Whereas, holding the belief in the ultimate supremacy of the working class in matters economic and political, and that the light of modern developments have proved that the legitimate aspirations of the labor movement are repeatedly obstructed by the existing political forms, clearly showing the capitalistic nature of the parliamentary machinery;

This convention expresses its open conviction that the system of industrial Soviet control by selection of representatives from industries is more efficient and of greater political value than the present system of government by selection from district.

This convention declares its full acceptance of this principle of “Proletarian Dictatorship” as being absolute and efficient for the transformation of capitalist private property to public or communal wealth;

The convention sends fraternal greetings to the Russian Soviet government, the Spartacans in Germany and all definite working class movements in Europe and the world, recognizing they have won first place in the history of the class struggle.1

This resolution, passed overwhelmingly by delegates to the Western Labour Conference in Calgary in 1919, indicated the extent to which workers across the Prairie provinces and British Columbia had become radicalized by their experiences during wartime. Eighty-nine of the 239 conference delegates were from Alberta, giving Alberta the largest contingent.2 This chapter traces the events that led to this radicalism and documents its gradual decline under an employer onslaught in the 1920s, followed by a revival of radicalism during the Great Depression.

It was a turbulent time for Alberta workers. The onset of the Great War in mid-summer 1914 coincided with the province’s most serious bout of unemployment and depressed conditions in its short history. The depression would linger on to 1915, prompting, in part, thousands of Alberta workers to early sign-up for paid military service overseas. As Alberta’s wartime economy improved, thousands more found work in the province’s resource extraction industries, particularly in southern Alberta’s abundant coalfields or
as wage labourers on growing farms. For those workers remaining in the cities, opportunity abounded as jobs in factories and other businesses vacated by young soldiers off to war needed to be filled. But one year into the war, labour surpluses had turned to labour shortages. “Everything stopped,” Calgary’s city commissioner recalled later, “and hundreds of single men — they were carpenters and bricklayers and so on — went off to war.”

Through the war years, Alberta workers secured important concessions, both from their employers and from the state, flexing labour’s muscle during a time of labour scarcity. But at the same time, they encountered new legislation, shifting employer organizational strategies, and inflationary prices that challenged their autonomy both on and off the job. When the guns fell silent on 11 November 1918, hard times returned to Alberta, and the province’s workers struggled once more against high unemployment and recalcitrant employers determined to claw back concessions made during the prosperous war years. This produced a wave of strikes that swept across the province in 1919.

A measure of prosperity had returned to Alberta by the middle of the 1920s. Wheat, a commodity so central to Alberta’s economic well-being, fetched more reliable prices through the last years of the decade, buoyed in part by higher international demand, higher yields, and technological innovations. Newcomers, too, arrived in larger numbers than earlier in the decade, some fleeing political upheavals or persecution in Europe, and many winding up in Alberta cities and on Alberta farms. Young women, many lately arrived from Great Britain, found work as domestics, while (primarily) central and eastern European men arrived as unskilled workers, artisans, and tradespeople. All of these newcomers added distinct ethnic and cultural dynamics to the growing province.

The relative prosperity through the late 1920s was dashed again at the end of the decade, this time on the shoals of a worldwide economic depression. Nearly ten years passed before Alberta workers again found economic security. Nevertheless, many workers banded together under newly organized Communist-inspired groups to advance ideologically radical agendas with varying degrees of success. Their efforts were met and restrained in different ways and for different reasons by employers, the state, and organized labour. The organized labour movement itself underwent serious and difficult ideological divisions throughout the economic downturn, and emerged from the 1930s with different goals and organizational strategies.

Through these years, Alberta workers consistently challenged their employers, their governments, and their society more generally to think about (and respond to) the “labour question.” Some continued to work for alternatives to the conservative craft-dominated labour movement. Others entered formal politics at the local, provincial, and national levels. Still others confronted their employers and the state with radical new ideas on how their society ought to be organized. Overall, they created important forums for building solidarity and collective activities that sometimes crossed ethnic and gender lines.

