

# "Yours In Revolt" The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Canadian Labour Movement

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## **"YOURS IN REVOLT":**

### *The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Canadian Labour Movement*

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The militancy of western Canadian workers during the first two decades of this century culminated in 1919 in secessions from the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada and the American Federation of Labor, the establishment of the One Big Union, and a wave of strikes. In part because of its innate drama, in part because it profoundly affected the course of socialist politics and trade union organization in the nation, the unprecedented outburst has attracted many students in the intervening years. Much of this attention has been focussed upon Winnipeg where, it is now suggested, conditions unique to that city were primarily responsible for the six-week general strike.<sup>1</sup> A number of studies have also examined the broader contours of the labour movement in the four western provinces and, in general, have concluded that syndicalist forces were temporarily victorious in the spring of 1919.<sup>2</sup> Placed in the context of the original participants, these recent interpretations have rejected the argument of court, government and business that the Winnipeg general strike was simply the first stage of a revolutionary conspiracy; the strikers' contention, that they sought only the right to collective bargaining and a wage increase, has been upheld. But the modern consensus seems to accept the second assertion of the propertied classes: a revolutionary plot was afoot in western Canada; the One Big Union would subvert the established order by following a secret syndicalist blueprint for revolution. This conclusion is misleading. It is founded upon a misunderstanding of the role of the Socialist Party of Canada in 1919 and thus of the SPC's creation, the

One Big Union. Far from syndicalism, the SPC leaders advocated short-term reforms, sought to avoid outbreaks of violence, and assumed the continued relevance of their political party. They were, indeed, committed to eventual revolution, but they did not see the One Big Union as the *sine qua non* for the arrival of utopia. And the strikes which coincided with the founding of the OBU, spreading from Winnipeg across the West in May and June of 1919, marked the failure, not the victory, of the Socialist Party of Canada. This paper documents the assumption of leadership in the western labour movement by members of the Socialist Party of Canada and provides an assessment of the party's impact upon events in the spring of 1919.

## I

The Socialist Party of Canada was small and carefully organized. Its members were well-informed and often had been required to pass an examination in Marxist doctrine before admission. They accepted the strictures of the executive upon the necessity of discipline and unity and education, fundamentals of a revolutionary movement, and often paid the price for doctrinal purity by forfeiting popular support. Organized by means of constant correspondence with headquarters in Vancouver, the few thousand party members studied the writings of Marx and Engels and Liebknecht and Kautsky and a dozen others in weekly educational meetings of their locals in western and, in rarer cases, eastern Canada. They constituted an exclusive vanguard which rejected the mild reformism and broadly-based movements of less-committed revolutionaries. Theirs was the scientific gospel of Marxism as interpreted by E.T. Kingsley and, later, by a growing number of younger socialists. As the years passed, and as the original leaders were pushed out of the party because of ideological disagreements, control passed into the hands of a small coterie in Vancouver Local No. 1. By 1915, W.A. Pritchard, thoughtful and widely-read, had become the party intellectual. Several years later, Jack Kavanagh, an aggressive and articulate platform speaker, became a strong factor in British Columbia labour politics. Victor Midgley was always near the centre of trade union administration in Vancouver, and C. Stephenson performed similar functions as secretary of the party. These four were the heart of the group which developed a programme for revolution. They were assisted by a number of party members in other centres, notably Tom Naylor on Vancouver Island, Joe Knight in Edmonton, and Dick Johns and Bob Russell in Winnipeg. These socialists were also leaders in the trade union movement, but their loyalty to party preceded loyalty to unions.<sup>3</sup>

The great influence of the Socialist Party during 1918-19 depended in part upon dissension in the national trade union movement. Canadian union solidarity had been slowly developing prior to 1914 but the pressures of the war, from munitions production to manpower registration, had produced divisions in the most important forum for organized labour, the Trades and Labor Congress.<sup>4</sup> The overwhelming defeat of various radical and reform proposals at the 1918 Congress convention in Quebec City marked a low point for the national organization and the beginning of a secessionist movement. Significantly, though dissatisfaction with Congress policies could be found in many parts of the country, this secession was based upon a regional interpretation of the differences: eastern reaction had triumphed over western enlightenment according to commentators from west of the Great Lakes. One convention visitor was told, "the hope of labour lies in the West. Eastern labour men didn't see far enough ahead.... If our salvation is to come it must come from the West."<sup>5</sup> Such an interpretation of the Congress was patently incorrect. In the only roll-call vote during the proceedings, (the sole means of determining geographic patterns), 29 westerners and 51 easterners confronted 3 westerners and 81 easterners: the dissatisfied group at Quebec was much larger than simply the western delegation, but the western delegates were almost unanimous in endorsing the need for change. They went home with the conviction that their region had been wronged.<sup>6</sup>

