INTRODUCTION
THOSE WHO BUILT ALBERTA

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Most Canadians — and even many Albertans — view Alberta as a rich, placid province where the streets are paved with gold, thanks to the province’s fossil fuel riches. In this view, Alberta is a one-class, one-party province where meaningful political debates about social values are absent. Certainly, one book, published in 2009, portrays recent immigrants to Alberta from other provinces as viewing their new home as the “second promised land,” a place with low taxes and little government interference in people’s daily lives. An earlier study, however, demonstrates that this perspective on the province is too simplistic and ignores evidence that many, perhaps even most Albertans embrace communitarian values rather than the conservative values that are often attributed to them.

Often lost in such discussions is the fact that Alberta has a capitalist economy in which some owners of capital have become very rich and some who must work for a living have done rather less well. The working people who built and continue to build the province of Alberta often vanish from the story when the focus is on constitutional battles between Edmonton and Ottawa, and on the mythological, individualist “mavericks” whom some wish to portray as embodying the true Alberta spirit. While entrepreneurial individuals have certainly played a role in the history of the Prairies, their contribution has been modest relative to that of the workers, farmers, and small-business operators who have always formed the overwhelming majority of the population. It is a history of this majority, and especially its working-class component, that this book tells.

It is a history in which entrepreneurs give way to trade union organizers and groups like the Industrial Workers of the World, the CCF, and the Communist Party; the Hunger Marchers of 1932; the Gainers’ strikers and the “Dandelions” of the 1980s; the mostly female Calgary laundry workers who put the brakes on Ralph Klein’s efforts to destroy the public sector in the 1990s; and the Lakeside Packers workers, most of whom belonged to a visible minority, who organized against all the odds within a classically reactionary community in the early twenty-first century.
In an earlier effort to portray the history of Alberta workers, Warren Caragata produced Alberta Labour: A Heritage Untold in 1979, a lively history of working people in Alberta that focused on union struggles. Caragata was a staffer at the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), and writing the book was one of his assigned duties. Caragata evidently enjoyed a fair degree of independence in writing the book — although, according to AFL staff members at the time, AFL president Harry Kostiuk, reflecting Cold War sentiments that were still strong in the labour movement, made him abbreviate or remove certain passages that emphasized the major role played by Communists within certain labour struggles. Nonetheless, Caragata produced an excellent history of working-class struggles, incorporating material from interviews with some participants in those struggles. I strongly recommend that those interested in Alberta labour history make use of Caragata’s study, in addition to the present work, to explore developments between 1883 and 1956, the period on which Alberta Labour concentrates.

Alberta Labour reflects the time and circumstances in which it was written. Historians were only beginning to shift from histories of “great men” and institutions toward social history, so the book contains little about workers who tried but failed to organize trade unions or about women, Aboriginals, and people of colour.

This book attempts to build on Caragata’s achievement while also discussing the history of workers in the province in the thirty-five years since Caragata did most of his research. But it is more than simply an update, since a key focus of Working People in Alberta: A History is the incorporation of social history approaches to the history of working people. In this respect, our work is greatly aided by the over two hundred interviews that have been videographed and transcribed by the Alberta Labour History Institute (ALHI). ALHI was formed in 1999 by trade unionists and academics who felt that too much of the history of Alberta had been told from the point of view of the elites and too little from the perspective of its working people. Many labour pioneers and union activists were aging, and if they were not interviewed soon, their stories might die with them. Operating mainly as a volunteer organization, ALHI set out to conduct comprehensive interviews with working people from a variety of backgrounds throughout the province. ALHI has also sponsored and recorded events in which key players discuss major working-class historical issues, and its website (www.labourhistory.ca) includes a labour history chronology of the province and excerpts from its many interviews. ALHI’s annual labour history calendar is popular with trade unions throughout the province.