Some of the most dynamic contributions to Canada’s labour history emerged in Alberta through the interwar years: the Western Labour Conference of 1919; the One Big Union (Obu), formed the same year; and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF),
whose founding meeting took place in Calgary in 1932. Though these interventions proved to have larger implications outside the province than within it, they nevertheless reveal a vibrancy that challenges Alberta’s one-party, one-ideology, one-class reputation. Alberta labour prior to the Second World War grappled with many of the same problems and challenges that workers elsewhere in Canada struggled with, including how to organize the labour movement effectively, how to accommodate new ethnic and gender dynamics, what goals to pursue, and what strategies to use to achieve those goals.

War, Repression, and Depression, 1914–1939

FIG 4.2 In May of 1919, the Edmonton Bulletin announces that Edmonton workers would begin general strikes in show of solidarity with the Winnipeg General Strike. Edmonton Archives 267 138.
Tension had been building for some time, and war was widely expected. After Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in July 1914, the world watched and waited. In rapid succession, the paving stones of the road to war fell into place, and by 4 August, when Britain declared war on Germany, Austria-Hungary, Serbia, the Russian Empire, and France had already taken sides as a result of prior alliances, agreements, and treaties. In those days, when Britain was at war, so were her dominions, including Canada. It may have seemed a complicated business to people thousands of miles and an ocean away, but for many Albertans, the idea of war was exciting. It represented adventure, romance, and a little danger. For some, it was a chance to distinguish themselves and to defend the honour and glory of the British Empire. Alberta’s religious, political, and business leaders, who led the charge in beating the imperialist drum, were not alone in their enthusiasm for the war. Many urban-dwellers got caught up in the excitement. Edmonton’s streets “thronged with excited crowds and patriotic demonstrations” almost as soon as the war began. Calgary, the Daily Herald reported on 8 August, had never seen “such an imposing military parade,” as hundreds of new recruits marched through city streets cheered on by onlookers. Within days, some two thousand Calgary men had enlisted for overseas service; prominent among them were members of Calgary’s wage-earning class. Nineteen of the city’s firefighters signed up almost immediately, most of whom became stretcher-bearers, medics, and combatants. Their departure affected firefighting services in the city: “I have lost so many good men through enlistment,” complained fire chief James Smart. By August 1915, Calgary’s bricklayers and stonemasons had joined the war effort in force, followed by all of the city’s painters, decorators, and paper hangers a year later. Historian David Bright suggests that, by war’s end, some 60 percent of Calgary tradesmen had enlisted. Similar patterns emerged in Edmonton and Lethbridge, in Drumheller and Red Deer.

Many of the province’s labour leaders were more skeptical about the whole business. To them, militaristic nationalism and allegiance to empire, king, and country undermined the wider class struggle. It seemed clear to socialists that the war was a “miserable muddle,” of benefit only to a wealthy international elite. “Capitalists of the world cause all war,” delegates to the 1911 Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) meeting in Calgary declared. And though the TLC had become more conservative and softened its anti-war stance by 1914, western radical labour leaders maintained that the war was of little interest to workers. Why, leaders like Edmonton’s Joe Knight asked, should workers fight — and maybe die — for capitalist interests? What quarrel did Albertan workers have with German or Austrian workers? The state repression of workers’ efforts to seek economic justice, discussed in chapter 3, caused class-conscious workers to guffaw at government and corporate propaganda stating that the war was meant to spread democracy. Anti-militarism and pacifism were fed by the obvious lies of the pro-imperialists.

Rank-and-file workers across the prairies largely set aside labour leaders’ pacifist exhortations early in the war. Most of the first recruits rushing to hastily organized recruitment centres were recent arrivals from
Britain, anxious to defend the mother country. Others, French and Belgian immigrant miners from the Crowsnest Pass among them, found that their own ethnic and national loyalties coincided with those of their new homeland, and either signed up as members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force or returned home to fight for their mother countries directly. French reservists from Edmonton, that city’s Bulletin reported in early August 1914, were leaving daily for Calgary, where they would shortly join their counterparts from the southern parts of the province travelling to France. Others still viewed the war as a way to prove their loyalty to their adopted home. “Thousands of our Ukrainian boys have enlisted with the Canadian overseas force,” Winnipeg Ukrainian leaders boasted in 1916, “and many have already lost their lives fighting beside their British brethren on the battlefields in France.”

