Although there was scarcely a recognizable workforce in 1885 in the southwestern half of the Northwest Territories, which would later become Alberta, all the essential elements that would shape the experiences and conditions of the early working class were already in place. The suppression of First Nations’ land rights after the treaties were signed and the military defeat of Métis aspirations of autonomy at Batoche cleared the last obstacles in the way of exploitation of the land and resources of the Northwest Territories by the federal government. Both the Canadian Pacific Railway — which, through its initial federal grant of twenty-five million acres of land “fairly fit for settlement,” had instantly become the largest corporate enterprise, employer, and private landowner on the prairies — and the federal government were actively promoting the settlement of the prairies by immigrant farmers.

The first significant coal development in Alberta was at Coal Banks (soon to be renamed Lethbridge after William Lethbridge, the company’s first president), where Alexander Galt, Canada’s first finance minister, and his son procured extensive coal leases for the company Galt had begun selling to British investors while he was Canada’s High Commissioner in London. The Galts then secured further land and coal grants at special low rates to construct a railway connecting Lethbridge to the CPR mainline near Medicine Hat. Once the Galts had secured a coal contract with the CPR, their North Western Coal and Navigation Company began producing coal in 1883 for the railway and the local house heating market. Another new mine at Anthracite near Banff began to produce high-quality bituminous “steam coal.”

The railways themselves were the other main providers of employment. Calgary, which became the site of a European settlement when the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) established a fort there in 1875, was in the midst of an early real estate and housing boom as a result of railway construction, creating work for skilled craftsmen in the building trades. That boom and continued railway construction provided the demand for the area’s largest manufacturing outfits, two sawmills.
For workers arriving in Alberta over the next thirty years, job opportunities were available in four quite distinct environments. First, massive railway construction projects employed tens of thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, who were housed in isolated temporary construction camps. Single-industry coal towns, which offered a mixture of skilled and unskilled jobs, constituted a second environment for workers. A third was the growing urban centres, in which skilled workers in the construction industry, the railway running trades, and other skilled crafts lived and worked alongside unskilled and semi-skilled workers employed in the retail trade, transportation, manufacturing, domestic service, and the public sector. Finally, there were waged farmworkers, the largest component of paid labour in this period. Within each of these four distinct environments, workers struggled to improve their lives in their workplaces and within their homes and communities. They confronted contradictions and prejudices and engaged in debates over ideology, tactics, and strategies that continue to this day.

Was it possible to extract a living wage and acceptable working conditions during this period? If so, how could that best be accomplished? What was the relationship between unions and social class? What did worker solidarity mean? Was political action advisable, and if so, how could workers best participate? What role did the state play? Could or should the capitalist system be reformed? How could a socialist alternative be achieved? These were some of the questions faced by workers moving into the evolving area of European settlement that had dispossessed the Aboriginal residents. Unsurprisingly, the different answers that workers arrived at depended upon their experiences with employers, labour organizations, governments and police, and their own diverse communities. Cumulatively, their experiences created a diverse yet vibrant workers’ movement capable of responding to the economic, political, and social conflicts ahead.
THE RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

“Why were the recognized leaders of union labour in Canada so long indifferent to the wage conditions of the navvy?” wondered Edmund Bradwin, using the name given to railway construction labourers. Given the low wages and poor working conditions they endured, navvies should have been fertile ground for union organizers. Their work was brutally labour intensive. Throughout the spring, summer, and fall, navvies cleared the railway right-of-ways, largely by hand. Using picks, shovels, axes, and wheelbarrows, they worked ten hours or more each day shoveling clay and gravel, breaking rocks, and clearing bush.

Between 1883 and 1914, three transcontinental railways were constructed across Alberta, along with lines to coalfields in Lethbridge, the Crowsnest Pass, Drumheller, Nordegg, and the Coal Branch south of Hinton. One line connected Calgary to Edmonton, another ran between Edmonton and Peace River, and both Canadian Pacific and Canadian Northern built branch lines into the farmlands. At the peak of railway construction, between 1907 and 1914, when both the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific were completing their transcontinental lines and the CPR was building branch lines, the railways employed between fifty thousand and seventy thousand workers annually.

FIG 3-3 Slavic workers laying track for the Canadian Northern Railway. Library and Archives Canada, c-46156.
ALBERTA AND “IMMIGRANT” LABOUR

The population of the District of Alberta in 1885 was 15,533 persons, of whom 9,418 were listed as Indian and 1,237 as Métis. With a provincial population of 374,663 persons reported in the 1911 census, the vast majority of Alberta workers during this period were migrants to the province. Canada’s political elite, having created a new country in 1867 in the hope of copying the American success story of establishing an expanding marketplace by moving the country’s borders ever further west, were disappointed that the British settlers whom they had recruited proved less than enamoured of their new homes. Between 1881 and 1901, despite government efforts to attract new immigrants, Canada experienced a net out-migration, with 1,229,000 people entering the country and 1,615,000 emigrating, mostly to the United States. Only natural increase saved the country from a net decline in population.

The picture began to change dramatically in 1897. The best land in the American West had been taken, and the Canadian government, while closing the door to non-whites except for very specific work, relaxed its former prejudice against potential southern and eastern European immigrants. Between 1901 and 1911, 1,782,000 newcomers arrived in Canada. The majority were not of British descent. From 1901 to 1905, the federal government actively recruited peasant farmers from eastern Europe. Simultaneously, the railways and industrial employers sought immigrants from southern Europe and the Balkans, particularly from 1907 to 1914. Between 1896 and 1914, approximately one million immigrant farmers arrived in Canada, along with two million other immigrants. Most of the non-farmers found their way into wage labour in the manufacturing centres in central Canada and in railway camps, mines, factories, and logging enterprises in the West.

In central and eastern Canada, the western, eastern, and southern European immigrants remained a minority within the dominant Anglo-Celtic (English, Scots, Irish, and Welsh) majority, or, in the case of Quebec, the French-speaking majority. However, in Alberta, the British held a bare 51 percent majority by 1911. The largest other groups were, in order of size, Germans, Scandinavians, Ukrainians, French, First Nations, and Russians. Even among Albertans of Anglo-Celtic origin, the majority were newcomers to the province, with migrants from other provinces outnumbering English speakers from the British Isles.

In his seminal work, The Bunkhouse Man, Edmund W. Bradwin notes that workers on the railways were divided into “whites” and “foreigners.” Canadian-born English- and French-speaking workers, new arrivals from Britain and the United States, Scandinavians, and sometimes Finns were included in the “white” category. “Whites” got the better jobs on the railway construction gangs while the “foreign” navvies — Ukrainians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Hungarians, Croats, Bulgarians, Macedonians, Turks, Orientals, and Sikhs — got the “mucker” jobs.

Ethnic stereotypes regarding temperament, work habits, abilities, and intelligence abounded. Even Bradwin freely painted the various ethnic groups’ “characteristics” with a broad brush, despite his observation regarding their skill:

Not that the man from Central and Southern Europe is un-acquainted with the art of bridging great rivers by huge spans of steel, for he is prone to criticize the seeming haste with which, in Canada, the long trusses are soon girded into great arches and tracked with level crossings, but too frequently at a sacrifice of the solidity and finish of workmanship which characterize those in his own land. Many newcomers to the
Dominion from Central Europe would prove useful on structural work, but have not the requisite knowledge of English so essential in the conduct of these hazardous tasks.6

The negative response of the British elite to the incoming ethnic immigrants is typified by a *Calgary Herald* article from 2 February 1899:

What is this country coming to? Doukhobours pouring in by the thousands on the eastern slope, Galicians [Ukrainians] swarming over the central portions, and rats taking possession of Dawson City, one would imagine that Canada had become a veritable dumping ground for the refuse of civilization.7

The equating of rats that accompanied the Yukon gold rush with certain ethnic groups reflected the deep racism of many British-origin Albertans. Their careless stereotypes also ignored the fact that Alberta’s ethnic workers included many who were skilled, literate, and politically sophisticated. For example, a study of the Polish community in the Crowsnest Pass found that young Polish immigrants, although coming from farming communities, had experience as carpenters, bricklayers, brewery workers, and tailors. They could read and write Polish. These were not the strong-of-body and weak-of-mind Eastern Europeans stereotyped by English Canadians.8

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1 The 1885 Census boundaries for the District of Alberta excluded the northern third of the current province and a narrow band on the east, including Medicine Hat. The populations of First Nations are therefore understated, and the numbers elsewhere, while representative, are not exact. *Census of the Three Provisional Districts of the North-West Territories: 1884–5*, and *Census of Canada, 1911, Vol. 1, Areas and Population by Provinces, Districts and Subdistricts.*
3 Ibid., 248.
6 Ibid., 101–2.
8 Krystyna Lukasiewicz, “Polish Community in the Crowsnest Pass.”
Although labour for the CPR mainline in the early 1880s was originally recruited from central and eastern Canada, some fifteen thousand indentured Chinese labourers were given the most dangerous jobs in the construction through the mountains in British Columbia. More than fifteen hundred died on the job, a rate of attrition more akin to a war than to a construction project. Exhaustion and scurvy claimed many lives since the employer provided no medical services and the state placed no limits on exploitation of labour. The sacrifices of the Chinese workers, however, did not dispel racism against Orientals. During the construction of the Crowsnest Pass line from Lethbridge to Nelson, BC, in the late 1890s, which involved about forty-five hundred navvies, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier’s government made the hiring of only British subjects as construction labourers one condition for government financial support. They may later have regretted that decision because many of the one thousand Welsh workers complained in the newspapers about their treatment rather than tolerating the low wages and inhuman working and living conditions in the camps. Navvies recruited in eastern and central Canada were equally critical.