Plans had already been laid to prevent comparable debacles in the future. At an unprecedented regional caucus, all but a handful of western delegates in Quebec agreed that some sort of regional conference should be held prior to the next convention in order to ensure a stronger presence in the Congress. David Rees, of the United Mine Workers, and Victor Midgley, secretary of the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council, who were named to this "Western Inter-Provincial Convention Committee," began immediately to organize a major conference for union representatives of the four western provinces, to convene in Calgary in March of 1919. Though there remains no evidence on how this decision was made, it is likely that the organizers were unsure of their footing and their object at this time. Writing several months later, David Rees explained that a spring meeting would provide an opportunity to seize the initiative within the Canadian labour movement. By then, he said, many more soldiers would have returned home, breadlines would probably be longer, the coalition government, ("whose long suit is nearer profiteering or most certainly orders-in-council than statesmanship") would be disintegrating, and a better estimate would be available on "how the Peace Conference, the inter-Allied Labour Conference, the Spartacus movements, and other

movements are progressing." The western delegates could establish a policy "that we can proclaim to the world as the will of the labour movement of this country." Rather than an affront to their eastern comrades, Rees concluded, "there is every indication that a well reasoned rational programme carried by the Western conference will be accepted by the Canadian labour movement generally."<sup>7</sup> The westerners would provide a focus for the many dissatisfactions of union members across the country and a necessary alternative to the traditional AFL-TLC viewpoint.

Secession from the national Congress was not even contemplated. Instead, the meeting would presumably address the issues which had been raised at the Congress in 1918: consideration of industry rather than craft as the basis for union organization, reduction of the authority of international union headquarters, greater reliance upon provincial labour federations as a unit of union government, and militancy in political and economic disputes including, perhaps, the threat of a general strike as a means to ensure that labour would influence the so-called "reconstruction" of Canadian society after the war.<sup>8</sup> That they hoped for national endorsement of such a programme was an indication of the temper of the times as well as of their eternal optimism.

Indeed, interest in socialism increased markedly amongst western workers in 1918-19. Sunday meetings on such topics as the Russian revolution, the class struggle, and plans for reconstruction won extraordinary audiences in Vancouver.<sup>9</sup> Circulation of the *British Columbia Federationist*, largest labour journal in the West, stood at 6300 in January 1918, 8200 in June, and 15,000 by the end of the year.<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Knight in Alberta and Dick Johns in Winnipeg reported a rapid increase in SPC membership.<sup>11</sup> And Tom Beattie, a miner in Coleman, Alberta, asked SPC headquarters for more information on international events because, he reported, while capitalists around the world prepared a last-ditch defence, local union men were considering a jump from the United Mine Workers to the Industrial Workers of the World: "In the mine I work in the sole topic of conversation both going in and coming out, is socialism or Bolshevism . . ."<sup>12</sup> Such circumstances, in the light of domestic and international events, influenced the direction of the SPC and of the union movement.

The decision to hold a western conference depended in large measure upon the good offices of the executives of the British Columbia and Alberta Federations of Labor and the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council. In early October, Rees and Midgley spoke to the executive of the British Columbia Federation about shifting the location of its annual convention to Calgary in order to meet with representatives from the other western provinces. Approval followed quickly. In

November. Rees asked the Alberta Federation to move the date and location of its convention, planned for Lethbridge in January, for the same reason. He found little sympathy for postponement amongst the leaders of the Federation, however, and, after one visit to Calgary, lumped Wheatley, Ross, Kinney and Smitten, the Alberta leaders, into the category of "Lloyd George coalitionists."<sup>13</sup> The Alberta convention did take place as scheduled in January but the delegates agreed to support a western conference as well. Ernest Robinson, the cautious secretary of the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council, tried to avoid a commitment on the proposed western assembly and eventually suggested instead that a caucus of western delegates meet at Fort William while en route to the annual Congress convention.<sup>14</sup> For this he had his fingers rapped smartly by Midgley: a small caucus could certainly be held next September, said the Vancouver leader, but at the moment "what we need is a representative gathering of the entire western labour movement."<sup>15</sup> The Winnipeg Council accepted the invitation without further fuss. As usual, Saskatchewan made little difficulty and received as much attention—a few letters and a visit from Rees who was travelling from Calgary to Winnipeg. By early January, the principle of a western convention had been endorsed; attention shifted to the selection of delegates and discussion of programmes.

Members of the Socialist Party of Canada immediately organized to elect their people as delegates to the Calgary conference and, it seems certain, some of the party leaders in Vancouver began to draft a platform for the western movement. This shift in emphasis from party to union organizations, an immensely important step for the SPC, would enable the party to capitalize upon the increasing militancy of the union membership.

In the closing months of 1918, the SPC had been subject to the problems that affected all radical groups: the influenza epidemic hit some of its members and forced the cancellation of public meetings; the party newspaper, the *Western Clarion*, was banned by the federal government, necessitating the establishment of a substitute, the equally vigorous *Red Flag*; some returned soldiers, seeking scapegoats for the social ills which confronted them, took out their frustrations upon "alien" socialist offices or meetings; the mails, which had been subject to official censorship, were made more uncertain by unexplained delays and disappearances of literature. But, by early 1919, the party was recovering the initiative. Foremost in its calculations was the "avalanche of unemployment" which was expected during demobilization.<sup>16</sup> The unemployment crisis of 1913-1914 would be nothing, party leaders insisted, in comparison with the problems of a labour market now swelled by thousands of women, (who entered the

work force during the war), and by returned soldiers. Having said for four years that the return of peace would bring capitalism's greatest trial, the Socialist Party leaders were developing a strategy to intensify the class struggle. As party secretary Stephenson explained to a correspondent, the leaders were moving with caution: "Social revolutions are bound by their very nature to move slow, so we must have patience and saw wood...."<sup>17</sup>