ALHI played a key role in the evolution of this book. In 2008, the institute formed a partnership with the AFL in order to produce materials to mark the centennial of the federation in 2012. This collaborative project, named Project 2012, was largely funded by the AFL and its affiliates, with ALHI and AFL staff sharing the work. The two groups have been working together to produce booklets, DVDs, posters, and a conference so that the centennial will be a means to reflect on the labour movement’s past and provoke discussion about future directions. Both groups agreed that a new book detailing labour history in the province should be produced, and I was asked to coordinate this effort. Discussions between ALHI and the AFL revealed a common interest in ensuring that the book be more
than simply a history of the labour movement; it was also to be a social history of working people, including both unorganized workers and the trade unions.

Unlike the Caragata book, which begins with the arrival of white settlers in Alberta and the creation of a classic paid labour force, Working People in Alberta: A History begins with the history of work in Alberta during the 98 percent of its history when only First Nations lived there. Chapter 1, “Millennia of Native Work,” tells the story of the period of First Nations’ control over the areas that constitute today’s Alberta and the sophisticated ways in which they organized their work and their lives. This chapter provides a glimpse into how people distributed necessary work tasks and benefitted from labour before European domination of Alberta ushered in organizational inequality with respect to work and distribution of social benefits. But it is indeed just a glimpse. The history of Native work in Alberta deserves a book of its own: this book only traces the outlines of what such a book might detail.

Chapter 2, “The Fur Trade and Early European Settlement,” deals with the period in which the commercial fur trade, organized by Europeans, was superimposed on the traditional economies and societies of First Nations in what is now Alberta, assessing the fur trade’s impact on the lives of Aboriginals. It also explores the effect on the First Nations of the decline of the fur trade and the advance of European settlement into the region. Overall, we see that the fur trade was a partnership among two peoples in which Native peoples retained most features of their traditional cultures while absorbing European ideas and goods to the extent that they deemed appropriate. In contrast, the settlement period was marked by dispossession and marginalization of Native peoples, a ruthless attack on their traditional cultures, and heavy-handed efforts to assimilate them to European ways.

Chapters 3 to 8 detail a chronological history of working people in Alberta from the settlement period onward. In each chapter, an effort is made to explore the political economy that underpinned labour issues. Chapter 3, “One Step Forward: Alberta Workers, 1885–1914,” deals with the period of initial European settlement in the region, a period in which Alberta was mainly a burgeoning agricultural province. Industry and a concomitant industrial working class developed to meet the needs of the farmers for goods and services. While the farmers were mainly independent commodity producers, they felt subordinated to the power of shippers, buyers, and bankers, and could sometimes make common cause with industrial workers to restrain the power of such big capitalists. But as employers of farm labourers, whom they often exploited, farmers were cool to labour’s calls for shorter work days, better pay, and more worker control within workplaces. They were often ambivalent about advocacy for social insurance programs and for nationalization of industry. The early labour movement that developed in this period had both conservative elements, particularly within the trades unions that emphasized craft exclusivity, and radical elements, exemplified by the miners who sympathized with Marxist calls for the elimination of capitalists and the creation of a workers’ state in which exploitation would disappear.

The first three chapters are based almost exclusively on the existing secondary literature on early Alberta history. The remaining chapters rely very heavily on the documentary record and, in particular, on the ALHI
interviews. Chapter 4, “War, Repression, and Depression, 1914–39,” with its focus on World War I and the interwar period, traces an era of relative economic stagnation and major political changes. The farmers’ movement took power provincially in 1921 from the bourgeois elements that controlled the Liberal Party government from 1905 to 1921, and it remained in power until the finance-obsessed Social Credit party won the provincial election in 1935. Independent labour politics emerged after World War I, and labour had electoral victories at all levels of government, reflecting a growing class consciousness among Alberta workers, particularly in urban and industrial areas. The mainstream of the labour movement attempted to work closely with the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) during its period in government, but the wisdom of that decision was called into question when the Great Depression arrived in late 1929 and the UFA proved to have only anemic strategies for helping its victims. While a Communist movement, originating in the 1920s in Alberta, played an important role in organizing the unemployed in the 1930s, other new forces emerged during the Depression including the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the forerunner of the New Democratic Party (NDP), and a reinvigorated industrial union movement with American roots.