For more than a few, however, military service represented mainly steady, full-time work during a time of uncertain and precarious jobs and high unemployment. Though the war would eventually provide a short-term lift for Alberta’s economy from the depression that had lasted more than a year, the downturn’s true end still lay some months into the future. Not until the summer of 1915 would more prosperous economic times arrive in Alberta. Continuing low prices for coal meant little work in the mines of southern Alberta, and disappointing small harvests in 1914 and 1915 left little seasonal work for migrant farm workers. Meanwhile, the bulk of the work associated with railway construction begun earlier in the century also disappeared as projects reached completion in 1913. More generally, the great boom that had fuelled the rapid urbanization and modest industrialization of the prairies went bust after that year. To make matters worse, British capital, on which prairie dreams had largely been built, dissipated fast in the wake of a worldwide industrial slowdown, leaving an overheated prairie economy to freeze.

Unemployment soared in the cities as well. Edmonton, the Labour Gazette reported in 1915, was one of the “five great labour reservoirs in Canada, the cities to which the unemployed chiefly gravitate.” This was certainly true for some one thousand unemployed men — cold, hungry, and tired — who descended on that city in December 1913 seeking work or relief. In the end, Edmonton relief officials were able to offer meals, beds, and a little relief work to only a third of them. Jobless numbers would only get worse, reaching on average between three thousand and six thousand men for each of the years 1914, 1915, and 1916. The city instituted work relief projects and opened a camp and dining hall on the city’s fair grounds. But relief authorities ordered the camp closed after they discovered Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) efforts to organize the campers.

At Calgary and Lethbridge, the numbers of unemployed were equally higher than normal, putting a severe strain on local relief efforts. Calgary’s Associated Charities Association reported in June 1914 that it was “overtaxed in caring for the destitute.” Nearly a year later, conditions had not improved: in March 1915, Associated Charities was spending some $8,000 per month on relief. “All charitable institutions were strained to the utmost to assist families who would otherwise have starved,” a Lethbridge social worker recalled of the prewar recession. In this context, many jobless workers joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force. As if to
underline the relationship between enlistment and food, new Edmonton recruits received a meal following successful medical examinations. For some, the prospect of regular pay and regular meals was alluring. “To such the war proved a veritable safety valve, and many enlisted,” the Lethbridge social worker continued. “I heard one man say he might as well be shot as starve to death.”

Many were shot on the fields of France at places like Vimy, Amiens, and Paschendaele, and of the over 45,000 Albertans who eventually served overseas, 6,140 never came home. Despite the often harsh and unimaginably dangerous conditions at the front, some kept up their spirits. Calgary fireman Private Jim Carswell had been in the trenches for five days in August 1915 when he wrote home: “Tell them it’s fine out here, and that I wouldn’t have missed this experience for Rockefeller’s fortune. We have a bear of a time — get fed good, have concerts every night when resting, and have football and baseball matches, too. Beats training all to pieces.” Others, like Donald Bannerman, an electrician from Banff, described the difficult and uncomfortable trench conditions in starker terms: “We went into the trenches the night before and, as it was raining cats and dogs, our rations for the next day were spoiled and we had nothing with which to break our fast.”

Bannerman was wounded the following year while trying to aid a comrade. He returned to Banff in August 1916. Thousands more were not so lucky.

Alberta’s workers contributed to the war effort at home as well. They bought war bonds, both to help defeat “Kaiserism” in Europe and as an investment in their own futures. They also sent their sons off to Europe to fight, no small contribution given the critical roles young men played in many working-class family survival strategies. Some labour leaders, however, counselled workers against buying war bonds or supporting so-called Patriotic Funds, warning that the bankers and war munitions profiteers would be the real beneficiaries of their sacrifices.

After the recession lifted in 1915, nominal wages generally rose for those workers who stayed behind. Farm workers’ wages, for instance, stood at $27 per month in 1915 and rose to as high as $60 per month by 1918. Monthly earnings for female farm wage workers were much lower, but they enjoyed a faster average rise, nearly tripling from $10 to $28 over the same period. By the late summer of 1916, farm workers in southern Alberta were refusing to work for anything less than $3.50 per day. Wages paid to manufacturing workers in the province remained steady through the early years of the war. While manufacturers paid out a total of just over $5 million in 1916 and more than $10 million the following year, this increase reflected a doubling of the number of factories operating in the province over the same period. Nevertheless, compared to the immediate prewar years, work was plentiful, as is also illustrated by Alberta coal production. Production fell between 1913 and 1915 from 4.3 million tons to 3.4 million tons. But it increased rapidly thereafter, to more than 6 million tons by 1918, and as a result, work at the mines was more regular and generally better paid than it had been during the recession.