During the winter of 1918-19, Socialist Party of Canada members who occupied important posts in the trade union movement had become identified with the militant camp which sought a western labour conference. Pritchard, Kavanagh, Midgley, Knight, Johns, and Russell were prominent supporters of the idea and worked hard to ensure that it came about. When Midgley ran into problems with the Winnipeg Labor Council, he wrote immediately to Dick Johns to obtain an insider's assessment of the problem.<sup>18</sup> Bob Russell encouraged Knight prior to the crucial convention of the Alberta Federation in January.<sup>19</sup> When Alberta approval of the western meeting was assured, Mrs. Knight replied that "with a big representation in Calgary in March we ought to make things hum. Wherever possible get reds to be delegates [.] We will put every effort forth in that direction ourselves and maybe we might be able to turn it into an S.P. Convention."<sup>20</sup> A month later, Russell informed party secretary Stephenson of his election, along with party member Dick Johns, to represent the Winnipeg Trades and Labor Council at the Calgary convention, and added: "we are getting a number of Reds elected by the Locals—so lets [sic] hope we will be able to start something."<sup>21</sup> Winnipeg was just one centre in which the SPC was successful. Though it is difficult to estimate the results of this campaign, the Dominion secretary of the party claimed that "the 'Reds' now dominate the Labour movement pretty well all through the west and have put life into its dead carcass. New times opens up new opportunities. You remember the Labour organizations were an almost hopeless case a few years ago."<sup>22</sup> The party could now work within the unions to further the socialist cause and, to a remarkable degree, it found support for its ideas.

The Western Labour Conference of March 13-15, 1919, a combination of regional parliament and religious revival, recognized the ascendancy of the Socialist Party of Canada in the western labour movement.<sup>23</sup> Over two hundred representatives of union bodies from the Lakehead to Vancouver Island adopted two fundamental resolutions: a referendum would be held to determine whether locals should secede from their international unions and establish One Big Union, an industrial organization of all workers; and another referendum would determine whether a general strike should be called to

enforce a number of demands, including a request for a six-hour day and five-day week because of the current unemployment crisis. Delegates condemned federal policies on Russian intervention, political prisoners, censorship, and curtailment of civil liberties. And, in an important statement of their political outlook, they endorsed the principle of "proletarian dictatorship" as being "absolute and efficient for the transformation of capitalist private property to communal wealth," and conveyed greetings to the Russian Soviet government, the German Spartacists, and "all definite working class parties throughout the world." The Socialist Party leaders, who dominated the debates and the committees, won over the conference to their school of revolutionary socialism.

Two further observations should be made about the Calgary meetings. First, it has been suggested that the results of the conference represented a "coup" guided by a few "dedicated believers."<sup>24</sup> In my view, this exaggerates the role of the Socialist Party leaders. To suggest that such overwhelming influence rested in the hands of these few men does an injustice to the thousands of union members who supported similar goals and the several hundred delegates who voted for them at Calgary. The most important factors affecting the outcome of the conference included the regional and international militancy of the working class, the Socialist Party campaign to elect delegates in union locals and trades councils across the West, and the careful preparations of the Vancouver SPC leaders to meet this growing unrest with a specific programme launched on the convention floor. Until more is known about democracy in the western union locals, the degree of success of the Socialist Party campaign, and the attitude of the delegates in Calgary, it is difficult to reach a more precise conclusion. There is no reason to suspect that the western workers were betrayed in March of 1919. Rather, one can reasonably conclude that the SPC victory was representative of the wishes of western union members.

The second problem, the nature of the new programme, must be studied with care because the nuances of socialist thought, like medieval philosophy, are many and subtle. The Socialist Party victory represented the adoption of Marxist or revolutionary socialist principles, as interpreted by the Vancouver elite of the party, but whether their programme can be described as syndicalism is questionable.<sup>25</sup> As it is usually understood, syndicalism implies the creation of worker-controlled economic structures within industry, opposition to the use of political parties and the political system as a means to further the workers' cause, and, finally, the withdrawal of labourers' services in a great general strike which would topple the capitalist system.<sup>26</sup> In 1919 the leaders of the Socialist Party of Canada, though they had long



boasted of their pure revolutionary outlook, accepted the value of temporary reform measures within the capitalist framework and rejected the need for disruptive acts to precipitate the revolution. The IWW plan for an industrial state within the present political system was also rejected. The SPC did not regard the general strike as the ultimate weapon in the class struggle. They never discussed sabotage. They sought, instead, to build an inclusive united working class movement, the One Big Union, simply as the next stage in the class struggle. They decided to reduce their emphasis upon political action, formerly their major weapon, and to stop the lobbying missions to legislatures, because the new militancy of the union membership demanded new strategy—a better union movement. Recognizing that many workers had been refused the franchise and that government by order-in-council circumvented parliaments, unions would confront the real rulers of society, the owning class, in another way. The object was not to cause an immediate transfer of power but to continue the education of the worker, to secure badly-needed immediate reforms, and, thus, through discipline and organization, to further the solidarity of the working class and to prevent premature violence.<sup>27</sup>