Chapter 5, “Alberta Labour and Working-Class Life, 1940–59,” assesses the impact on workers of a major reshaping of Alberta’s political economy, particularly after the chain of discoveries of large oil and gas deposits, beginning with the oil strike in Leduc in 1947. Alberta changed from a predominantly rural, agrarian province dependent on prices for agricultural products to a province dependent on the fortunes of “black gold.” Most of the coal mines closed, farming became a poor cousin to oil and gas exploration and exploitation, and dizzying economic growth replaced the stagnation of the interwar period. Workers’ efforts to benefit from the new wealth were limited by the Social Credit government’s alliance with big capital in the oil and gas industry and the determination of these two partners to keep unions out of the energy fields. Labour managed some gains despite this anti-union alliance, but in the context of the Cold War, a right-wing provincial government that passed anti-labour laws, and economic growth, Alberta workers lost much of their class consciousness and their interwar economic and political power. Large-scale migration of workers from other provinces and abroad meant that some of the province’s former labour struggles were unknown to many workers in Alberta.

Chapter 6, “The Boomers Become the Workers: Alberta, 1960–80,” examines the impact of international movements of anti-colonialism and youth rebellion on class consciousness in a province where the power of the energy industry was increasing dramatically. Although the Social Credit government was finally defeated in 1971, the successor Progressive Conservative regime was no more sympathetic to workers’ efforts to gain a greater share of the province’s wealth and to have safer workplaces and better provincial social programs. The fledgling New Democratic Party received some support from the provincial labour movement, but conservative elements within the movement continued to be apolitical and to see labour’s job in the narrow terms of dealing with individual employers. State employees were increasingly restive, however, and rebelled against the paternalism of their employers to build fighting unions during this period.
Chapter 7, “Alberta Labour in the 1980s,” deals with what may have been the most radical period of labour history in Alberta to date. As international energy prices collapsed in the context of a global recession that began in late 1981, the weaknesses of having the province’s economic strength based on one industry became apparent. Labour and its allies called for greater government involvement to diversify the Alberta economy. But this was the era in which neo-liberalism was emerging worldwide, with employers and governments calling for a return to the policies of the pre-Depression era in which the marketplace made most economic decisions. It meant that governments would severely cut the social benefits that workers had achieved since 1945 and that the laws governing the operation of unions would render them almost toothless so that capital could regain the profit levels that it had enjoyed in earlier periods. Workers and their unions resisted employers’ efforts to make workers pay for the recession that capitalists had caused, and strike waves and worker protests of various kinds marked this period. The NDP became the provincial official opposition in 1986 and again in 1989.

Chapter 8 concludes the chronological history of Alberta’s working people. “Revolution, Retrenchment, and the New Normal: The 1990s and Beyond” examines the eventual triumph of neo-liberalism as well as continuing working-class efforts to mitigate its effects and to discredit its ideological assumptions. This was a period in which the energy industry, now focused on the northern oil sands, went beyond dominating the provincial economy to become its almost exclusive focus. The province’s manufacturing base crumbled, leaving the Alberta economy less diversified than at almost any other time in its history. Politically, the so-called Klein Revolution, referring to the period when Progressive Conservative Premier Ralph Klein decimated the civil service and provincial programs, challenged the idea that citizens had a right to basic health, educational, and social services, and that such services could be provided efficiently by the state. The labour movement, more divided than in the 1970s, scrambled to unite its members behind campaigns to protect public services, while efforts to organize in the private sector yielded only a few key victories.

Chapter 9 elaborates on a theme that runs throughout this book but requires a synthesis and evaluation of its own. “Women, Labour, and the Labour Movement” looks at both the factors that have held women back within the labour force in Alberta and their determined efforts to use both trade unions and pressure upon governments to create more gender justice. It argues that the unions, while laggards on issues of gender rights before the 1970s, have made considerable progress since that time in fighting for the interests of working women.

Finally, Chapter 10, “Racialization and Work,” looks at the continuing struggle of minority workers of colour to achieve social justice in Alberta. As was the case for gender struggles, the trade union movement was rife with prejudice in earlier periods. Since the 1960s, however, the labour movement has played an increasingly important role in the struggle for social equality and human rights, both in the workplace and the broader community.