But the wage increases often did not even keep up with soaring wartime inflation. Food and fuel costs, for instance, had doubled by war’s end. And while rents changed little during the war, they jumped dramatically with the return of overseas soldiers in 1919. Calgary’s firefighters viewed the situation as dire enough
to organize for the first time and demand better pay. Mar-
rried men especially, they pointed out, could not live on
the wages they earned in the inflationary climate.32 In
mid-November 1916, miners in the Crowsnest Pass region
threatened to strike if wages did not rise 25 percent to
help them make ends meet. The miners had secured an
8 percent increase the previous August, but food costs
at the camp stores had risen 30 percent.33 The coal op-
erators’ refusal to bargain with the miners resulted in a
much wider strike near the end of November, reaching
Lethbridge and Drumheller miners, as well as miners in
the Crowsnest Pass.34 Over the next five months, min-
ers in southern British Columbia and southern Alberta
— members of District 18, which covered all of western
Canada — struck often, defying agreements made in 1915
by the United Mine Workers of America to maintain in-
dustrial peace in the region for the duration of the war.35

The miners were striking from a position of relative
strength, given the imperative need for reliable coal
supplies to fuel the nation’s war-related railway and
manufacturing needs.36 Equally important for their
solidarity, the miners, through shared experiences,
maintained a strong sense of unity, as well as class- and
ethnic-based solidarity. For the most part, they made
their homes in coal towns that, according to historian
Gerald Friesen, had a “depressing sameness to them,
whether situated in the stark landscape of southern
Saskatchewan, the badlands of central Alberta, or the
majestic valleys of the Rockies.” Their work was hard
and dangerous, resulting in an average of thirty deaths
per year on the job through the interwar years. Off the
job, they were “brought together by sporting teams,
cultural events, reading groups, benevolent funds, and
especially by political action and strikes.”37

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**THE WARTIME POOR**

Not all Alberta workers enjoyed high wages, good working conditions,
or strength in numbers during World War I. In the spring of 1916, the
Alberta and Great Waterways Railway advertised work at wages of $1.50
per day laying steel near Fort McMurray. Recent European immigrant men
took the company up on its offer and arrived at the work camp in June.

Once there, however, they discovered that the railway company
charged each man one dollar per day for room and board, and a further
dollar per month for “doctor’s fees.” On Sundays and other days when
the weather was rainy, the men did not work and did not get paid, but the
company still required them to pay for their food and lodging. The ten-
hour workdays were hard, but this was not altogether unexpected. What
the workers probably did not anticipate were the hordes of mosquitoes
and sawflies that harassed them day and night.

The men demanded a raise of 25 cents per day, and the company
agreed. Soon thereafter, however, conditions deteriorated even further
when the railway company refused any additional wage increases. In the
end, the workers felt they had little choice but to walk off the job. They
asked for their last pay, determined to make it back to Edmonton with a
little money in their pockets. The foreman, however, said the men could
retrieve their pay in Edmonton. They walked, hungry and tired, to Lac la
Biche, some 175 miles to the south, where they rested a few days before
making the rest of their journey to Edmonton.

In July 1917, the federal government intervened in the District 18 strike, establishing a “de facto nationalization of the interior coal mines.” For the remainder of the war, prices, wages, and supplies would be set under the dual authority of a Dominion Fuel Controller and a Director of Coal Operations. Wages rose shortly thereafter, reaching as high as five dollars per shift by 1918. Province-wide, more than eleven thousand workers were involved in some seventeen industrial actions in 1917, mostly in the mining communities in the south, up from some five hundred workers the year before.\(^3^8\)

Inflation and poor working conditions caused serious problems, but many Alberta workers were also angry at the obvious disconnect between wartime rhetoric and apparent wartime profiteering and cronyism, first evident in contracts that Minister of Militia Sam Hughes awarded to his friends and later during businessman Joseph Flavelle’s tenure as head of the Imperial Munitions Board.\(^3^9\) A Unitarian minister and labour activist in Calgary, William Irvine, reflected the frustration of many in the pages of his *Nutcracker* newspaper: “No other country in the world,” he claimed in 1916, “has permitted capitalists to pile up fortunes at the expense of the soldiers in the trenches — 200 million dollars in the profit extracted by our army contractors since the war began.”\(^4^0\) Workers also opposed the federal government’s extension of the *Industrial Disputes Investigation Act* to war production work. According to legal scholars Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, “the extension of the IDIA favoured employers because it required strikes and lockouts to be postponed until after the conciliation process was completed.”\(^4^1\)