The One Big Union and the general strike were limited weapons in a battle which was defensive as well as offensive; short-term reforms and better education were the goals. For this reason, the success of the general strike threat in Winnipeg in 1918 and the example of the British "Triple Alliance" were cited often in 1919. When the British miners, dockers and railwaymen presented radical demands to business and government leaders, they threatened to tie up the country: "So there was prompt action all around. The workers did not declare the general strike. Nor did they wrest from the labour exploiters and the government 100 per cent of their demands. But they did coerce the labour exploiters and the government into granting the major portion of their demands . . ." <sup>28</sup> The Socialist Party leaders were uncertain about the path to revolution beyond this point; they probably assumed that eventually, when class solidarity developed into militancy, a single final convulsion would mark the collapse of exploitative capitalism. *Der Tag* would be violent only if capitalists made violence necessary but the unspecified process of revolution was as likely to occur in the polling booth as in the streets. The political party, experienced observer of the social system, remained an essential instrument of revolution in the Socialist Party outlook.

A fundamental issue underlying the Calgary debates was the constituency to which the revolutionary campaign should be addressed. The merits of industrial unionism and social revolution were generally accepted, though details were disturbingly scarce, so the debate focus-

sed on whether protests against the capitalist system should be regional, national, or international. Herein lay the significance of the decision to separate the results of the referenda on the OBU and the general strike into eastern and western Canadian polls. The Socialist Party leaders were eager to further the cause at Home—in their local, their province, and the West. Cooler heads argued that local or regional action was too great a risk, and should await national or American assistance. J.H. McVety insisted that the Canadian labour movement benefited from international unions.<sup>29</sup> Like McVety, David Rees believed that the present internationals would be favourable to a reform platform and might even accept the principle of industrial unionism.<sup>30</sup> One delegate to the British Columbia convention warned that a provincial strike ahead of a campaign for support on the American west coast was ill-advised.<sup>31</sup> Another argued that a western and national campaign should precede Canadian secession from international unions.<sup>32</sup> A national and international constituency was pivotal, said some; a local or regional secession was a beginning, responded the Socialist Party leaders.

In the determination of the members of the SPC elite to proceed with a regional movement, two factors seemed paramount: one was their perception of the urgent need for some means of controlling the workers in the highly unstable social conditions of 1919; the second was the power of the regional assumption in Canadian social thought. Socialist Party leaders feared that a premature outbreak of violence would set back the movement toward social revolution. They derived great hope from the experiences of Lenin in Russia and Bela Kun in Hungary and, equally important, they recognized that inadequate preparation had doomed the workers' movement in Finland. Thus, they concluded that a central clearing house for the workers' movement could be invaluable in the coming months. The size of the constituency to which they appealed was determined by the accidents of Trades and Labor Congress politics and by the regional prisms of Canadian experience; a western secessionist movement in the national labour institution, as in farm politics and the Presbyterian church, drew upon longstanding conflicts and upon several generations of insistence that the West was a distinct community with unique interests and its own perspective.

## II

It was one thing to outline a theory of social revolution and quite another to implement a sweeping revision of established institutions in preparation for the event. Faith and hope seemed to be the hallmark of the western labour movement, however, as it moved away from the craft unions of the last generation and toward the unknown utopia.

Socialist Party leaders understood that a shorter work week and the creation of a new union organization in the West would not topple the capitalist system. But, as a first step, it would provide an example and a base of operations. The campaign would begin in the western provinces, they said, because westerners were "not so heavily hampered by Officialdom as our Eastern Brothers."<sup>33</sup> Separation of ballots for eastern and western Canada in the OBU and general strike referenda illustrated their determination to "go it alone" at first, if necessary, but plans were also made to conduct educational meetings in central Canada and the western states.<sup>34</sup> Pritchard encouraged Dick Johns to campaign in Ontario and Quebec—"Any extending eastward must be the immediate work of the 'Peg boys'"—and suggested that Bob Russell travel to St. Paul and Minneapolis;<sup>35</sup> the Vancouver group would take responsibility for the Pacific Coast: "You see, we must rouse the mass in the U.S., and the nearest home must be approached first."<sup>36</sup>

In March and April, the chief concern was to mobilize an effective general strike for a six-hour day. Johns travelled to Ontario and Quebec with the belief that "we must get those Railway organizations in the East, it is an impossibility for us in the West to break from the East, they could successfully fight us with locomotives in case of a strike."<sup>37</sup> Within two months, the strike vote, which was disappointing, was being ignored, whereas the OBU movement received considerable support and attention. Johns was amazed by his reception in Ontario: "I haven't spoken to a meeting since I left Wpg. three weeks ago but that a large majority were in favor of the O.B.U....I was always advised that if I ever went East I would soon lose my optimism. But I wish to emphasize that I am more optimistic now, than I was before I left Wpg."<sup>38</sup> The Vancouver mission included visits by Pritchard to mining communities in Montana and by Kavanagh to the Seattle labour council and the Washington State Federation of Labor.<sup>39</sup> Its greatest success was in the Pacific Coast District of the International Longshoreman's Association, which decided to hold a referendum on reorganizing as an industrial union "along the lines of the 'One Big Union' now being put forward in Canada . . ."<sup>40</sup> The workers' revolt could begin on a regional basis, but, as the Socialist Party leaders well knew, the socialist revolution must be national, continental, and, in the ultimate crisis, world-wide.