The criticism caused enormous embarrassment for the Canadian government, which feared that such complaints would choke off desired immigrants from Britain. In response, the government appointed two Royal Commissions to investigate wages and working and living conditions. The CPR, unhappy with the bad publicity that the newspapers and Royal Commissions gave to their employment practices, turned to immigrant labour from eastern and southern Europe on future construction projects, a strategy subsequently copied by other railways and industrialists.

The findings of the commissioners, along with reports by the North West Mounted Police, provide vivid glimpses of the life of a navvy. Most had been misled about the terms and conditions of work when they signed their contracts. For example, they were not told that they would have to pay their fare from Ottawa to the worksite. Charged a penny a mile, they owed the employer $22.49 before they began their first day’s work. They had to purchase blankets, boots, work clothes, candles, and other necessities from the company store, which often doubled the normal price of goods. Food was supplied at a fixed rate of $5.00 per worker each week. There were also deductions for sending mail and for receiving medical care. Considering that the men were paid $1.50 per day for a ten-hour workday and received no payment for days when they were too sick to work or when the weather did not allow work, it is not surprising that after working for two months, men could find themselves either with no money coming in or in debt to the contractor.

Living conditions in the camps ranged from bad to appalling, depending upon the particular contractor. One group was housed in tents without stoves in the middle of winter. Groups of fifty or sixty men were crowded into tiny, unventilated bunkhouses with leaking roofs, mud floors, and seven-foot ceilings. Blankets and bedding were generally infested with lice, and the unsanitary bunkhouses were home to vermin. The meat and other food sent to feed the workers was frequently spoiled and rancid by the time it reached the camps. The workers had to find and transport water for personal use, and privies were badly constructed and often contaminated local water supplies.

Unsurprisingly, such conditions caused rampant
illness among navvies on the Crowsnest line, including
colds, flus, diphtheria, mountain fever, and rheumatism.
Despite workers being charged for medical care, only
five doctors served thousands of workers strung out
along hundreds of miles of track. The deaths of two
sick workers who received no medical care prompted
the second Royal Commission. During the hearings,
there was testimony that men too sick to work were
fired and ejected from the camps.

On the Crowsnest line, as with most other railway
construction during this time, workers were not al-
lowed to quit. Bound by the Master and Servant Act,
the men were compelled to work unless permitted to
leave by the employer. The North West Mounted Police
enforced work contracts. If the police caught a worker
who had left an employer before his labour contract
had ended, he was forced back to work or jailed for
desertion. By contrast, there were few repercussions
for a contractor who violated the contract. According
to Warren Caragata:

A frequent cause of dispute was, as it had been on the
mainline, the failure of contractors to pay the workers
wages owed. In some cases examined by the commis-
sion, contractors just abandoned the camps and the men
in them. At Wardner, just inside the B.C. border, several
complaints were heard from men in a camp that they
had not been paid for two months. . . . In such cases,
the options open for the workers were few. The Mount-
ies could come and arrest a navvie for deserting his
contractor but there is no reference in the Dugas com-
mission report of any contractor, having deserted a camp
full of men and leaving them one hundred miles from
Macleod with dwindling food supplies, being arrested
and tossed into the guard house.6

One option always open to working people when
individual protest proves futile is collective action. Dur-
ing early railway construction in the region, two major
confrontations with bosses occurred, one to the east
and one to the west of what would become Alberta's
borders. In 1883 at Maple Creek, not far from Medicine
Hat, and in 1885 at Beaver Creek, near the Rogers Pass,
navvies collectively put down their tools and refused
to work. Both strikes were suppressed by the North
West Mounted Police, under the leadership of Inspec-
tor Sam Steele. At Maple Creek, the strike leader was
arrested and imprisoned and the men forced back to
work, but at Beaver Creek a pitched battle between five
hundred navvies and the Mounties ended only when
one of the strike leaders was shot by a policeman and further gunfire appeared imminent. Strike leaders were arrested and either fined or sentenced to six months of hard labour. The North West Mounted Police had the authority of magistrates at the time: they could arrest, charge, convict, and sentence offenders at will.

One barrier the navvies faced in struggles to assert their rights was the disinterest of the labour movement in organizing them. There were many reasons for this. Most early trade unions were craft-based and not interested in unskilled workers. For unions that might have been interested, the isolation of the camps made them difficult for outsiders to reach. Furthermore, the work was seasonal and workers frequently moved locations and changed contractors, which made sustained union involvement difficult. Probably the most significant barrier to organizing, though, particularly after 1900, was the fact that most of these workers were non-British immigrants. Edmund Bradwin calculated that in the early 1920s, 32 percent of the railway construction workers were Slavs (Ukrainians, Czechs and Slovaks, Yugoslavs, and Poles), 24.7 percent Scandinavians (Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes), 7 percent Italians, and 3.8 percent other non-British (other European, Orientals, Blacks, and East Indians). Once the 11.3 percent made up of French-Canadians was factored in, only 20 percent of the workers had English as a first language, and 40 percent of those were new arrivals from Great Britain.7

The language barrier to organizing these new immigrants was secondary in many cases to the problem of nativism on the part of the dominant Anglo leadership and membership of existing unions. The one union that welcomed railway navvies was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). After its founding in 1905, the IWW focused on the masses of unskilled workers whom other unions were unwilling to organize, including textile-factory workers in the east of the continent and migrant labourers who worked the farms, railway construction camps, and logging camps in the west. Historian Greg Hall, in his study of the IWW and agricultural workers in the American West during this period, describes the bond shared by IWW members, who were often referred to as “wobblies”:

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the vast majority of migrant and seasonal laborers working in western agriculture were white, native-born men. Among these predominantly unmarried workers, travelling by rail from job to job and living in “jungles,” harvest wobblies developed a distinctive culture of work and life on the road, which I have termed their “worklife culture.” They shared much of this culture with other migrant and seasonal agricultural laborers of the day. Yet the wobblies embodied a unique camaraderie in the jungles, worksites, union halls, skid rows, jails, and freight cars of the American west. Their common experiences forged a sociocultural bond that was further strengthened by aggressive opposition to employers, law enforcement officers, and “hi-jacks, the robbers and confidence men who preyed on migrant harvest workers.”

In the Canadian West, these observations were equally true for the “navvies”: single white males working in camps in the summer, riding the rails to jobs, and
spending winters in the skid rows of cities like Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver. With the added shared experience of being immigrants standing outside the Anglo-dominant mainstream in terms of both language and custom, the immigrant navvies were a unique part of Alberta’s early labour history.

This worklife culture of the navvies predisposed them to the IWW message. Shunned by the crafts unions and the dominant Anglo society, exploited at work and routinely cheated by employers and labour agents, and discarded when no longer needed, migrant workers believed that employers and the government would always treat them unjustly. Few could fulfill the residency and citizenship requirements to vote, so the IWW disdain for the electoral process found fertile ground. Furthermore, the lack of a permanent community left most migrant workers without the mechanisms so essential for the survival of the working class during this period. Single men on the move had no families to provide the critical waged and non-waged contributions by women and children that helped workers make ends meet. For them, taking on the employer in IWW-organized job actions with other immigrant workers, regardless of ethnic background or language, was the only way forward.

**THE ALBERTA COAL MINERS**

In the absence of another fuel supply for home heating, coal was essential to both the settlement of the southern prairies and the operations of the railways that made settlement economically possible. From the beginning, coal mining was one of the most important industries of the province — with softer, heating lignite coal found at Drumheller, Lethbridge, Taber, and Edmonton, and the harder bituminous steam coal found in the mountains of the Crowsnest Pass, Canmore, the Yellowhead, and the Coal Branch. However, Alberta coal mining was both physically dangerous and economically precarious, a volatile mixture that produced increasingly bitter confrontations between workers and owners, establishing the province as one of the bastions of radical labour activity in Canada.

All underground coal mines were dangerous, but employers refused to reduce those dangers because safe explosives, safety gear, ventilation equipment, and safety measures involving timbers for shoring diverted money from profits. Miners complained that the ponies used to haul coal carts inside the mines were treated better than the men; mine ponies cost money to replace; men were replaced for free.

Coal production was financially precarious because of the economic power of the railways. Data from 1920 to 1945 indicate that the railways commonly purchased over 90 percent of Alberta’s annual bituminous coal production. In addition, the CPR’s ownership of “captive mines” gave the company even more influence over the market price of coal. The CPR effectively controlled the Hillcrest mine in Alberta and in 1908 launched the Hosmer mine across the BC border in the Crowsnest Pass. In 1905, the railway’s capacity to depress coal prices led to profit margins being half of what original investors in the coal mines expected. Finally, the coal producers were absolutely dependent on the railways to transport their product to markets outside the province; the freight rate structure of both the CPR and CNR discouraged export of coal.
INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was a revolutionary union created to address the inability of the labour movement, as it was then constituted, to free workers from the economic suffering they experienced in the early twentieth century. The back of the manifesto sent out before the 1905 founding conference in Chicago articulated what a labour organization must do to properly represent the working class:

First — It must combine the wage earners in such a way that it can most successfully fight the battles and protect the interests of the working people of today in their struggle for fewer hours, more wages and better conditions. Second — It must offer a final solution of the labor problem — an emancipation from strikes, injunctions and bullpens [labour concentration camps then in use in America].

Unlike the craft-based unions of the American Federation of Labor, the IWW welcomed women, black workers, and immigrants (the union printed literature in many languages). One of the harshest criticisms of the existing labour movement was that it ignored the need for labour solidarity. The American Federation of Labor had only limited interest in workers beyond the “aristocracy of labour” represented by skilled workers, who were almost invariably white males. Even within skilled ranks there was little solidarity. Crafts-based unions routinely ordered their members to cross other craft-union picket lines on the grounds that their own contracts with the employer in question were still in force.

