed in the city.³⁴ In June 1914, the Associated Charities Association declared itself “overtaxed in caring for the destitute,” and by March 1915 was spending more than \$8,000 a month on relief.³⁵ The situation was probably at its worst in late 1914 when seven thousand walked the streets in search of work.³⁶

It was indeed in this period, rather than in 1919, that the problem of unemployment presented a radical threat. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the SPC helped organize a local League of the Unemployed, which in early 1914 marched on City Hall with banners declaring ‘Work, Starve or Steal’ and ‘Why Starve in a Land of Plenty?’³⁷ The 350-strong procession disintegrated into a riot that ended with the police making several arrests. William McConnell, IWW local secretary, allegedly incited marchers to “take what you want for yourselves...go where there is plenty and take plenty.” For this he was arrested, tried, and convicted for sedition — the first such case in Canada, claimed the *Albertan*. Meanwhile, Frank Molan, an unemployed demonstrator, was sentenced to six weeks’ hard labour for allegedly assaulting Police Chief Alfred Cuddy.³⁸

Reports on the state of unemployment made by the local *Labour Gazette* correspondent and by union locals to the CTLC reveal that once again the worst was over by 1916. In February of that year, the Civic Labour Bureau — established in 1912 to put unemployed workers in contact with employers short of labour — was deemed to have served its purpose and was closed down indefinitely.³⁹ The Associated Charities Association reported a similar improvement. In August 1915

³³Bright, “Bonds of Brotherhood?” For problems of using this evidence, see Joseph Harry Sutcliffe, “Economic Background of the Winnipeg General Strike: Wages and Working Conditions,” MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1972, 68-102.

³⁴*Albertan*, 1, 24 January 1914.

³⁵*Labour Gazette*, 14, February 1914, 949; *Labour Gazette*, 15, April 1915, 1173.

³⁶*Labour Gazette*, 13, April 1913, 1069, June 1913, 1368; *Labour Gazette*, 14, July 1913, 34, August 1913, 142, September 1913, 258, May 1914, 1278. *Albertan*, 1 January 1914, 24 January 1914, 15 January 1915. Report of Unemployment Conference at Calgary, *Albertan*, 6 November 1914.

³⁷*Albertan*, 3 January, 8 January 1914.

³⁸*Albertan*, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15 January 1914, 18 February 1914. See also David Schulze, “The Industrial Workers of the World and the Unemployed in Edmonton and Calgary in the Depression of 1913-1915,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 56-8.

³⁹*Labour Gazette*, 16, February 1916, 884. While the bureau could only locate work for the unemployed, and not create jobs, its success was nevertheless considerable, having placed seven thousand in work by the end of 1914. *Albertan*, 4 December 1914.



United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, Local #1779, passing along 8th Avenue at 1st Street, Calgary, Labour Day parade, 1912. (Photographer: J.L. Welch; picture courtesy of the Glenbow Museum Archives, Calgary.)

it assisted a total of 238 cases; a year later, relief was claimed by a mere fifty families.⁴⁰ By July 1916 "there appeared to be but few unemployed in the city."⁴¹

A number of factors helped relieve wartime unemployment. A combination of patriotism and desperation caused thousands in Calgary to enlist well in advance of the introduction of conscription.⁴² Fifteen hundred men signed up in the first month of the war, and by May 1916 the *Albertan* claimed that ten thousand Calgarians had responded to the call.⁴³ Such a figure cannot be substantiated and is doubtless an exaggeration, but the extent of enlistment should not be underestimated. Calgary Fire Chief James Smart saw 56 of his crew enlist between August 1914 and March 1916, and consequently was unable to respond to a request from Mayor W.G. Gillett of Prince George, B.C., for a replacement senior officer:

Before the war it would have been a very easy matter to send you just the man you need but I have lost so many good men through enlistment that I find it difficult to spare such a man as I would recommend for the position.⁴⁴

Entire unions enlisted, and up to 60 per cent of all union men put on the uniform.⁴⁵ In 1916, Labour Day celebrations had to be cancelled because, the *Albertan* claimed, "so few men remain in the city, and so many are marching on the grim parade that leads to the battleground."⁴⁶

Whilst enlistment eased the unemployment situation during the war, some feared that the end of the war would throw thousands of workers back into an overcrowded labour market and thus create havoc.⁴⁷ Labour leaders feared especially that returning soldiers might be used as strike-breakers. This fear was not totally unfounded, as veterans in February 1916 had indeed accepted work at wage levels previously rejected by striking motion picture operators.⁴⁸ Speaking in the midst of demobilization, Mayor Reuben Marshall told the Mathers Commission that he hoped that many of the estimated 5,000 returning veterans would be re-absorbed into the workforce, but conceded that "...the time will come when we cannot carry that policy on. It is going to be expensive for the city as it is but we have tried to extend our programme to help that out."⁴⁹

⁴⁰*Labour Gazette*, 16, August 1915, 165, August 1916, 1458.