While the One Big Union was winning widespread acceptance among western unions during April and May, control remained in the hands of the Socialist Party militants. Differences of opinion arose on several occasions, particularly with IWW sympathizers who still sought "to form the new society within the shell of the old," but

Midgley, Kavanagh, and Pritchard were not swayed. When Carl Berg, a Wobbly sympathizer and erstwhile party member in Edmonton, published "The Spectre of Industrial Unionism" in the *OBU Bulletin*, he received a hasty telegram from Vancouver headquarters condemning his "IWW sabotage philosophy."<sup>41</sup> A week later, a rumour reached Edmonton that the Socialist Party had already chosen the officers of the OBU.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, the June constitutional convention of the OBU was dominated by the Vancouver SPC perspective.<sup>43</sup> In the unusually feverish atmosphere, however, such factionalism was overcome by expectations of success. A coalition emerged as labourites in Vancouver and Winnipeg made common cause with members of the Socialist Party, and IWW syndicalists in the coal mining districts moderated their opposition to "political" activists. Until its organization could no longer keep abreast of the rapid development of worker militancy, the Vancouver elite was able to direct the movement as it wished. But the workers were very impatient; thus, in June, at the founding convention of the OBU, one radical could explain to Carl Berg that the new union's constitution was irrelevant because "the present system would not last over two months and all we needed was a universal card and all things would right themselves . . ."<sup>44</sup> The establishment of the new union structure which might manage this unrest had only just begun.

For the leaders there was simply not enough time in the day to handle all the demands which strikes and union reform imposed upon them. The Socialist Party and the One Big Union were outpaced by events. Tension started to mount when, at the beginning of May, in situations unrelated to the One Big Union except by the shared atmosphere of intense excitement, building and metal trades workers went on strike in Winnipeg. It was significant that R.B. Russell, SPC member and one of the insiders in the OBU, claimed to have opposed the metal trades strike.<sup>45</sup> Two weeks later, thousands of Winnipeg workers, organized and unorganized, struck in support of their colleagues and on behalf of the principle of collective bargaining. The Winnipeg general strike, as it was known, began on May 15. Parallel with this dramatic action, and too often lost in the glare of publicity surrounding the Winnipeg events, three industries of importance to the West also neared confrontations. In southern Alberta, where a Dominion Director of Coal Operations supervised unstable labour-management relations, the leaders of District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America were about to call a strike on the issue of wages and hours.<sup>46</sup> It seemed likely that the huge Division 4 of the Railway Employees would tie up the national rail system in June; eastern Canadian machinists in the division were furious with the attitude of Dick

Johns and others, claiming that "this bunch from Winnipeg are determined to pull off a strike if possible and are grasping at every little chance."<sup>47</sup> In British Columbia, a loggers' union had been started in January, gained thousands of recruits within three months, and was now waging a number of strikes for better living conditions and shorter hours.<sup>48</sup> In addition to these problems, it should be remembered that, though the Calgary resolution to call a general strike for a six-hour day had not received a warm endorsement in the West, the threat of general strikes on any of a number of issues had been hanging over citizens of the four provinces for at least a year. Within three weeks of the start of the general walkout in Winnipeg, by the end of May or early June, trades councils across the West and in some eastern centres were calling their members out in sympathy. The general strike in Winnipeg was only the most dramatic expression amongst the many worker protests in May and June of 1919.

The Socialist Party militants were forced by circumstance to pursue a dangerous course. Their campaign to create a new labour organization was just beginning. Opposition from craft union leaders in eastern Canada and the United States was mobilizing. Government intervention to seize their newspapers, to halt their correspondence, or to outlaw their unions, was always possible. Even in the West, leaders had yet to secure agreement on tactics or to develop a means of enforcing their decisions. Carl Berg explained that the leadership hoped to restrain worker outbursts at least until the OBU was established but "if the workers decide to go out then we will have to act and do the best we can, we cannot back out of anything [.] we are to fight and to show the way, but we will have to use what little grey matter we possess to see that we do not get into any traps laid by the masters. . . ."<sup>49</sup> Three weeks later, near the end of May, Berg wrote a quick note to a friend from his desk in Edmonton in strike headquarters. He claimed to have control of the city's power supply and, though still fearful of a capitalistic plot, said he was ready to follow fate wherever it led: "There is [sic] already soldiers and guns here so you see that they mean business, and I have a lot of work to do, so excuse my short letter. . . ."<sup>50</sup>

It was already too late to establish the discipline of a central union headquarters. The workers' unrest, set off by events in Winnipeg, erupted in a series of unplanned, uncoordinated strikes. And the leadership reluctantly followed the workers into battle because it had no choice. W.A. Pritchard's rousing speech to Vancouver workers sounded the appropriate defensive note: "Their comrades were in the fight, and it was now a question of standing by them and, if necessary, going down with them—or, later, going down by themselves. His advice was: 'If you are going to drown—drown splashing!' (Great

applause.)"<sup>51</sup> On the tenth of June, Jack Kavanagh wired the strikers in Winnipeg to tell them that the cause was not lost and that Vancouver was shut tight in their behalf. The bosses "cannot stand much longer," he said, "...this is now a question of western provinces."<sup>52</sup> These leaders insisted that the working class must stand united, however ill-prepared their forces and however badly chosen the field.