The IWW rejected signed contracts in its constitution because contracts prevented workers from striking when the time was best, restricted the calling of sympathetic strikes, and encouraged the crossing of picket lines (union scabbing). The IWW constitution bore the motto “An Injury to One is an Injury to All,” and all IWW workers in an industry belonged to the same branch of the union regardless of skill or occupation.

Although initially tolerant of Socialist Party members being active within the union, in 1908, the Wobblies (as IWW members were called) explicitly removed all references to electoral politics from their constitution, claiming that political action presented no danger to the economic elite and wasted labour’s efforts on futile struggles.

The new preamble read:

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among the millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life.

Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, abolish the wage system and live in harmony with the Earth.

Instead of the conservative motto, “a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work,” we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, “abolition of the wage system.”

It is the historic mission of the working-class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for the everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.

The Wobblies were famous for their creative strike strategies, and they encouraged their members to strike at will. They pioneered the idea of mobilizing strikers in mass actions in order to keep morale up. Since the union refused to produce a “war chest,” IWW strikes
were purposefully very short. If there was no immediate victory, they simply returned to work and announced that they were “taking the strike to the job” by harrying employers through slowdowns and delays at the worksite.  

From the beginning, the IWW had strong Canadian and Albertan connections. A key union involved in founding the IWW, the Western Federation of Miners, was strong in British Columbia and was active until 1905 in the coal mines in Lethbridge and the Crowsnest Pass. The United Brotherhood of Railway Employees, which had led workers in a Winnipeg-to- Calgary-to-Vancouver strike against the CPR in 1903, was directly linked to another IWW founder, the American Labor Union.

With its militant, revolutionary message and its focus on unskilled factory workers and transient labourers, mostly new immigrants, the IWW gained a strong following among railway construction workers, miners, loggers, and farm workers in Alberta. With the exception of the miners, the IWW was the only union that tried to organize these groups of workers.

Despite attacks by more conservative labour leaders and organizations, and despite savage repression by governments in Canada and the United States during World War I and its aftermath, the IWW maintained a presence in lumber camps and other settings during the 1920s and 1930s, and its ideas influenced the campaign in 1919–20 to get existing unions in western Canada to join the One Big Union.  

2 Ibid., 32–33.
3 Ibid., 37.
4 Ibid., 109.
5 Ibid., 33, 111.
6 Ibid., 134–38.
In an era when all North American workers, even those in mighty craft unions, faced savage attacks that increased work hours, speeded up production, and reduced wages, Alberta coal mine owners needed little encouragement to grind their workers. However, the chronic downward pressure on coal prices orchestrated by the railways meant that the mine owners had little capacity to secure industrial peace by meeting even the most basic needs of their workforce. Even the Galt’s were no match for the CPR. In early 1886, the CPR demanded, and received, a price reduction in coal from $5.00 per ton to $2.50 by threatening to otherwise hand the CPR’s coal contract to Pennsylvania producers. In response, Galt ordered coal to be stockpiled at the Medicine Hat terminal and then laid off all his miners, giving the unmarried men one-way tickets to Medicine Hat and offering the married miners their jobs back with a 75 percent reduction in pay.

Alberta’s First Coal Strike

Within a year, the bitterness created in the mining community at Lethbridge by company lay-offs and wage cuts simmered over into a strike for higher wages in April 1887. Surprisingly, the workers won because the CPR was short of coal and the North Western Coal and Navigation Company was short of money. However, when the men struck again two months later, the coal shortage had eased and the company imported strikebreakers from eastern Canada and Ohio, using the NWMP to escort them across the picket lines. The strike was lost. This pattern of massive layoffs whenever demand for coal fell became a repeated theme for heating-coal producers in Lethbridge and elsewhere. The cyclical suffering of miners and their families during these sudden, temporary layoffs had lasting effects on the social fabric of coal towns. Although the railway needed coal year round, heating coal was only needed in the winter, so mines were only busy during early and mid-winter.

When the North Western Coal and Navigation Company again fired its 518 workers in early 1894 and offered to rehire only 150 married workers if they agreed to a 17 percent wage cut, the miners rebelled. Although 150 miners immediately left town to look for work elsewhere, the remaining workers went on a strike organized by local leaders since they had no union affiliation yet. The Mounties placed a guard on company property and attempted to mediate the strike. Finally, the company broke the strike by threatening to evict all the workers from the company-owned houses despite the winter weather.

Three years later, protesting the company’s installation of larger coal screens (the men only got paid for coal that did not fall through the screen) and demanding higher wages, the Lethbridge workers struck again. This time, a large group of miners left to work on the rail line being constructed in the nearby Crowsnest Pass, but the CPR would not hire the strikers despite its need for labour. With the local NWMP captain constantly coercing the men back to work, the strike again failed.

Following these three successive defeats, Lethbridge miners proved receptive when a representative of the militant Western Federation of Miners (WFM) visited Lethbridge in October 1897, bringing a message of the need for collective action. The WFM had been involved in bitter struggles in the hard-rock mines.
in Idaho, Montana, and Washington, often confronting gun-wielding company forces and state troops with armed resistance. By 1898, the Lethbridge local boasted about two hundred members. However, when tested in 1899, the new union failed to gain either recognition or better terms from the employer, and it was disbanded in 1902. But the union did establish viable locals in the Crowsnest Pass mines at Fernie, BC (1899), and at Frank, Alberta (1903). The WFM also officially endorsed the Socialist Party of America in 1902, and its Canadian locals backed the Socialist Party of Canada.

In 1903, at the same time that an allied union, the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees (UBRE), was striking the CPR in western Canada, a crucial strike by the WFM coal miners in the Crowsnest Pass and on Vancouver Island brought first a federal Royal Commission and then the threat of punitive and restrictive legislation against the union. The deputy minister of Labour for the governing federal Liberals, Mackenzie King, threatened to pass legislation declaring both unions illegal organizations. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, Frank Sherman, the leader of Crowsnest Pass miners organized in District 7 of the WFM, changed his allegiance to the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) in late 1903, reorganizing the locals into a new District 18.

Although some criticized Sherman for abandoning the WFM, the UMWA, with its larger membership, offered a better chance to gain real improvements for rank-and-file coal miners. Unlike the embattled and battered WFM, the UMWA had emerged as a major national union in the United States by winning an interstate coal contract in 1898, in the process bringing out on strike the whole American Midwest. They won the eight-hour day, the union check-off, and a process of collective bargaining. Their subsequent leader, John Mitchell, led a strike of 100,000 hard-coal miners in Pennsylvania in 1902, and the subsequent government intervention in the dispute forced an arbitration that awarded significant gains to the workers. The new organization swept up the miners in the Pass; by 1906, it had a membership of four thousand and had negotiated contracts with Crow’s Nest Pass Coal, West Canadian Collieries, the Hillcrest Coal and Coke Company, and Coleman International; later contracts included Canmore and Taber.

### The Lethbridge Strike of 1906

The first real test for Frank Sherman and District 18 took place at the Galt mine in Lethbridge in 1906. Control of the company had passed to Toronto financiers, with A.M. Nanton of Winnipeg being the new managing director. The new management was no more sympathetic to unions than the Galts, who had beaten back four strikes and the Western Federation of Miners. Nanton specifically instructed mine officials not to meet with any union representatives.

On 8 March 1906, the newly organized local went on strike in support of demands for union recognition, an eight-hour day underground, some wage adjustments, dues check-off, a checkweighman to monitor the weighing of coal for the workers, and a pit committee to handle grievances and supervise safety. With only thirty of the six hundred peak-season miners scabbing (crossing the lines to go to work), the strike got off to a strong start. The nine-month strike, which
ended on 2 December 1906, was marked by the dynamiting of strikebreakers’ houses, confrontations between the NWMP and strikers, the exposing of an agent-provocateur, and the intervention of Mackenzie King on behalf of the federal government.

The NWMP were heavily involved in this strike, as in every strike in Lethbridge. Thirty-four men were assigned to the strike, and a further eleven company men were sworn in as special constables; reinforcements later increased the number of men available to fifty-four. An undercover policeman was planted as a spy among the foreign miners. Company officials warned the police about potential violence by the strikers, particularly the non-Anglo element, and even suggested that the strikers were armed with guns, which no evidence has supported. 24

Despite police claims of neutrality in the strike, the force was boarded in railway cars on company property and fed and housed at company expense. Police escorted a company official through miners’ houses as he urged them to return to work. In their attempt to stop strikers and their families from verbally abusing scabs whom they were escorting home, six Mounties drew their revolvers and pointed them at the crowd of men, women, and children. The strikers later relaxed their harassment of the scabs because of both the insufficiency of scab numbers to operate the mine and the dangers of police repression.25 But the strike dragged on through the summer with sporadic outbursts of violence, including the dynamiting of a house that the union claimed was an attempt to discredit the union by a company-employed agent from the Thiel Detective Agency in Chicago (an offshoot of the Pinkerton Detective Agency).