⁴¹*Labour Gazette*, 16, July 1916, 1354.

⁴²*Albertan*, 9 September 1914, 20 March 1916.

⁴³*Labour Gazette*, 15, September 1914, 363; *Albertan*, 2 May 1916.

⁴⁴Glenbow-Alberta Institute (GAI), Calgary Fire Department papers, M1881, box 3, f. 59, Smart-Gillett, 8 December 1916.

⁴⁵Taraska, "Calgary Craft Union," 46; *Nutcracker*, 17 November 1916; *Labour Gazette*, 16, August 1915, 165.

⁴⁶*Albertan*, 2 September 1916.

⁴⁷Mathers Commission, testimony of Marshall and Parkyn.

⁴⁸Taraska, "Calgary Craft Union," 50.

⁴⁹Mathers Commission, testimony of Marshall.



View of 1st Street West, Calgary, looking north, ca. 1916. (Photographer: n/k; picture courtesy of Glenbow Museum Archives, Calgary.)

Again, however, it appears that historians have tended to overstate such fears. P.D. McLaren, a metal trades employer, cited the case of his own industry in which reabsorption had been complete, and argued that any labour unrest was due not so much to fear of unemployment but to the alleged agitation of One Big Union (OBU) supporters. In May 1919, Detective-Corporal S.R. Waugh of the RNWMP, in one of his reports on the local situation, noted that "The returned man and conservative labour man will not stand for disorders, Bolshevism or the Soviet form of Government ideas; if any element start [sic] that sort of thing, he will be the first to try and put it down."⁵⁰ For its part, organised labour sought to mitigate any problems posed by demobilisation. The CTLC sought to re-educate returning men and to ease them back into work through cooperation with the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA).⁵¹ In return, the GWVA actively supported the CTLC's bid to establish a provincial labour bureau, and returning veterans regularly attended labour meetings.⁵² The organization also passed a resolution seeking to obtain cash grants from the federal government to assist the reintegration of soldiers. This resolution in February 1919 was resisted by the government and defeated a month later, but as Desmond Morton's study of Canada's military demobilization suggests, the "rapid absorption of most veterans in the labour force" was also a telling factor in the resolution's failure.⁵³

Other factors which alleviated war-time unemployment include: the availability of harvest work in the summer months; work provided as a result of the war effort; new public works initiated by the city council; job-sharing schemes whereby shorter shifts were introduced; the return of whole families to Britain; and the expansion of charitable organizations.⁵⁴ Unemployment certainly remained a problem in 1919, but to far less an extent than in 1914 or 1915. Furthermore, the spring of 1919 was a mild one and enabled work outside to resume unusually early.⁵⁵ Unemployment, like low wages, was not in itself a significant factor that might account for any radical behaviour by Calgary labour in that year.

Contrary to Taraska, Damji, Caragata *et al.*, the events of May 1919 in Calgary cannot be interpreted simply as a reaction by labour to worsening economic conditions. The overall situation had been far worse in 1916, yet even then labour

⁵⁰National Archives of Canada (NAC), Report of Detective-Corporal S.R. Waugh, 21 May 1919, RG 27, vol. 313, f. 151A.

⁵¹GAI, Calgary Trades & Labour Council minutes, *Minutes*, M4743, 18 January 1918.

⁵²*Albertan*, 7 October 1918, 19 January 1918. See also CTLC Minutes, 16 March 1917, 3 January 1918. The CTLC in 1917 passed a motion that "all returning enlisted men should be reinstated in their jobs if they so wished." CLTC Minutes, 19 January 1917.

⁵³Desmond Morton, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930* (Toronto 1987), 122-9.

⁵⁴*Labour Gazette*, 14, September 1913, 258; *Labour Gazette*, 15, August 1914, 165; *Labour Gazette*, January 1915, 790; *Albertan*, 2 May 1915, 16 May 1915, 25 December 1913, 19 September 1914, 28 June 1916.