The Socialist Party philosophy changed not a whit during the crisis. Victory would be determined not by the extent of management concessions but by the degree of education provided. As soon as the federal government intervened in Winnipeg, the Vancouver socialists had the issue upon which to rationalize their sympathetic strike. The Winnipeg workers' action was not the first stage of revolution, they insisted, but merely an attempt to secure the basic right of collective bargaining. Having shown its true colours by supporting the owners in Winnipeg's contract shops, the government had transformed an industrial issue into a political one. The socialist leaders responded, therefore, with a broad reform platform that would embarrass the government, demonstrate the alliance between corporate and political interests, and win the support of the people:

*[the workers] must adopt a programme that will give them the support of the general population. They must, now that the fight has been precipitated, take measures to see that the government rectifies some of the conditions that are almost intolerable . . . These questions can be settled by the people, and without a revolution, by passive tactics on the part of the workers. Will they adopt the tactics that will give them not only the right to collective bargaining, but a knowledge of their power, and at the same time some of the things that they have been asking for these many moons. The issue is political. The workers must take the matter up on those lines, and wring political concessions from the master class, and beat them at their own game. Will they see the opportunity? We hope so.*<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the settlement of Winnipeg post office problems (the occasion for federal intervention) and the right of collective bargaining, the Vancouver manifesto called for improved military pensions, higher gratuities for overseas service, nationalization of cold storage plants, abattoirs, and elevators to prevent food hoarding, and the six-hour day in industries where unemployment was prevalent: "failing the granting of these demands by the Dominion Government, the workers [will] continue the strike until the present government resigns and places these matters before the electorate."<sup>54</sup> The consis-

tency of the Socialist Party concern for limited reforms and political education was evident once again.

The workers emerged from the strikes a little wiser and a good deal poorer. By late June or early July, they drifted back to their jobs or moved on. Many had been reluctant to join the walkouts and most, undoubtedly, saw them as utter failures. In defeat, the coalition of labourites, Wobblies, and revolutionary socialists broke apart. An international loyalist found in Saskatchewan that, "following the March convention at Calgary, the sentiment in favour of the O.B.U. had been exceedingly strong and general . . . Following the general strike, however, and when it became a question of making a practical decision, a very sweeping change of attitude was adopted."<sup>55</sup> Carl Berg, Wobbly to the end, blamed the "politicians" of the Socialist Party for their betrayal of the One Big Union, (which he had hoped would embody I.W.W. principles), and thus the betrayal of the proletarian movement. Advising an old friend to work on a homestead, he provided a poignant epitaph to the strikes and to the western revolt: ". . . you have a wife and I think you could make life a little more pleasant if you were away from the mines and mills, I may go and hide myself somewhere and forget the struggle [sic] if it is possible. Now so long old pal I will write you again, give my best regards to all the Reds."<sup>56</sup> The critical moment had passed. Capitalism, aided by the power of the state, had withstood the challenge. While the militants could draw feeble lessons about the need for national cohesion of the working class and perhaps the value of a daily labour press, it was clear that their hope was exhausted. They might blame the Winnipeg strike upon a government-employer conspiracy to smash the organized labour movement, but such accusations could not hide the fact of defeat. The Winnipeg strike trials and internal dissension plagued the One Big Union for another year; by then, the counter-offensive of international unions, employers and governments had driven it into retreat.

### III

The western revolt collapsed within two years and left the more conservative organizations, the American Federation of Labor and the Trades and Labor Congress, relatively unshaken. Opposition to union political activity was superseded, to no one's surprise, but by moderate reformers rather than revolutionaries. The Socialist Party of Canada was preoccupied by legal proceedings, discredited by the strikes, and eventually divided by new political alternatives. Christian social gospelers and the labourites, not the Socialist Party or the Communist Party, became the legitimate representatives of "socialism" in the West. The vehicle of the radicals, the One Big Union, came very close to victory

in 1919 but, in failure, it has come to be regarded as a dramatic aberration in the history of Canadian Labour.

The merit of the customary explanations of the western revolt, which emphasize factors within the trade union movement and the economy, must be acknowledged. The shortcomings of craft organizations had become increasingly obvious to many North Americans and the structure of union government in Canada had ensured that local reformers would be frustrated. Remoteness from American craft union headquarters resulted in disagreements or misunderstandings over basic questions like strike action and organizational efforts, while differing opinions on how to secure political influence hampered activists in the Trades and Labor Congress. Significantly, since the internationals controlled the basic policies on economic and jurisdictional questions, urban and provincial councils became the home of intense political discussions which had no other outlet than debates in the national Congress or lobbying missions to provincial capitals. International unionism thus handicapped the workers when they wished to express their views or use their labour power in Canadian public affairs.

But why was the revolt almost exclusively a western phenomenon? Several observers have suggested that a common work environment existed in the western provinces. The time and pace of development, and the economy created by the national policies of the federal government, produced peculiar labour-management relations. Thus, the boom-bust character of the hinterland, the proprietary attitude toward the labour force in many industries, and the rough, unstable character of new communities were causes of western unrest.<sup>57</sup> While accepting such explanations, these pages have emphasized that a regionally-based political party influenced the direction of events. There would have been no *One Big Union*, no western secession from the Trades and Labor Congress, whatever the economic or social conditions, without the Socialist Party of Canada. The ideology of these revolutionary socialists and their estimate of current labour conditions determined the course of the revolt.