By May, most of the single miners had left to seek work elsewhere, leaving the married miners and their families on the picket lines.26 In July, the company prematurely announced that the strike was over; by October, two hundred men, mostly inexperienced, were living in bunk cars on company property and working the mine, but the amount of coal actually produced was disputed. In the fall, Mackenzie King concluded that the green workforce would need much more training to be productive and noted that no new miners were coming to Lethbridge to work during the strike.27

Because of the sudden and deep onset of an early winter on the prairies that year, a public panic over the coal crisis caused the premier of Saskatchewan to plead with Ottawa to end the strike. Although there were heating-coal shortages in the West in the winter of 1906–7, it is doubtful that the striking miners were primarily responsible, despite the claims of media and politicians. The Lethbridge strike affected only one-third of Alberta’s coal capacity; Saskatchewan, despite the cries of its premier, depended on Pennsylvania, not Alberta, for its normal supply of heating coal; and finally, the operators of Alberta’s bituminous mines claimed that they would have been happy to supply the shortfall, but the CPR would not provide them with coal cars. Regardless of the reason for the coal shortage, it convinced the federal government to send Mackenzie King to mediate the strike at Lethbridge.28

After King travelled twice to confer with John Mitchell, international president of the United Mine Workers of America, he cobbled together a compromise that the company accepted and the union agreed to on behalf of the miners. During the mediation, King insisted that the workers make the greater concessions
and treated the union spokesmen with contempt and fits of temper. Instead of union recognition, the miners got a non-discrimination clause claiming that union and non-union workers would be treated equally. Given the imbalance of employer and worker power, such a clause allowed the operators to discriminate against union militants. The union lost the check-off, and the men had to apply to get their old jobs back. They did, however, get a 10 percent wage increase and a cumbersome grievance procedure.

The Industrial Disputes Investigation Act

Based on his experience in Lethbridge, King prepared legislation that the Laurier government tabled in 1907. The Industrial Disputes Investigation Act (IDIA) mandated compulsory arbitration in all disputes in public utilities (e.g., coal mines, railways). During investigation by a three-person board appointed by the government, neither side could stop work through a strike or lock-out; the resolution recommended by the board was not binding on either party. The act did not prohibit employers from firing or intimidating union supporters, arbitrarily altering wages and work-time, hiring anti-union workers and agents, or stockpiling to serve markets during a strike. Essentially, King was disarming the union and leaving the company free to act.

Another significant development from the Lethbridge strike was the creation of the Western Canada Coal Operators Association (WCCOA), an employers’ bargaining agent designed specifically to deal with the United Mine Workers of America from a position of strength. In 1907, negotiations foundered between the union and the WCCOA. The union wanted an across-the-board wage increase and had a 90 percent strike mandate behind them. With the IDIA just put into effect, the operators instituted a wage reduction, confident that the workers could not legally strike until the mandatory conciliation process had run its course. Despite the silence of union leaders, the rank-and-file miners walked off the job in the Crowsnest Pass. On 15 April, fourteen hundred miners walked off on the BC side, followed by a thousand more on the Alberta side and then by six hundred more in mines along the CPR mainline. When Mackenzie King and influential union and government leaders urged the striking miners to accept the IDIA conciliation process, every local but one small one voted him down. Although a deal was hammered out on 28 April, it was not the result of conciliation but rather a negotiated settlement forced by the striking miners.

District 18 went through two more rounds of negotiations with the WCCOA in 1909 and 1911. During the recession of 1909, the negotiations ultimately resulted in a three-month strike that gained little and split the membership. The 1911 negotiations foundered on wage rates because inflation had accompanied a new economic boom and made it impossible for miners to live on the old wage scale. Despite recognition from the union that the CPR stranglehold on the bituminous operators severely restricted their ability to pay a living wage, the miners could not accept the wage freeze and rate equalization proposed by the WCCOA, nor the employers’ demand for a return to the non-discrimination clause, which negated union security. On 1 April, the strike began with six thousand miners leaving the job. Evictions and attempted evictions of strikers from company housing ensued, with gunshots.
When the miners turned down a conciliation award that mirrored the employers’ position, the operators declared on 18 August that mines in District 18 were now “open shop” (that is, the miners were not required to join or financially support the union). In the end, the miners voted 58 percent in favour of a four-year contract containing the employer wage positions but retaining the union check-off. The strike had been thoroughly lost.35

The Miners and Socialism

Despite extensive courting by the Conservative and (especially) the Liberal parties, western coal miners from Vancouver Island to Alberta became more and more solidly entrenched in the socialist movement between 1900 and 1914. Both English-speaking and ethnic miners supported the Marxist Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) electorally, fighting for an end to a social and economic system that blighted their lives. But the first coal miner elected to the Alberta legislature, Donald McNab, was an independent labour candidate elected by acclamation in Lethbridge in January 1909 in a by-election held a mere month ahead of a general provincial election. Despite allying himself with the ruling Liberals in the legislature, he lost his deposit in the February election as the local Liberals rejected him in favour of a businessman.36

However much the Liberal party schemed to enfold the organized miners in their party structure, the miners rejected the idea. The Liberals in 1909 endorsed a mine union leader, John Angus McDonald, in the coal-town–dominated Rocky Mountain constituency, which included both the Crowsnest Pass communities and the mines near Banff. However, the winner of the election was the SPC candidate, Charles McNamara O’Brien. O’Brien ran without official union support despite the fact that District 18 president Frank Sherman had run under the SPC banner himself in the 1908 federal election. According to historian Allen Seager:

O’Brien’s win certainly did serve notice of a popular political ferment which went well beyond the demands of the Province’s labour reformers, who really were, in
Marx’s famous phrase, just the tail of the great Liberal Party. For one thing O’Brien, unlike the Gladstonians, never claimed to be the guardian of the miners’ special interests. He spoke for all workers, in the name of the “working class.”

A native of Ontario, O’Brien came west as a navvy on the Crowsnest line and worked as both a miner and logger. He was a gifted speaker and a committed socialist who rejected the idea of social democratic reforms as unworkable.

O’Brien’s election reflected a growing radicalization among Alberta coal miners. For example, at the 1909 UMWA western Canadian convention, the members passed resolutions calling for public ownership and democratic management of coal mines, welcoming Chinese and Japanese workers to the union, and supporting potential realignment with the Western Federation of Miners.

O’Brien served only one term in the legislature. In the 1913 elections, the Liberals ran two coal miners as Liberal-Labour candidates in the mining constituencies of Lethbridge and Rocky Mountain, both endorsed by prominent UMWA leaders. The Conservatives won both seats and O’Brien, despite increasing his vote from 37.5 percent to 39 percent, was defeated. The union executive members who had cooked up the Liberal-Labour alliance were kicked out of office at the first opportunity after the election.

In 1914, District 18 officially endorsed the Socialist Party of Canada with its revolutionary platform. Although undoubtedly many miners still supported social-democratic, independent labour, Liberal, and even Conservative strategies, the majority of the coal miners had rejected the possibility of reform.

### Life in Coal Towns

The mining workforce comprised 50 percent experienced miners, 40 percent unskilled labour, and 10 percent skilled tradesmen. Alberta miners came from across Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Europe. Since both miners and mine labourers moved frequently in search of work and wages, they were hard to track. The 1911 Canada census provides a good example. Since the census was taken beginning 1 June, it would have significantly underestimated coal workers in the heating-coal industry, which was at its lowest ebb of production during the warm months. Miners, and particularly single miners, simply left to look for other work during the down times. Even the bituminous miners were busier in the fall to accommodate the harvest rail shipments.

Despite the limitations, however, the census provides valuable insight into the broad ethnic diversity of the coal communities, as a quick look at table 3.1 shows. Of the Europeans counted, there were 821 Austro-Hungarians (composed of Ukrainians, Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians), 637 Italians, 258 Belgians, 167 Russians, 114 Germans, and a scattering of Poles, Scandinavians, Jews, Dutch, and Greeks. There were also 58 Chinese and a small number of Japanese.

The UMWA worked diligently to build solidarity across ethnic and linguistic barriers. Between 1911 and 1915, the District 18 union publication, the District Ledger, ran foreign-language news, socialist political manifestos, letters, and other local contributions in French, Italian, Finnish, and Slavic languages. By 1914, ethnic union leaders had begun to emerge, including Jean Legace, Nick Tkachuk, John Lauttamus, Frank
Bonacci, and Alex Susnar, all of whom became officers of the union. There is little evidence of ethnic stratification into the miner/mine-labourer jobs except for a British/Italian domination in the skilled trades group, which made up about 8 percent of the workforce. The broad presence of both skilled miners and committed socialists among the ethnic miners was attested to by one observer lamenting the ideology of the miners:

Many of the miners in Canada came from mining areas in Europe where injustice and poor conditions had promoted communism, anti-clericalism, and general disaffection. Very few of them, except the Slovaks, practiced their religion. [Bellevue’s] Father Donovan reported in 1927: “We have 750 European Catholics in this parish; only 50 of them attend Mass.”

A random sampling of 515 European workers employed from 1907 to 1909 at the Crows Nest Pass Coal Company showed that the men had an average of 4.5 years of experience in mining. Within the coal towns, the various ethnic groups constructed halls, co-operatives, and mutual aid societies for their own particular groups while at the same time joining together as a larger collective within the union and in the mines. Another important factor in Alberta coal towns was the number of married women and families. According to the 1911 census, the Crowsnest coal towns had a greater proportion of married men than the Alberta average (see table 3.2).