⁵⁵Mathers Commission, testimony of Parkyn.

had showed little sign of overt radicalism. Nor can it accurately be said that the introduction of conscription in 1917 radicalized the city's labour movement.⁵⁶ To understand why not, it is necessary to reconsider the more general working-class response to the outbreak of war and subsequent events in Winnipeg.

V

DONALD AVERY'S examination of the 'radical alien' in Winnipeg claims that the outbreak of World War I "magnified many of the problems facing immigrants in Canada."⁵⁷ While this may have been the case in Winnipeg and other centres populated by a high proportion of East Europeans, it was not true of Calgary, which remained heavily British in terms of ethnic origin throughout the early 1900s.⁵⁸ The 1921 census shows those of British origin constituted more than 82 per cent of the city's population, with no other single ethnic group exceeding 3 per cent. In Winnipeg, those of British origin in 1921 amounted to just more than 67 per cent, while substantial numbers were found among other ethnic groups.⁵⁹ Although care is needed in drawing inferences from such figures, the homogeneously Anglo-Canadian nature of Calgary society is relevant to understanding working-class responses during the war. There are indications, for example, that the British monarchy and the Empire remained symbols of respect and even affection among Calgary workers.⁶⁰ It is therefore not surprising that Calgary workers were at the forefront of enlistment as soon as war broke out. They were also generous contributors to the Patriotic Fund, established in 1914 to provide relief for families of soldiers and to support the war effort. As the *Albertan* noted of the city's response to this appeal:

It was quickly demonstrated that the people of Calgary did not have a great deal of money to spare and the individual contributions were small....[I]t was noticeable that the most liberal givers, in proportion to their means, were working men and people in moderate circumstances. Men out of work managed to find something and widows who had hard work to get along at all, were glad of the opportunity of doing something.⁶¹

⁵⁶Martin Robin, "Registration, Conscription, and Independent Labour Politics, 1916-1917," *Canadian Historical Review*, 47/2 (June 1966), 101-18.

⁵⁷Donald Avery, "The Radical Alien and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919," in Carl Berger & G. Ramsey Cook, eds., *The West and the Nation: Essays in Honour of W.L. Morton* (Toronto 1976), 212.

⁵⁸*Census of Canada*, 1901, vol. 1, 392-93; *Census of Prairie Provinces*, 1916, xxi. See also Lewis G. Thomas, "The Rancher and the City: Calgary and Cattlemen, 1883-1914," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 16/4 (June 1968), 203-15.

⁵⁹Based on figures quoted in Max Foran, *Calgary: An Illustrated History* (Toronto 1978), 178 and Alan F.J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: An Illustrated History* (Toronto 1977), 204.

⁶⁰*Albertan*, 26 April 1902, 27 May 1910; GAI, McCallum family papers, M715, f. 3; GAI, John Gillseppe diary, Film AB, entries for 22, 30 January 1901.

⁶¹*Albertan*, 16 September 1914.

74 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

In January 1917, the CTLC held an open meeting to discuss whether or not Calgary workers should support the federal government's national registration scheme. Socialist W.J. Dyson moved that any decision should be left to the individual, but this was defeated in favour of a motion pledging "...the Trade Unionists and Citizens of Calgary...to support a National Service Scheme which has for its Object the mobilization and use of the Natural Resources and Utilities of this Country for the direct benefit of the State."⁶²

This motion passed all but unanimously, and appears to have been the CTLC's final word on the issue. In June 1917, a request from the Vancouver SPC to take part in a general strike should conscription be enforced was filed by the CTLC without comment.⁶³ Nor did local unions show any sign of taking the initiative.⁶⁴ This lack of organized opposition contrasts with the enthusiasm for conscription displayed by 'Johnnie Canuck Mechanic,' a working-class *Albertan* correspondent in 1915. Having failed to pass the enlistment medical on three separate occasions, he vented frustration in a vitriolic letter:

...when I turn to my trade I find the positions are filled with apparently able-bodied men, who are working for whatever the boss wishes to hand them on pay day, and a great many of these are old country yellow streaked individuals. I think a little conscription judiciously applied would remove a considerable amount of dissatisfaction now existing among good loyal Canadians.⁶⁵

It seems then, that there are problems interpreting the alleged revolt by Calgary labour in 1919 either as a reaction against deteriorating economic conditions or as a rejection of wartime political measures. The war did not end a 'golden age' of labour prosperity, for in terms of wages and employment security no such age ever had existed in the city. Neither did the advent of conscription unite the city's workforce into a rebellious, militant, or radical working class. The question remains, then, exactly what was the nature and extent of labour revolt in Calgary in the year of the general strike? An examination of the referendum vote on the OBU and the sympathy strike in support of Winnipeg workers suggests that both have been overstated.⁶⁶

⁶² CTLC Minutes, 5 January 1917; *Albertan*, 17 August 1917.