Implicit in this analysis is an emphasis upon the influence of regional consciousness within the western labour movement. Many dissatisfied leaders at the Quebec convention of the Trades and Labor Congress spoke of western grievances. Reform-minded delegates agreed to support a call for a western labour conference. The Socialist Party of Canada chose to proceed immediately with the *One Big Union* in a regional constituency. These decisions were founded upon one of the profound assumptions of the Canadian nation. Two generations of Canadian experience had fostered images of a new society in the West, whether radical, hospitable, or merely separate, and thus created a



belief in a western community. Campaigns for national recognition of the western viewpoint in political and economic affairs accentuated the impression. The development of the geographic metaphor, "the West", suggested an obvious constituency to the disgruntled delegates at Quebec in 1918. For some of them, the call for a regional caucus was merely good strategy which could result in the capture of broader support at future national conventions. For the Socialist Party of Canada, however, the conference provided a vehicle for the implementation of needed reforms and, perhaps, the base for social revolution. The image of a distinct "West" in Canada provided a foundation for the One Big Union by supporting the interpretation of regional division in the Trades Congress, by providing an easy passage for the idea of a conference, and by encouraging Socialist Party leaders to proceed with the drive for immediate reforms and political education in a regional constituency.

The SPC success was testimony to the extent of worker unrest and to the power of a dedicated revolutionary party. It was quite sufficient cause for the violent reaction of the established classes. The hundreds of letters, books, and pamphlets taken from homes and offices and then introduced as evidence in the Winnipeg strike trials demonstrated to the satisfaction of the court and many Canadians that a conspiracy against the established order dwelt in their midst. And the guilty verdict did have some foundation. The Socialist Party was preparing for revolution. The general sympathetic strike in Winnipeg might have been a significant step in that direction. But the Winnipeg strike leaders were not planning to travel that road, at least not at that moment. The Socialist Party campaign was unrelated to the strike in Winnipeg.<sup>58</sup> It counted amongst its supporters a large number of workers in the four western provinces, including citizens of Winnipeg, and a growing number in eastern Canada and the United States. The campaign aimed not at the immediate overthrow of the government but at immediate reforms, further education, and better organization. Far from illegal operations, the militant socialists were concerned to avoid violence and to undertake only constitutional activities until the day of revolution dawned.

Events outran the leadership. Handicapped by inadequate communications links, unprepared for the walkout in Winnipeg, exhausted by contract negotiations in other jurisdictions, the leaders endorsed a futile succession of strikes in support of their Winnipeg comrades and watched the proletarian enthusiasm die.

A revolutionary socialist party guided the western secession from the Trades and Labor Congress in the spring of 1919. Never was the customary closing of these socialist correspondents, "Yours in re-

volt," more appropriate. Though the question must remain for more careful examination, one suspects that government intervention ended not only the Winnipeg strike but the western uprising. Certainly, the counterattack of business, government, and international unions, and dissension within western union and socialist ranks, ensured that the era of upheaval would be shortlived.

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### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike*, (Montreal 1974).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930*, (Kingston 1968); Andrew Ross McCormack, "The Origins and Extent of Western Labour Radicalism: 1896-1919", doctoral dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 1973; David J. Bercuson, "The Roots of the One Big Union: A Study of Western Canadian Syndicalism", unpublished paper presented to the Canadian Historical Association, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> The best introduction to the SPC is provided by its newspapers, the *Western Clarion* and its successor, the *Red Flag*. The estimate of membership is made by Paul Fox, "Early Socialism in Canada", in J.H. Aitchison, (ed.), *The Political Process in Canada: Essays in Honour of R. MacGregor Dawson*, (Toronto 1963), pp. 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> David Jay Bercuson, "Labour in Winnipeg: The Great War and the General Strike", doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 1971; Martin Robin, "Registration, Conscription, and Independent Labour Politics, 1916-1917", *Canadian Historical Review*, XLVII (1966).

<sup>5</sup> *Western Labor News*, 8 November 1918.

<sup>6</sup> Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, *Proceedings....* 1918, pp. 5-12, 139; *British Columbia Federationist*, (henceforth cited as *BCF*), 4 October 1918; *Manitoba Free Press*, 28 September 1918.

<sup>7</sup> Provincial Archives of Manitoba, (PAM), R.A. Rigg Papers, Rees File, D. Rees to Alberta union locals, 19 December 1918.

<sup>8</sup> At least some indication of this outlook can be gleaned from the *Western Labor News*, 30 August 1918, and *BCF*, 9 August 1918.

<sup>9</sup> Reports on these weekly gatherings were carried in the *Federationist*.

<sup>10</sup> *BCF*, 27 December 1918.

<sup>11</sup> PAM, Winnipeg Strike Trials, The King vs. R.B. Russell, (henceforth cited as Russell Trial), Mrs. Knight to R. Russell, 13 January 1919; PAM, One Big Union Papers, (henceforth cited as OBU), D. Johns to V. Midgley, 10 December 1918.

<sup>12</sup> Russell Trial, T. Beattie to \_\_\_\_\_, 9 and 24 November, 1918.