The war exacerbated existing prejudices against “enemy” aliens — workers principally from the Austro-Hungarian Empire who had earlier in the century been recruited to solve labour shortages during the great boom by serving as a temporary, industrial workforce. These migrant workers, many of them single men from Galicia and Bukovyna, made for an attractive, largely unskilled workforce because they would work cheaply under difficult conditions in isolated places. Once the two new transcontinental railways were nearly completed and other work requiring unskilled labour dried up after 1913, many of these workers made for western Canadian cities in search of work or relief. There, historian...
Bill Waiser says, “they were received coolly — if not with revulsion — and forced to eke out a miserable existence in crowded, filthy, urban ghettos.” They initially attracted little interest or attention, save for disdain by the Anglo-Protestant majority, many of whom considered them “ignorant foreigners,” the “scum of Europe.” Through the war years, however, many were regarded as “enemy aliens,” especially if they had been born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The federal government moved swiftly due to business pressure and widespread public prejudice to establish internment camps for thousands of destitute and unemployed “enemies.”

Edmonton’s city commissioners were similarly concerned about masses of unemployed “enemy aliens” arriving in their city. The city authorities conducted a survey of city workers in February 1916 with a view to dismissing German and Austrian workers. The commissioners found five street-railway workers who had been born in Germany or Austria. Although all five had been naturalized, they were nevertheless suspended until they could produce their naturalization papers. Another man who had arrived in Canada from Germany some twenty years earlier and had worked at the city’s power plant for twelve years was likewise dismissed from his job, despite his assertion that he had been born in Russia. Four more men of Austrian birth were suspended from their jobs in the waterworks department until they became naturalized British subjects. More covert operations were also launched specifically to keep an eye on migrant workers of enemy nationalities. The Royal North West Mounted Police hired “high-priced Secret Service Agents” to infiltrate immigrant communities throughout the war, including an undercover barber in Edmonton.

Given such outright hostility, it is unsurprising that many recent-immigrant workers banded together, both to assert their own interests and to protect themselves from nativist hiring practices and policies. At Coleman, Polish immigrant workers established the Polish Society of Brotherly Aid in 1916. John Liss-Pozarzycki later noted:

I was one of the co-founders of this Society. I prepared the constitution for them, taking as a model, the constitution of the National Union of Poles in Chicago. In addition to helping its compatriots in distress, the Society issued each member an identity card stating that he was not an Austrian or a German, but a Pole. These documents were recognized by the authorities in Alberta and saved their bearers much grief.

But perhaps the biggest issue and object of suspicion among workers during the war was the looming threat of conscription, state-enforced service in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. As voluntary recruitment fell after 1916 and earlier recruits continued to die on the battlefields of Europe in high numbers, Canada found it increasingly difficult to make good on its promises to Britain regarding soldier numbers for the war effort. Even the release of “enemy aliens” from internment camps through 1916 and the expected entry of the Americans into the war on the Allied side by 1917 could not sate the need for more soldiers at the front. Early in 1916, Prime Minister Robert Borden floated the idea of registering men, supposedly to use the nation’s manpower as efficiently as possible. The business community, especially in central Canada where labour shortages abounded, applauded...
the prime minister’s initiative. “Has the time not come for Canada,” Canadian Manufacturers Association president J.H. Sherrard asked rhetorically in 1916, “to register her men so that those who can be most useful to the war by remaining at the work they are necessary to, shall not be recruited?”

Many labour leaders interpreted the registration of men differently. The Trades and Labour Congress, for example, opposed registration on the grounds that it was a precursor to military conscription. In Calgary, trade unionists were cautious, accepting “a National Service Scheme which has for its Object the mobilization and use of the Natural Resources and Utilities of this Country for the direct benefit of the State,” but stopping short of endorsing the registration of men as part of the plan. By the summer of 1916, some Calgary labour leaders were poised to accept what the Albertan called “conscription in the fullest meaning of the word” but were hesitant to do so until there was “first a conscription of wealth.” In the end, the Borden administration introduced a conscription bill in June 1917, a measure that became law after the election in December of a “Union” government: the Conservatives joined by the pro-conscription elements of the Liberal Party. Labour’s call for conscription of wealth — that is, a ban on profits for capitalists during wartime — went unheeded.

