ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our greatest debt in the production of this book is to the Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI) for its over two hundred interviews with Alberta trade union leaders and rank-and-file workers, covering events from the 1930s to the present. The ALHI, working with the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) on Project 2012 — an organizational effort to commemorate the founding of the AFL in 1912 — suggested that a book of this kind would be a fitting way to celebrate the occasion and asked Alvin Finkel to undertake its research and writing. We thank both the ALHI and the AFL, as well as everyone involved with Project 2012, for their inspiration and ongoing encouragement.

We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for AU Press who provided incisive suggestions that we attempted to incorporate in our revisions. Editors Joyce Hildebrand and Pamela MacFarland Holway have raised important questions and improved the organization of our materials as well as our prose. Ron Patterson took charge of the collection of images, while Natalie Olsen is responsible for the book’s elegant design.

We thank the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees for their financial support for the research and production of this book. They donated to the project with no strings attached. No official of either union body asked for or received an opportunity to read any of the chapters as they were written or before they were finalized. In short, the book is not an official history of any union organization, though it was timed to appear for the centennial celebration of the AFL so as to contribute to reflections on labour’s past in Alberta and on lessons for its future. While three of the authors — Jim Selby, Winston Gereluk, and Jason Foster — are past employees of the federation, none had any relationship with it at the time they wrote their chapters. This book is solely the product of its authors, and no one exercised any censorship or any attempt to impose particular points of views on any of the authors. The authors are all activists and/or sympathizers with the labour movement and work in labour-related fields. But this is an effort to tell the history of working people to the
best of our abilities, not to whitewash anything within Alberta labour history or to give only one side of the story in internecine union battles.

As we were preparing this book, we were saddened by the death of Neil Reimer, one of the great heroes of the Alberta labour movement. Neil’s lifelong efforts as a trade union organizer, trade union official, politician, and social activist have resulted in better representation and better working conditions for Alberta workers, and have improved social policies for Alberta workers and seniors. Always committed to education for and about working people in Alberta, Neil became an early member of ALHI; he conducted many interviews and agreed to be interviewed at length himself on several occasions. His efforts to create more autonomy for Canadian workers led to the creation of an independent Canadian union, the Energy and Chemical Workers Union (ECWU), in an area where American-led unions once prevailed in Canada. The ECWU was one of the three Canadian unions that merged in 1992 to form the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada.

Neil’s successful efforts to organize refinery workers in Alberta in the 1950s defied the common wisdom that the entire oil industry was beyond the reach of unionism. The Oil Workers International Union rewarded his efforts by making him its Canadian director. Under his leadership, the union fought not only for better wages but also for improved safety standards and greater union involvement in enforcing safety. An officer of the Canadian Labour Congress as well as his own union, Neil played a big role in the creation of the national New Democratic Party and became the party’s first Alberta leader. To the end of his days, he remained active in both union and political work, serving during his retirement in many capacities, including president of the Alberta Council on Aging. A towering figure in the trade union and social justice communities in Alberta, Neil will be remembered for his storytelling, humour, and abundant humanity, which inspired all of the authors of this book.