The fact that married miners and their families were settled in the coal towns in far greater proportion than was the provincial norm belies the idea that the coal towns were simply a harsh, alienating environment occupied by an extremely transient population. Rather, it indicates a commitment to both the job and the towns themselves. Single miners may have voted with their feet when labour disputes or seasonal layoffs occurred,
but the married miners clearly had a greater stake in the community. In the Lethbridge strike of 1906, it was the married non-British miners living in the mine town of Stafford next to the mine who stayed for the duration of the strike, and their wives caused as much grief for the strikebreakers and NWMP as the miners.47

The coal towns in the Pass were open towns with independent merchants and town councils. That meant that the miners, particularly the married miners and their families, were integral parts of communities in which they had both influence and ownership. Working-class families in the coal towns used the same survival strategies as their urban counterparts. They raised livestock, sometimes as small farm owners and sometimes simply turning their livestock loose in the wild. They took in boarders and did laundry and housekeeping, and family members earned money where they could.48

**Death and Danger in the Mines**

Working in Alberta coal mines was extremely dangerous. Deaths per million tons of coal mined between 1907 and 1916 in British Columbia and Alberta were more than double the comparable figures for Nova Scotia and the United States.49 However shocking the major mine disasters were (the Bellevue disaster of 1910 took 31 lives and the Hillcrest disaster of 1914 killed 189 miners), weekly accidents in the mines were a fact of life for several reasons. The Crownsnest coal had an unusually high amount of methane gas, which produced a high risk of both major explosions and minor “bumps” (sudden shifts in a mine that can lead to the collapse of walls or ceilings). Furthermore, the coal seams inclined an average of thirteen to twenty-six degrees, resulting in many haulage accidents. In addition to these natural risks, however, cost-cutting by the mine operators

| TABLE 3.2 MARRIED MEN IN ALBERTA AND IN CROWSNEST COAL TOWNS, 1911 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alberta | Married | As % of total men | Married men per 100 single men | Single |
| 70,706 | 31.6 | 47.9 | 147,587 |
| Crowsnest | 1,189 | 39.9 | 67.4 | 1,765 |
| Bellevue | 1,147 | 40.0 | 67.9 | 168 |
| Blairmore | 291 | 39.6 | 68.1 | 427 |
| Coleman | 403 | 41.3 | 70.6 | 571 |
| Frank | 173 | 36.2 | 56.9 | 304 |
| Hillcrest | 117 | 37.9 | 61.9 | 189 |
| Lille | 91 | 46.0 | 85.8 | 106 |
was a huge factor in mine accidents. To cut back on expenses, the operators routinely coerced the men to use less shoring timbers than required for safe operations. Poor shoring caused more cave-ins, seriously injuring and killing mine workers. The use of cheap, dangerous explosives was another factor: since miners had to buy their own explosives, their low wages put the safer but more expensive explosives out of reach. This bare-bones operation of the mines produced 1,435 serious accidents (not counting fatalities) in the Crowsnest between 1904 and 1928. When “slight” accidents are added, the overall accident rate rises to an average of two per week between 1906 and 1928.50

**Alberta Coal Miners and Socialist Politics**

Many factors played a role in creating the lasting Marxist socialist tradition of the coal miners in Alberta between 1885 and 1914, a tradition that remained a powerful influence on coal miners and the labour movement for the next twenty-five years. The incorporation of non-English European immigrants, many with pronounced radical leanings learned back home, into the British workforce in the mines, mining communities, and union created a broad class solidarity that transcended ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences. The lack of a British majority probably defused the nativist reaction found among the British community elsewhere. Shared dangers of the work — made worse by the actions of the owners, layoffs, chronic unemployment, low wages, and the inability of government to reform or regulate the mining corporations — all influenced miners toward a radical socialist position. Certainly, there was no universal agreement on politics: reformist liberals, labourites, and the anarcho-syndicalists of the IWW all had significant support in the mining community. However, unlike the navvies and migrant workers, many coal miners put down roots in communities and could exercise their franchise. Frustrated by the state interventions on the part of the NWMP and Mackenzie King’s collaborationist legal processes that always seemed to benefit the owners, many miners adopted a political strategy of putting the state in the hands of the workers. When District 18 officially endorsed the Socialist Party of Canada, it indicated that the majority of miners were willing to formalize a relationship that had been growing for a decade.
The early development of Alberta’s urban centres was determined largely by the railways. When the CPR decided in the early 1880s to build its mainline through Medicine Hat, Calgary, and Rogers Pass instead of through the previously planned Battlefords, Edmonton, and Yellowhead Pass, the centres along the northern route went into decline as land speculation died down. Speculative land investment moved to Medicine Hat and, particularly, Calgary. It was not until a Calgary-to-Strathcona rail link was built in 1891 that Edmonton and Red Deer began to grow.

Railways brought the settlers, and the railways’ location played a large role in determining where settlement occurred: proximity to a transportation corridor was essential for moving goods economically to and from the farms and rural towns. Calgary’s first boom in the 1880s was mercantile, largely based on supplying goods to the CPR, its contractors, and their employees, and on building homes for the burgeoning population. By 1891, Calgary’s population had grown to four thousand. There were 28 manufacturing firms, employing 170 workers, much of their production directed at supplying the local construction industry.51

The First Unions

The twin pillars of the railway and the construction industry provided the focus of early union organizing attempts. The first unions in Alberta represented skilled railway workers: the engineers, brakemen, and firemen without whose skill the trains would not run. The running trades, as they were known, were
considered an elite group because their skills gave them a relatively strong bargaining position with the employer. They were essential to the operation of the railroad and hard to replace quickly in a work stoppage. Without organization, however, they were vulnerable. In 1883, the unorganized Alberta-based locomotive engineers and firemen joined a national work stoppage to protest an arbitrary wage cut by the CPR. However, the workers were forced to accept the wage cut after the NWMP intervened not only to guard company property, but also to operate the trains themselves when necessary. In September 1886, three years later, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers chartered the first union in Alberta in Medicine Hat, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen followed them within months. Two other railway running trades locals were established shortly thereafter, and by 1900, with a few short-lived exceptions, these four railway locals were the only organized workers in what is now Alberta.

There had been other efforts to unionize in the region, as indicated by the arrival in Calgary in December 1886 of the Knights of Labor, which had already organized some twelve thousand Canadian workers, mainly in Ontario’s industrial heartland and in Montreal. The result was Calgary’s Local Assembly 9787 of the Knights of Labor. In 1888, the local attempted to organize the miners of bitumen at the Canmore mines west of Calgary but by the 1890s the group had disbanded. The Knights — with their willingness to organize across craft divisions, combine skilled and unskilled workers, and welcome women into the union — offered an alternative to the unfettered capitalism of the late nineteenth century in North America and a major challenge to the narrower crafts-based unions that were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. However, suppression by the state and a growing, organized antagonism by employers and the craft unions finally extinguished the Knights’ vision of a more egalitarian workers’ society.
Craft Versus Industrial Unions

With large-scale immigration beginning around 1897, Edmonton and Calgary began to grow rapidly, and the population boom triggered a construction boom. In 1901, Calgary’s population was 4,398 and Edmonton’s was 4,176 (including Strathcona, also known as South Edmonton). By 1906, the populations had tripled, with Calgary at 11,967 and Edmonton at 14,088. Five years later, Calgary was home to 43,704 and Edmonton to 30,479.55

With the construction boom came a demand for construction workers in both cities and the first major expansion of union organizing in the urban centres. Although a short-lived local of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA Local 95) was founded in Calgary in 1892, it did not last through the recession that gripped the city in the following years. In 1902, however, the booming construction industry triggered a wave of union organizing among the building trades, with the carpenters’ union organizing Local 1055 in Calgary and Local 1325 in Edmonton. The stonemasons organized in both cities in 1903, as did the bricklayers, and the plumbers and pipefitters followed in 1904. In the decade from 1900 to 1910, local branches of American-based craft unions proliferated in Alberta’s cities. Among the skilled trades organized were confectioners, blacksmiths, brewers, lathers, bakers, retail clerks, barbers, tailors, teamsters, and brewers. In 1905, 30 percent of the adult male workforce in Calgary was organized into a craft union, and by 1913, there were 44 union locals in the city, representing over 3,000 workers. The province contained 171 locals with a combined membership of 11,500, of whom half were coal miners. Edmonton was in a similar position to Calgary with the coming of the two transcontinents (the CN in 1905 and the Grand Trunk Pacific in 1909) and the addition of new locals of key railway workers: carmen, locomotive engineers and firemen, machinists, and maintenance-of-way workers. An influential group among the organized workers were the printing trades, represented by the International Typographers Union, which had locals in both cities.56

Even at their best, however, the craft unions of the day represented no more than one-third of the workforce, and they largely resisted notions of organizing the majority of other workers: the unskilled and women. Craft unions were exclusionary by nature. Their strength depended upon restricting membership and controlling the apprenticeship process — and with it, access to the knowledge and skills of the craft. The fewer skilled workers available in each craft, the more job security and bargaining power the union members had. That exclusionary underpinning provided fertile ground for nativist tendencies among the skilled workers. Most skilled tradesmen at the time were of British descent, as was the leadership of the craft unions. Through hiring hall practices and apprenticeship selection, the craft unions could remain largely British male preserves, leaving the less desirable work for women, children, and ethnic groups. In Calgary, for example, where over 80 percent of the citizens claimed a British heritage, maintaining a homogeneous union membership would have been relatively easy. Province-wide, the British were a much smaller majority.57

Another problem with craft union organizing was the splintering of the workforce of the same employer into discrete units, each with its own contracts. At the CPR, for example, each trade had its own bargaining
unit and contract. When the trackmen went on strike in 1901, all their co-workers — the engineers, firemen, shop workers, machinists, clerks, and freight handlers — stayed on the job, ensuring that the company continued to operate easily and won the conflict. Craft union insistence that their members honour their contracts meant that during a dispute by any one union in a plant or industry, other unionists would consistently be crossing picket lines, weakening the strike and breaking down solidarity.

By the close of the nineteenth century, the craft unions were under attack. The ongoing evolution of industrial capitalism was steadily eroding the craft unions’ base of support. Scientific management techniques promoted by engineers like Frederick Winslow Taylor and Harrington Emerson were assimilating skilled crafts and breaking them down to subsets of skills and processes that allowed semi-skilled workers to do them with less training, a process often referred to as deskilling. Technological change produced machines that replaced workers’ skills. The concentration of capital into larger monopolies and trusts tipped the balance of bargaining power between union and employer. Factories became larger and larger, as did the machines inside them, and employers became more aggressive in their opposition to unions. Unions affected by deskilling, mechanization, and loss of job autonomy represented crafts in crisis.