⁶³ CTLC Minutes, 22 June 1917.

⁶⁴ ITU Minutes, 30 August 1917; GAI, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 348 correspondence, M2215, box 4, f. 19, correspondence of 15 August 1917.

⁶⁵ *Albertan*, 30 September 1915.

⁶⁶ For details on the OBU and Winnipeg strike, see Bercuson, *Confrontation*, and *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978).

VI

THE OBU REFERENDUM was initiated at the Western Labour Conference in Calgary, March 1919, and held two months later in May.⁶⁷ It is unclear exactly why Calgary was chosen as the venue for this potentially provocative assembly. Taraska writes that the city's 1918 freighthandlers' strike, which had threatened to turn into a mini-general strike, "confirmed [that] Calgary was fertile ground for propagating left wing unionism among restless and discontented workers," and thus made the city a suitable location for "a radical union campaign in 1919."⁶⁸ Bercuson suggests that Calgary's central location in the West was reason enough for its choice, especially as organizers Dave Rees and Victor Midgley hoped that the British Columbia and Alberta Federations of Labour would move their spring conventions to the prairie city and so save time and money.⁶⁹ Whatever the true reason for the planners' choice of Calgary as venue, events were to show that location alone did not make Calgary synonymous with western labour radicalism. Although the CTLC voted in favour of the new organization in principle, Calgary locals displayed little interest or approval. Twenty-four unions did not even bother to register a vote; 14 unanimously opposed the organisation; and the remaining 20 voted with some equivocation.⁷⁰ In all, only 728 individual votes were recorded in favour of the OBU.⁷¹ To interpret this minimal response on the question of industrial unionism as widespread dissatisfaction with the existing craft-based unions is surely to stretch the evidence.

The response to the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 was similarly limited.⁷² When the CTLC strike committee eventually organized sympathy action, no more than 1,500 workers in total came out in support, compared with the 22,000 who downed tools in Winnipeg on 15 May.⁷³ The strike gained additional momentum only when it became confused with a separate dispute involving city postal workers, at which point the building trades entered the fray for the first time.⁷⁴ F.E.

⁶⁷For details of this conference, see Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour* (Kingston 1968), 173-7; and McCormack, *Reformers*, 157-8.

⁶⁸Taraska, "Calgary Craft Union," 72.

⁶⁹Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 72. See also Gerald Friesen, "'Yours in Revolt': The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Canadian Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 141.

⁷⁰For example, all 142 members of the ITU voted against both the OBU proposal and the recommended general strike in support of the six-hour day. ITU Minutes, 26 April 1919. See also GAI, Sheet Metal Workers Union Local 254 Minutes, M2230, 1 May 1919.

⁷¹Damji, "Militancy," 68, 168. See also Robin, *Radical Politics*, 179.

⁷²Robin, *Radical Politics*, and Warren Caragata, "The Labour Movement in Alberta," 119.

⁷³Even the size of the strike in 1919 was not without precedent. In July 1912, 1,200 carpenters struck in the city. *Albertan*, 5 July 1912.

⁷⁴SMW Minutes, 11 May, 5 June 1919.

76 LABOUR/LE TRAVAIL

Harrison, a local official of the federal labour department, wrote to Labour Minister Gideon Robertson on 7 June that:

Very little mention is now made of the Winnipeg strike. The attitude of the strike committee is that of one in sympathy with the postal workers. If this latter situation can be cleared, I am convinced that the strike in Calgary would cease within twenty-four hours.⁷⁵

Even the public efforts of noted radicals such as Bill Pritchard, Joe Knight, and William Irvine did little to inspire mass support either for the OBU or the General Strike. Pritchard's emotive and fiery address in Calgary's Mewata Park on 7 June attracted fewer than 500 workers.⁷⁶ Even more damning were the comments made by one metal trades worker on hearing of Pritchard's arrest in Winnipeg: "...it serves him well right [sic], every one of your "REDS" that is keeping us from our work should be in jail, and I hope that you will all get it later or sooner."⁷⁷