<sup>13</sup> OBU, D. Rees to V. Midgley, 18 and 24 November 1918.

<sup>14</sup> OBU, E. Robinson to V. Midgley, 22 November 1918.

<sup>15</sup> OBU, V. Midgley to E. Robinson, 29 November 1918.

<sup>16</sup> The phrase was used by Midgley, *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> PAM, Winnipeg Strike Trials, the King vs. William Ivens, (henceforth

cited as Ivens Trial), C. Stephenson to F. Johnson, 2 April 1919.

<sup>18</sup> OBU, V. Midgley to D. Johns, 2 December 1918, and reply, 10 December 1918.

<sup>19</sup> Ivens Trial, R. Russell to J. Knight, 3 January 1919.

<sup>20</sup> Russell Trial, Mrs. Knight to R. Russell, 13 January 1919.

<sup>21</sup> Ivens Trial, R. Russell to C. Stephenson, 18 February 1919.

<sup>22</sup> Russell Trial, C. Stephenson to T.S. Cassidy, 8 February 1919.

<sup>23</sup> A verbatim report on the conference was printed as a supplement to the *Western Labor News*, 4 April 1919. This should be used in conjunction with the report of the equally important convention of the British Columbia Federation of Labor: this verbatim account was published in successive issues of *BCF*, 21 March-11 April 1919.

<sup>24</sup> David Jay Bercuson, "Western Labour Radicalism and the One Big Union: Myths and Realities", in S.M. Trofimenkoff, (ed.), *The Twenties in Western Canada*, (Ottawa 1972), pp. 41, 46.

<sup>25</sup> This term is used by Robin, McCormack, and Bercuson; see note 2.

<sup>26</sup> Val R. Larwin, "Syndicalism", *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 15, (1968); Melvyn Dubofsky, *Industrialism and the American Worker, 1865-1920*, (New York 1975).

<sup>27</sup> This interpretation is based upon the *Western Clarion and Red Flag*, the weekly reports of SPC meetings in *BCF*, and upon the speeches of Kavanagh, Pritchard, and Midgley at the March conventions.

<sup>28</sup> *BCF*, 9 May 1919; see also the speech by A.S. Wells, *BCF*, 16 May 1919.

<sup>29</sup> *BCF*, 4 April 1919.

<sup>30</sup> *BCF*, 18 April 1919; Rigg Papers, Rees File.

<sup>31</sup> *BCF*, 4 April 1919.

<sup>32</sup> *BCF*, 4 April 1919.

<sup>33</sup> *OBU Bulletin*, 1 May 1919.

<sup>34</sup> OBU, V. Midgley to W. Smitten, 31 March 1919.

<sup>35</sup> OBU, W. Pritchard to D. Johns, 2 April 1919.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> OBU, D. Johns to V. Midgley, 29 March 1919.

<sup>38</sup> OBU, D. Johns to V. Midgley, 17 May 1919; see also Russell Trial, Johns to Russell, 30 April 1919.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *BCF*, 9 May 1919, p. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ivens Trial, J. Taylor to I.L.A. members, May 1919; *BCF*, 9 May 1919, p.

1.

<sup>41</sup> See the exceptionally illuminating letters from Berg to Kollings (Koeling, Kolling), in Russell Trials, during May and June of 1919.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 June 1919.

<sup>45</sup> PAM, Russell Collection, Cross-Examination of R.B. Russell, p. 134. An editorial in the *Red Flag* said that "even in the opinion of some, the Winnipeg strike broke out at an inopportune time for the progress of the O.B.U." *Red Flag*, 31 May 1919, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Russell Trial, E. Browne to J. Queen, 3 May 1919; E. Browne to \_\_\_\_\_, 9 May 1919; E. Browne to J.O. Sullivan, 19 June 1919; E. Browne to F.E. Harrison, 7 July 1919; E. Browne to J.O. Sullivan, 12 July 1919; Executive U.M.W.A. District 18 to members, 28 July 1919.

<sup>47</sup> Ivens Trial, J. Corbett to R. Kerrigan, 23 May 1919; Russell Trial, R.

Russell to W.H. Johnston, 14 June and 16 June 1919.

<sup>48</sup> *BCF*, 6 June 1919.

<sup>49</sup> Russell Trial, C. Berg to W. Kollings, 2 May 1919.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 May 1919.

<sup>51</sup> *BCF*, 6 June 1919; the editorial page sounds equally defensive.

<sup>52</sup> Russell Trial, J. Kavanagh to R. Russell, 10 June 1919.

<sup>53</sup> *BCF*, 30 May 1919.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*; *Red Flag*, 31 May 1919.

<sup>55</sup> Rigg Papers, R.A. Rigg to T.A. Moore, 22 August 1919.

<sup>56</sup> Russell Trial, C. Berg to W. Kollings, 25 June 1919.

<sup>57</sup> Paul A. Phillips, "The National Policy and the Development of the Western Canadian Labour Movement", in A.W. Rasporich and H.C. Klassen, (ed.), *Prairie Perspectives II*, (Toronto 1973); H.C. Pentland, "The Western Canadian Labour Movement, 1897-1919", unpublished paper presented at the University of Manitoba, 1973.

<sup>58</sup> See D.J. Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, and D.C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike*, (Toronto 1950).