Although all crafts unions developed various strategies to maintain their traditional control over work and the labour market, those most deeply affected by the changing workplace were more likely to engage in more radical strategies. In Vancouver between 1900 and 1919, the crafts in crisis — the machinists, boilermakers, bakers, tailors, and carpenters — amalgamated and broadened their organizations to include less skilled workers, building solidarity beyond their craft boundaries, and participated in sympathy strikes.

The problem confronted by the crafts unions was that as the deskilling process continued through both new technologies and scientific management initiatives, their members’ numbers and job autonomy decreased within an industry, while the numbers of semi-skilled and unskilled workers increased. The obvious solution...
was to adopt an industrial union strategy to meet the new employer attacks. Industrial unionism stressed organizing all workers in an industry into a single bargaining unit, regardless of craft or skill.

Two industrial unions in Alberta, the Western Federation of Miners and the United Mine Workers of America, took everyone—miners, unskilled muckers, and the 10 percent of their workforce made up of skilled craftspersons like stonemasons and carpenters—into the same bargaining unit. However, despite the fact that at least one of its affiliates, the UMWA, was clearly an industrial union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) officially rejected industrial organizing and reaffirmed its commitment to organizing by craft in 1901.60

The 1903 UBRE Strike Against the CPR

The AFL’s declaration against industrial unions soon had consequences for Alberta workers. The United Brotherhood of Railway Employees (UBRE) was an industrial union from the United States associated with a socialist labour central, the American Labor Union, which had been formed by the Western Federation of Miners and would merge into the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. By 1903, the UBRE had a thousand unskilled workers organized in locals at Vancouver, Revelstoke, Nelson, Calgary, and Winnipeg. Although it initially represented the freight and baggage handlers and freight and ticket clerks, the UBRE made no secret of their intention to organize all CPR employees, both skilled and unskilled, into one union. The CPR began a systematic campaign against the Vancouver local in January 1903, with extensive use of intimidation, dismissals, and the insertion of company spies into virtually every union meeting. By the end of February, the UBRE members in Vancouver were forced to go on strike demanding only the protection of their union. The union called out its other members in support.

Workers across western Canada supported the strike, and strike support funds were received from every major western city. Victoria sailors, teamsters in Vancouver and Calgary, and Vancouver longshoremen went on strike in sympathy, refusing to handle CPR freight. In late May, labour councils in Winnipeg and Calgary began organizing a campaign to declare the CPR “unfair,” boycotting any goods handled by the railway.

In contrast to the strong local support from many craft and industrial unions in the strike region, at the national and international levels, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), the Canadian equivalent of the American Federation of Labor, was determined to defeat the UBRE strike in the name of crafts unionism protection. TLC’s western organizer, J.H. Watson, worked with the CPR to organize a union of scab metaltrades helpers to replace the strikers. He also ordered boilermakers who had joined the strike back to work, an act replicated with the machinists by the Canadian vice-president of their craft union. The president of the boilermakers’ union in the United States threatened to revoke the membership card of any member who supported the strike. The railway running trades would not support the strike and kept the trains running throughout.

In the meantime, the CPR recruited strikebreakers from central Canada and the United States, and infiltrated the union with spies. The railway police
murdered popular socialist labour leader Frank Rogers on a picket line in Vancouver. The company even subverted and bought off the UBRÉ’s Canadian organizer, who turned over all the union’s inside information to the CPR. By the beginning of June, the CPR had hired enough strikebreakers to return to normal operations, and the strike was lost. Most strikers were blacklisted and never got their jobs back.\textsuperscript{61}

\textit{The Limits of Solidarity: Calgary Carpenters’ Strikes, 1902–3}

Three labour disputes within one year involving Calgary carpenters illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of craft union organizing. The new United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America Local 1055 was formed on 12 April 1902, and went on strike for three weeks in July that year, winning a reduction in daily work hours to nine and an increase in daily wages to $2.50. During the strike, which by its end had reduced work for plasterers and plumbers, the carpenters enjoyed support from the other construction unions in the city, as witnessed by the organizing of a successful mass rally by the Calgary Trades and Labour Council. The next year, the carpenters again went on strike, this time to protest the use of non-union labour by Calgary contractors in violation of the 1902 agreement. The strike ended when the contractors dismissed all non-union men and signed a new agreement.

Almost immediately following their successful second strike, the Calgary carpenters decided to hold a sympathy strike in support of a newly organized teamsters local. The teamsters had gone on strike to get a raise to $50 per month. The carpenters decided to stop handling any lumber delivered by strikebreakers. The employers pre-empted the conflict by locking out the carpenters on 4 June 1903, but the construction labourers’ union subsequently refused to handle any lime or sandstone delivered by strikebreakers. Soon, however, the general shutdown of construction in the city that resulted from the strike created rifts within the craft unions. Leading construction unions refused to participate in the actions, the stonemasons denounced the carpenters and refused to support them, and the bricklayers also refused to support the strike.

With the unskilled teamsters and labourers on side but the other trades opposed, the carpenters lost the strike and, in the settlement eventually mediated by Mackenzie King, lost their right to have only union carpenters on job sites. The local went bankrupt and was dissolved. When the carpenters had struck to defend their own skilled trade, the other craft unions had supported them, but when they struck in support of the rights of unskilled workers like the teamsters or labourers, that support was withdrawn.\textsuperscript{62}

\textit{Life in the Cities}

The divide between the skilled workers in the craft unions and the rest of the workforce was reflected in more than wages and social status. Both Calgary and Edmonton were victims of constant land and real estate speculation during the boom years from 1900 through 1912. While skilled male workers could perhaps earn enough to purchase small wood-frame houses (kitchen, living room, several small bedrooms, and a dirt basement), other workers rented even smaller three-room
houses, boarded with other working-class families, or took rooms in boarding houses or downtown hotels. The worst off put up tents or thrown-together shacks in Edmonton’s river valley, along the railway tracks, or in areas like Calgary’s Hillhurst district.63

Across Canada, wages were extremely low during this period. From 1900 to 1905, workers’ wages increased slightly in real terms, but high inflation reduced real earnings.64 Wage levels in Calgary failed to meet the federal government’s minimum figure for meeting the monthly needs of workers with a family of four: $127. At the end of 1911, none of Calgary’s skilled trades earned that much. The closest were bricklayers, who could have earned about 90 percent of that amount in the unlikely event they had a full month of continuous employment. The unskilled and unorganized were lucky to earn half that amount.65

Making Ends Meet: Women and Children at Work

Given the poor wages for unionized crafts workers and the even lower rates for unskilled and semi-skilled non-union workers, despite the relatively buoyant economy in Alberta in the 1900 to 1912 period, family survival clearly required more than any single wage earner could provide. One obvious strategy was for women and children to enter wage labour to add to family income, yet the 1911 census indicates modest employment of Alberta women and children. Only 7.9 percent of women were employed in wage labour compared with 66.8 percent of men. The key occupations for the women with paid jobs were domestic and personal service (46%), the professional occupations of teaching and nursing (20.7%), employment in the retail and merchandising

**FIG 3-12** Women in the workroom of the Great West Garment Company. Glenbow Archives, nd-3-4095-f.
sector (10.4%), and manufacturing jobs (8.7%). With few exceptions, the work that women found was low paid and non-union. For children aged 10 to 14, only 540 boys and 259 girls were listed as employed in wage labour. Of the girls, over 85 percent worked as domestic servants, and the boys mainly worked on farms (40.4%), in the retail industry (17.4%), and in manufacturing (10.9%).

Clearly, working-class families found other ways to cope than depending upon second salaries from women and children, although even the smallest amount of income could make a huge difference in standard of living. Historian Bettina Bradbury’s study of late-nineteenth-century Montreal workers shows the importance of relatively modest differences in income for working-class families. A difference of twenty-five cents per day in average pay for each of four levels of workers — new industrial skilled workers (engineers, moulders, machinists), the more seasonally affected skilled workers in the construction trades, workers in trades undergoing rapid deskilling (shoemakers), and unskilled workers — had substantial implications for families. The most skilled had a better chance of eating and living at a level that helped ward off diseases common in working-class neighbourhoods and were less likely to be forced to send young children out to work.

Like families in coal towns, urban working-class families adopted various strategies to augment family income. Keeping cows, pigs, and chickens gave them products to sell (eggs, milk, butter, livestock), as did small garden plots. A common strategy was to take in other workers as boarders. Children could also be sent to scavenge such goods as coal near railway tracks or to work as unlicensed street vendors, selling papers and shining shoes. For women, prostitution was another way to fend off destitution. Most prostitutes arrested in Calgary during this era claimed employment in other low-wage women’s occupations like waitressing, dressmaking, and laundry work. Women’s and children’s petty capitalism involving the barter and sale of home-made products of all kinds — activities that would not have been captured by the census questions regarding “employment” — probably also contributed to fulfilling family needs.