Even for those who did support the Calgary sympathy strike, the motive was often no more revolutionary than the hope of redressing some longstanding complaint. On the eve of the metal trades' walkout, CPR freighthandler Frank Grier rationalized about the action in pragmatic terms:

The different trades all have grievances, small and large, such as the miners and the railwaymen and others, and if these different trades struck separately, no doubt they would lose out, so that our forces might as well be combined and make one issue out of the whole strike, thereby getting the respective grievances settled once and for all.⁷⁸

The strike in Calgary was eventually called off on 25 June after 30 days, "with considerable dissension amongst the strikers."⁷⁹ Kealey has calculated that a total of 31,700 work-days were lost, making it the third largest stoppage behind Winnipeg and Vancouver.⁸⁰ Yet this so-called revolt had achieved nothing, and moreover had been rejected or ignored by more than 90 per cent of the city's workforce. Even those historians who argue that the war radicalized Calgary's working class are forced to admit that in Calgary's sympathetic strike was the least-impressive of all those staged in the west.⁸¹ Calgary, unlike Winnipeg, did not

⁷⁵NAC RG 27, vol. 313, f. 151A, ms 72699.

⁷⁶Report by Inspector J.W. Spalding, Commanding Calgary Sub-District, 7 June 1919, NAC, RG 27, vol. 313, f. 151A.

⁷⁷Quoted in Report by RNWMP Officer "F.W.Z.," 20 June 1919, NAC, RG 27, vol. 313, f. 151A.

⁷⁸Report by J.W. Spalding, RNWMP Inspector, Calgary Sub-District, 21 May 1919, NAC, RG 27, vol. 313, f. 151A.

⁷⁹Spalding Report, 24 June 1919.

⁸⁰Kealey, "1919," 29.

⁸¹Damji, "Militancy," 89. Only 200 Calgary workers turned up at Mewata Park in May 1919 to hear a speech by H.L. Rogers of the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council. *Calgary Herald*, 28 May 1919.

see labour grievances escalate into open class warfare in 1919. Labour historians thus should beware over-emphasising expressions of radicalism and instead turn their attention to other, potentially more fruitful questions. For example, what role did institutions, such as churches, charitable organisations, and even trade unions, play in the formation of class relations in Calgary — did they accentuate or mitigate economic inequality? What were the determinants of social or class mobility in Calgary in the first two decades of the century, as it was transformed from a frontier settlement to an urban and semi-industrial metropolis? The reaction of the city's workforce in May 1919 must be assessed not in terms of a national labour revolt but in terms of Calgary's own industrial development.

VII

WITH THE RECENT REPUBLICATION of Bercuson's *Confrontation at Winnipeg* and continuing reassessments of western labour radicalism, the debate over the nature and implications of 1919 looks set to continue.⁸² The more modest aim of this paper is to suggest that the experiences of local urban (and rural) centres should be studied in their own right; whether or not they fit the pattern of Winnipeg or the alleged national revolt should not be a primary issue. The complexities and contradictions of class and class relations should be explained, not explained away. Collectively, Calgary workers certainly formed a working class, inasmuch as they were men and women who recognized, in E.P. Thompson's words, "...the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests [were] different from (and usually opposed to) theirs."⁸³ Yet at the same time, their awareness of class was tempered by broader cultural bonds, by the fact that a great many had come to Canada inspired by capitalist or entrepreneurial ambition, and by the fact that they were not regarded or treated as 'aliens,' radical or otherwise.⁸⁴

Dr. Samuel Johnson once referred to a hasty remarriage as "the triumph of hope over experience." The phrase might aptly be used to describe the class-consciousness of Calgary workers in 1919. Despite a generation of economic disillusionment, labour continued to place faith in craft unions, political reforms and class co-operation. Through such means, it was believed, workers would eventually be rewarded with the wealth they had long been promised and had travelled far to receive. Robert Parkyn, carpenter by trade and socialist in ideology, illustrated this merging of experience and optimism in his closing comments to the 1919 Royal

⁸²For instance, see Jeremy Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia's Hard-Rock Miners, 1895-1903," *Canadian Historical Review*, 71/3 (September 1990), 317-46.

⁸³E.P. Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1963), 9.

⁸⁴On the impact of aspirations and expectations on class behaviour, see Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York 1976), 29-32.

Commission. On behalf of the Calgary Trades and Labour Council, Parkyn politely told T.G. Mathers:

Although we have spoken against our present competitive system, and our present antagonistic system, as I think it is, we have not in any way thought of antagonism against you. I believe humanity is good at heart. We are all kin, we are all trying to create a better condition, and I believe that we will eventually come to it.⁸⁵

Whether Parkyn's valediction was, in Greg Kealey's words, "a clarion cry for change" or a "cautious note of respectability...of near deference" is open to question.⁸⁶ Only further research into labour's social, cultural, and political aspirations in Calgary will provide the beginnings of an answer. It is time, therefore, to return to the evidence.

⁸⁵Mathers Commission, concluding address of Robert H. Parkyn.

⁸⁶Kealey, "1919," 12.

I wish to thank Professor Howard Kimeldorf and Julie Green for their constructive criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper, and also Labour/Le Travail's three anonymous reviewers.

APPENDIX I
Movement of Real Wage Rates, 1902-12 [1903 = 100.0]

	1903	1906	1909	1912
Bricklayers	100.0	114.5	100.6	92.1
Carpenters	100.0	92.7	104.2	105.7
Electricians	100.0	92.7	92.7	101.7
Stonecutters	100.0	81.6	74.2	69.3
Plumbers	100.0	115.5	124.0	98.4
Labourers	100.0	115.3	101.3	90.4
Machinists	100.0	92.7	93.1	93.5
Iron Moulders	100.0	108.2	108.6	96.9
Metal Workers	100.0	97.3	97.7	114.5
Blacksmiths	100.0	108.2	108.6	96.9
Boilermakers	100.0	108.2	108.6	82.1
Compositors	100.0	105.9	116.4	109.0
Pressmen	100.0	105.9	116.4	114.2

Source: Department of Labour. *Wages & Hours of Labour in Canada, 1901-20* (1921).
 Department of Labour. *Board of Inquiry into the Cost of Living* (1916).
 (Calculations are my own.)

APPENDIX II
Movement of Real Wage Rates, 1913-1918 [1913 = 100.0]

	1913	1914	1916	1918
Bricklayers	100.0	98.4	87.5	83.4
Carpenters	100.0	98.4	82.1	82.9
Electricians	100.0	98.4	87.5	72.9
Stonecutters	100.0	98.4	87.5	84.2
Plumbers	100.0	98.4	84.2	89.8
Painters	100.0	98.4	87.5	80.2
Labourers	100.0	98.4	84.2	76.4
Machinists	100.0	98.4	97.2	105.0
Iron Moulders	100.0	98.4	97.2	108.2
Metal Workers	100.0	98.4	87.5	99.5
Blacksmiths	100.0	98.4	93.3	102.9
Boilermakers	100.0	98.4	97.2	112.5
Compositors	100.0	98.4	87.5	82.8
Pressmen	100.0	92.8	95.1	97.1
Factory Workers	100.0	92.8	95.1	97.1

Source: *Labour Gazette*, vols. 13-19.

Department of Labour, *Wages and Hours of Labour in Canada, 1901-20* (1921).

Department of Labour. *Report of Board into Cost of Living*, vol. 1 (1915), 137.

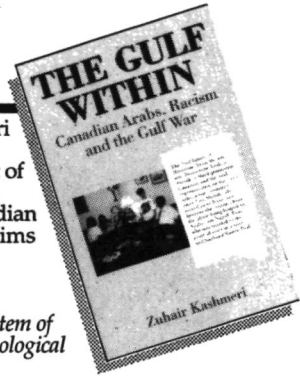
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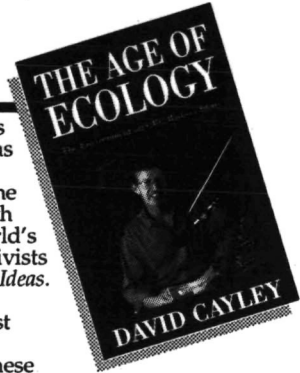


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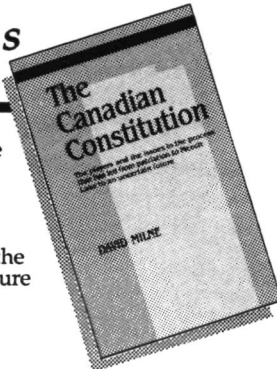


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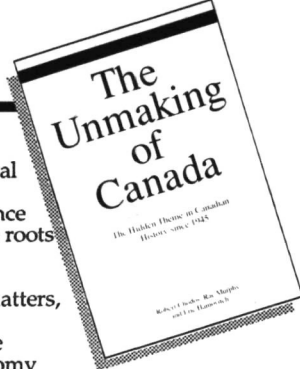


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