Urban Workers and Politics

One of the main activities of the early labour councils involved mobilizing the strength of labour politically. Initially, that meant lobbying government over issues like the number of working hours and working days and the payment of fair or union-scale wages on all city contracts. Increasingly frustrated with the almost universal failure of such lobbying efforts, the municipal unions moved toward a more class-oriented position near the end of the decade. In 1911, the Calgary Trades and Labour Council amended the preamble to its constitution to make political action a priority. The craft unions that made up the leadership and the majority of membership of the municipal labour councils at the time were never as radical as the miners, with their adoption of revolutionary socialist parties, or as the migrant navvies, with their affinity to the anarcho-syndicalism of the IWW. Instead, they promoted a labourist policy whereby councils only endorsed candidates who were trade union members.
THE FOUNDING OF THE ALBERTA FEDERATION OF LABOUR

A labour central is an alliance of two or more independent unions in a voluntary association for the purpose of pursuing common goals. In Canada, there are labour centrals at the local or municipal level, the provincial level, and the national level. The first labour centrals in Alberta were municipal labour councils. The Calgary Trades and Labour Council (CTLC) first met on 19 February 1901. Less than two years later, the Edmonton Trades and Labour Council was formed on 16 January 1903. These early labour councils were voluntary associations of skilled trades unions and were created as independent bodies to meet perceived needs at the local level. Although both Calgary and Edmonton received charters from the American Federation of Labor, they did not even bother to apply for them from the American parent body of craft unions until 1905 and 1906, respectively.

The municipal or local labour councils provided a ready and useful means for unions to communicate with each other and to keep each other informed about upcoming issues and events. The councils encouraged cooperation among unions on many fronts and gave labour a recognizable voice in the community. They presented labour’s political demands in the municipal arena and made representations to provincial governments on such issues as reduced work time and job safety. Another concern of the councils was promotion of the social status of labour — the respectability of the craft workers — through events like the Labour Day parades that publicly displayed workers’ pride in their crafts.

The early CTLC included in its charter a commitment to organize men and women in both skilled and unskilled occupations into unions. Following its founders’ intent, the CTLC helped organize unskilled railway workers into the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees, the Allied Mechanics Union, the General Labourers Union, and the Retail Clerks Union. It is questionable whether this commitment to organize unskilled workers survived official affiliation of the CTLC to the American Federation of Labor, with the latter’s active dislike of industrial unions like the UBER and its focus on skilled rather than unskilled workers.

Labour councils were loose federal structures that exercised only moral authority over the union locals that voluntarily agreed to join. Although there is some validity to the argument that this was a consequence of the nature of the craft unions that dominated the early councils, where each union’s strength lay in its ability to control the work rules and protect the jurisdiction and knowledge of its singular craft (especially from other craft unions), it is also true that a loose federal structure was a method of control. All meaningful labour authority within any council would always trace back through each craft union to its headquarters in the United States. Essentially, this control provided councils with the autonomy to act only on those issues where there was no debate, while constraining them to proceed only at the pace of the most conservative member.

Labour councils, even when successfully initiated, had no guarantee of survival. For example, labour councils were formed in Medicine Hat in 1905 and in Lethbridge in 1906, but neither remained viable, with Medicine Hat’s council disappearing after a year and Lethbridge losing its charter in 1908.

Although Alberta officially became a province in 1905, it was seven years before a provincial labour central was formed. On 14 June 1912, at the instigation of District 18 of the United Mine Workers of America, forty labour delegates met in the Lethbridge Trades Hall and founded a new provincial labour central. District 18 had pursued
the creation of the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) since their 1911 convention, which had mandated both a provincial federation and closer ties and co-operation with the new and growing United Farmers of Alberta (UFA).

The miners tried to kill two birds with one stone by reserving two vice-presidential positions on the AFL executive for UFA representatives. The initial response from the UFA was positive. UFA president W.J. Tregillus told the delegates at the AFL founding convention, “The farmers are as much labourers as the miners or any other workers.” Donald McNabb, who had been a Labour MLA, agreed. “If organized,” he said, workers and farmers “could go to the legislators as a united band and cooperate in demanding legislation for the farmers, the city toiler, and the miner.” But the UFA quickly soured on the idea of having official ties with the labour movement. The founding convention of the AFL supported the unions’ calls for minimum wages and maximum hours of work. While the farmers had been anxious to work with labour in opposing the power of large, monopolistic corporations, they were employers too and were unenthusiastic about any suggestion that they needed to pay their workers more. So, by the time of the second convention of the AFL in 1913, the farmers had broken all ties to the organization.

District 18 itself was in the middle of a sectarian political struggle between the Socialist Party of Canada and the liberal and labourist tendencies. As the dominant voice in the new federation (the miners supplied the majority of members and 60 percent of the dues of the organization), the miners’ internal differences surfaced at the first convention. On the one hand, the liberal miners supplied both the chairperson of the founding convention and the first president of the organization, John O. Jones. On the other, radical miners’ voices were also present at the convention. Clem Stubbs, the leader of District 18 of the UMWA, informed the delegates that he would support the federation if it would work to abolish the wage system.

Despite the wishes of the more radical miners, the new AFL confined itself to lobbying government for the next few years. With the miners themselves divided on political action, any attempt to create a unified political stand was seen as too divisive. Instead, the work of the AFL’s first years related to easily supportable resolutions calling for a workers’ compensation system, a fair-wage clause for government contracts, better health and safety regulations, an end to child labour, and banning of employment agencies.4

1 See Mark Leier, Red Flags and Red Tape, 54, 55.
2 Lethbridge Daily Herald, 15 June 1912.
3 Ibid.
The cities had always provided a substantial base of support for candidates with a labour background. When he was elected to Calgary City Council in 1902, the president of the carpenters’ local, R.A. Brockelbank, became the province’s first labour candidate ever elected to public office. Another carpenter, J.A. Kinney, president of the Edmonton local, became that city’s first labour alderman in 1914. The weakness of the labourist tactic of making union membership the critical condition for labour support is illustrated in the case of Brockelbank, who by 1907 had moved his allegiance to the Conservative party.70 One critique of the labourist position of the craft-dominated urban labour councils was related to their exclusivity. It was difficult to develop and maintain a class position that spoke to the needs and issues of all working men and women when the councils themselves never represented the two-thirds of working people in the cities who were either unskilled, unorganized, or both.

THE 1913–14 DEPRESSION

During the Canadian economic boom from 1897 through 1913, the Canadian and Albertan economies expanded at a phenomenal rate. Investment in massive railway construction, port expansion, extension of telegraph and telephone systems, and increased power-generating capacity was accompanied by sustained growth in population and land settlement in the West, and by the growth of cities. Driven first by the Klondike gold rush and then by the prairie wheat exports, economic growth was construction-led. The construction boom in the farms, towns, and cities of the West was financed with foreign (largely British) capital. British capital financed railway construction, farm development, house-building, and land speculation across the prairies. The construction boom in the West stimulated consumer goods industries in central Canada and iron and steel manufacture in Nova Scotia.

In 1913, the boom came to a sudden halt when the Balkan wars created a financial panic that turned off the tap on British capital investments in Canada. In 1914, the Canadian economy collapsed, nowhere more drastically than in the West. Railway construction stalled, and the building boom ended as urban centres actually began to shrink. Land speculators forfeited property back to cities by refusing to pay property taxes. Unemployment hit 25 percent in the manufacturing centres of Ontario even before the normal winter slowdown. In Alberta, Calgary and Edmonton were suddenly inundated with unemployed workers.71 The influx of thousands of unemployed railway navvies and other migrant labourers added to already burgeoning numbers of unemployed citizens from construction, retail, and railroad operations. The federal government refused to act on the unemployment crisis, simply fobbing it back onto municipalities ill-prepared to deal with the scope of the crisis. Union membership plummeted in the cities, local charities were incapable of coping, and the unemployed, lacking even the most basic social safety net, were desperately destitute.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) intervened and became instrumental in mobilizing the unemployed. The Wobblies pioneered work with the unemployed, a logical step since so many of their members were migrant workers who suffered repeated bouts of unemployment. Rejecting the charitable and often demeaning “relief” at the municipal level — generally just enough help to fend off starvation in exchange for
menial make-work — the IWW had a different message and tactic. Its message to unemployed workers in Edmonton and Calgary was that the depression was not the fault of workers, but rather a failure of the capitalist system; therefore, workers had the right to work at fair wages and should not have to beg for charity. The Wobblies mobilized the unemployed to occupy local churches demanding places to sleep and encouraged penniless workers to order and eat meals at restaurants and then instruct the restaurant to “bill the mayor.” They held marches demanding work and wages, and even contemplated a march of the unemployed to Ottawa. On several occasions, police in the cities clashed with militant unemployed workers.72

Things were no better in the coal fields. Workers at the mines in Taber averaged one day of work per week throughout 1914. Coal miners across Alberta were working short time and suffering from loss of income. The western boom had ended, and with it, many workers’ belief in the social and economic system.

**FARMHANDS AND SEASONAL AGRICULTURAL LABOUR**

Farmers and farm labourers also suffered as the boom ended and markets for wheat shrank. Beginning in 1897, the pace of westward migration had accelerated. Lured by the promise of free homesteads, the rising international price of wheat, and government propaganda, tens of thousands of would-be farmers from central and eastern Canada and from Europe moved to the Canadian prairies. Many of these newcomers, however, lacked the capital necessary to establish themselves on the land and were forced to turn to wage labour to survive. In fact, it was assumed that agricultural immigrants would provide a cheap source of seasonal labour both for established prairie farmers and for the developing industries in the west. On several occasions, the government even amended homesteading requirements so as to allow cash-poor farmers to gain clear title to their land even though they spent long periods away from their farms working for others.73

Newcomers were thus encouraged to take up waged farm work as a path to eventual independent land ownership. In fact, without the steady flow of new immigrant homesteaders to replenish the agricultural workforce, established prairie farmers could not have survived. At the same time, the low wages, irregular seasonal employment, and poor accommodations they offered provided little incentive for most workers to take employment with them. Thus, despite the incoming labour supply, farmers were left constantly complaining about labour shortages.74

The two main sources of year-round labour for farmers were full-time permanent farmhands and homesteaders in need of cash. For a time in the pre–World War I period, even the full-time farmhands could aspire to eventually become farm owners. In 1900, homesteading costs were approximately $500, which could be accumulated in three to five years of farm labour. By 1911, homesteading costs had risen to about $1,500 — representing six years of steady farm work. And by the beginning of the war years, this “agricultural ladder” (from farm worker to homesteader to independent farmer) had disappeared altogether. Most of the good homesteading land was gone, and the price of purchasable land had risen rapidly as a consequence of the steep inflation of the war years.75
The ambiguous relationship among established farmers, poor homesteaders, and full-time farmhands during the prewar era created a peculiar work culture. On the one hand, the farmer was both aspiring capitalist and employer. On the other, his employees were either already small landowners on their own or else aspiring young landowners. An employer in a given season might someday find himself taking work from a former employee. Furthermore, the farmer and his family worked alongside the hired hands, generally doing the same work in the same conditions. Farmhands usually lived and ate with the family, with room and board provided on top of the wages.

Historian Cecilia Danysk likens the farmer-farmworker interaction in this period to an apprenticeship. Employer and employee alike expected the farmworker to become a farmer — to graduate from apprentice to master. The farmworker accepted what would otherwise have been unacceptably poor wages and working conditions as the cost of gaining an education in the craft of prairie grain farming. Even once a homestead was established, paid farm work enabled the homesteader to earn badly needed cash while remaining in the vicinity of his own land, to which he could return when his short-term employment ended.

Farmworkers also typically traded job tenure for wages. If a farmhand worked during the winter months, he generally did so for room and board only, with the occasional five dollars of “tobacco” money tossed in each month. The seven-month summer job covered the working year of the farm and was considered full-time for a hired hand, but the pay was less per month than that of the most common hires for one to three months during seeding or harvest. Workers could also be hired for specific jobs like rock-picking that paid by the day. Farm workers’ wages in Alberta varied according to weather, crops, the personal experience of the worker, and labour supply in a given district. In 1909, the average annual farm wage (not counting room and board) was $242. That fell to $168 during the recession in 1914 but rose steadily as the manpower shortage grew during the war: in 1920, it was $690.

Farmhands seldom engaged in collective action to better their wages or working conditions, nor in the early period were any unions active among farmworkers. Normally, if dissatisfied, they would “vote with their feet” by simply leaving the current employer and finding a new job at another farm. Several factors contributed to the apparent inability of farmworkers to act collectively like other wage labourers in pursuit of better treatment. First, farmhands were isolated. There was seldom more than one hired hand per farm, and often one farmhand worked for several farmers in a district. The farms were far apart and there was little opportunity for farmworkers to meet. As well, farmworkers’ perception of their class position was often at odds with their subordinate status in the labour force. Although they were undoubtedly wage earners, they did not intend to remain in that position: they saw themselves as future farmers and employers of labour. Their ideology was directed by their ambitions rather than their current conditions, and their lack of radicalism was often reinforced when farmers treated them as part of the family and encouraged their participation in social, recreational, and religious events within the community.

This ambivalent social and class position for permanent farm labour faded as land costs skyrocketed and farmhands lost the dream of becoming independent
commodity producers. By the mid 1920s, the prairie communities characterized hired men more as shiftless drifters and unambitious failures than as future farmers and community men. Canada was still recruiting agricultural immigrants on the promise of eventual land ownership in the 1920s, but after 1914, newcomers arriving without capital had little chance of ever reaching that goal.

The Harvest Excursionists

Although full-time farmhands and poor homesteaders provided prairie farmers with the labour they needed for spring planting and other seasonal work, they represented less than half the labour required to bring in the wheat harvest in the fall. That critical harvest work on the Canadian prairies was provided by migrant workers from eastern and central Canada, who were transported west by special reduced-fare trains for the harvest in August and returned east in October or November the same way.

Begun by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) at the request of the Manitoba government in 1892, the “harvest excursions” expanded as western agriculture expanded. In 1925, the peak year, 54,850 agricultural labourers were delivered to the West. Between 1901 and 1914, over a quarter million farm labourers, an average of about twenty thousand per year, took part in the harvest excursions.

The process was simple. After the provincial governments provided the railway with an estimate of total labour that would be needed that year, the CPR (and later the Soo Line, Grand Trunk Pacific, Canadian Northern, and Canadian National as well) advertised the jobs and offered extremely low-priced tickets west. Originally, the tickets were to specific stops on the prairies, but after 1912, all harvesters stopped first in Winnipeg, where they were recruited at a job fair with representatives from each province and many farming districts present to extol the virtues of their specific area. The harvesters then purchased a second ticket to their final destination at a price of half a cent per mile. To get the same reduced fare to return home, a harvest worker had to produce his ticket stub signed by a farmer verifying that the harvester had worked at least thirty days in his employ. There was also a time limit: excursionists had to return home before 30 November.

Unlike the permanent farmhands and homesteaders, the harvest excursionists were unambiguously wage labour and were treated that way. While farmhands either lived in the farmer’s house or in proper quarters, harvest workers took whatever shelter was available — granaries, unused chicken coops, haylofts, and even derelict boxcars. Accommodations were never good and frequently terrible. Sanitary facilities were generally an outhouse and a bucket for well water. Harvesters worked from sunrise to sunset, stopping only for the typical five meals per day provided by the employer.

The work was brutally hard and unvaried. The farmer (or his son or a permanent farmhand) drove the binder that cut the slightly green wheat and tied it into sheaves. The harvesters lifted and carried two sheaves at a time, stacked eight to ten of them into a stook, and then repeated that exercise all day while racing to keep up to the binder. After harvesting, threshing was slightly less onerous but also provided fewer jobs for the excursionists, who generally got jobs pitching the ripened sheaves onto wagons that transported them to
the threshing machine. Threshing paid slightly higher wages per day, but the day was longer because it could be done by moonlight or lamplight. Work was six days a week unless it rained, and harvesters were not paid on days they didn’t work.83

To continue to attract the massive amounts of labour required at harvest time every year, farmers had to pay wages that balanced the back-breaking labour, long hours, and poor living conditions. Harvest excursionists were paid at least double the going daily rate for agricultural labour in Quebec, Ontario, and the Maritimes, and one-third more than unskilled urban construction workers in the eastern cities. The daily wage rates varied depending on labour supply and demand, the weather, the experience and skill of workers, and their negotiating ability. In 1901, the rate was $1.88 per day; in 1914, it was $2.55, but between those years it fluctuated, going as high as $3.13 and as low as $2.00. Harvesters typically worked about forty-two days each season.84

Although the Industrial Workers of the World was very successful at organizing migrant harvest workers in the United States during this period (the wobblies claimed eighteen thousand members in their agricultural component), there was little union presence among the Canadian harvest excursionists before 1919. When the IWW did begin organizing farmworkers in Canada, it faced a hostile police and government action that effectively suppressed the organization. IWW organizers were often jailed for “vagrancy” or simply deported to the United States. In addition, the RCMP and railway police kept a close eye on trains that were carrying migrant workers, and once the harvesters were dispersed to farms, it was all but impossible for the IWW to contact them.85

Although easily the largest, most important part of Alberta’s workforce between 1900 and 1914, migrant harvest workers, poor homesteaders working for wages, and full-time permanent farmhands have left little mark on the face of labour history. Never successfully unionized on the Canadian prairies, homesteaders and farmhands were isolated from each other and largely at the mercy of their employers. Eventually, they either successfully made the transition to farm ownership or left the farming industry completely.86 For migrant workers, the farm work was a short-term promise of quick cash, not a vocation. The Great Depression of the 1930s put a temporary end to the demand for harvest excursionists, while the introduction of gas tractors, combines, and ever-larger farm equipment essentially eliminated the need for such workers altogether.

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living conditions that were stark even by the standards of the times. Their isolated working conditions and spells of winter unemployment in the skid rows of western cities, and their constant migrations in search of work that moved them across provincial boundaries and the Canada–US border, caused them to view the IWW as their natural ally. The union’s message of a world without bosses made sense to them.

The mine workers, though also facing precarious lives, lived in permanent communities, and many had families to help anchor them in place. Despite their ethnic diversity, they developed a solidarity that allowed them to withstand employers who freely employed strikebreakers and agents who, in turn, were aided by the police. That unity across ethnicities was mirrored in a unity across skill and craft lines in their industrially organized union. Between 1904 and 1914, they transformed the United Mine Workers of America District 18 from a business union into an openly socialist fighting organization.

In the urban centres, the craft unions associated with the American Federation of Labor were incredibly successful at organizing the elite skilled trades essential to the operation of the construction, railway, and printing industries. They formed labour councils and pursued a political program of labourist reform to protect their interests as workers. However, although the urban labour movement was very good at protecting the interests of elite workers, it did not speak for the majority of workers in the cities since it disdained to organize the semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the manufacturing, service, retail, and public sectors.

By 1914, Alberta workers had developed competing socialist, labourist, and syndicalist political programs. Sometimes they remained divided by ethnicity while at other times they overcame their divisions to fight and win both strikes and elections. When World War I began in 1914, the state and employers demanded that workers respond as “Canadians” confronting enemies of Canada and Britain rather than as members of an international working-class confronting exploitative and competing national capitalist groupings. In the face of these demands, Alberta workers’ different approaches to fighting exploitation would continue to produce both victories and setbacks for the working class as a whole and for its various subclasses.
Determined to have their voices heard, approximately 12,000 farmers, farm labourers, and town workers gathered in Edmonton’s Market Square for the Hunger March of 1932. Provincial Archives of Alberta, NC-6-13014.