Alberta workers did secure limited labour-friendly provincial legislation during the war years. The Liberal government passed the Factory Act, 1917. Among other provisions, the act established a minimum wage of $1.50 per day for men, except for apprentices, who would receive $1.00 per day. (Women, however, who were included in other provinces’ minimum wage legislation, would not be incorporated into the Alberta legislative scheme until 1920.) The 1917 changes also included a joint industrial council program that provided for a “chief inspector” in any city or town with a population greater than five thousand. On the recommendation of a local advisory committee representing employers and employees, the inspector was allowed to “make regulations respecting the hours of labour per day or per week in any local factory, shop, office, or office building,” so long as such regulations did not abridge the 1917 Factory Act.

Low levels of unemployment during the war emboldened many workers to unionize, including government workers. Edmonton city labourers received a charter from the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada in 1917, and municipal workers in Calgary, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat had also organized by war’s end. In the early postwar period, more government workers unionized. By 1919, in Calgary, both inside and outside city workers, along with police and firefighters, street-railway workers, and city hospital workers, had joined unions.

The Civil Service Association (CSA), predecessor of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, also formed in 1919. Before the war, the prevailing philosophy had been that employees of the federal or provincial governments were servants of the public rather than workers and that they therefore should not seek the rights that unionists demanded. Alberta’s Civil Service Act forbade government employees from asking for a salary increase (such a request was considered equivalent to resignation), meaning that wages could only be increased if the government decided to increase them. Given that the provincial government decided to save
money during the war by ignoring the impact of inflation on its employees’ wages, it was only natural that its workers would rebel and demand the right to negotiate wages and working conditions. Although the CSA joined the Alberta Federation of Labour in 1927, in its early years it behaved more like an advisory body to the government than a trade union.50

REVOLT

When the war ended in November 1918, Alberta’s labour market shifted once again. The labour shortages that had characterized the last years of fighting in Europe quickly became labour surpluses once again as thousands of veterans returned home. Making matters worse was the federal government’s promise, as part of its demobilization program, to resettle veterans anywhere they chose in the country. Veterans from all over Canada descended on western cities like Edmonton and Calgary seeking work. Adding tension to an already tense work situation were increasingly sharp ethnic divides. Through much of the war, employers had relied on (and benefited from) recent-immigrant workers who were often willing to work for less pay to fill vacated jobs in mines, factories, and lumber camps. Many returning veterans focused their hostility in the recessionary climate on these workers. Furthermore, women who had participated in the wage labour market during the war years were encouraged — both by society and public policy — to return home to non-wage labour following the war.

Workers in Alberta, as across the nation, had a substantial list of grievances, some left over from the war years and others associated with the postwar demobilization process. Inflation, wartime profiteering, and conscription had left a bitter taste in workers’ mouths. Walter Smitten, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, expressed a fairly common view of workers’ postwar expectations: “We have been told that this was a war for democracy, and I think we should make sure that democracy attains a decent standard of living.”51

In an effort to head off worker militancy, and in response to deteriorating relations between workers and employers, the federal government appointed a Royal Commission with directions to “make a survey and classification of existing Canadian industries . . . with a view to improving conditions in the future.” In reality, the Mathers Commission (so named after its chair, Justice Thomas Graham Mathers of Manitoba) sought evidence of existing worker-employer councils designed to lessen industrial conflict. Perhaps more importantly, the commission promoted such councils (modelled on the so-called Whitley councils in Britain, named for the politician who first proposed the idea) as a means of solving industrial disputes in future. In any event, in carrying out its work, the Mathers Commission visited cities across the country, taking testimony from workers and employers about the state of industrial relations at that time. The commission also inspected industrial plants and workplaces with, as its final report pointed out, “the object of visualizing for ourselves the operations of the plant and the working conditions of the men employed in it.”52

In the end, the commission summarized its findings that the “chief causes of unrest” nation-wide were unemployment and the fear of unemployment, and the high cost of living.
The calm procedures associated with the Mathers Commission’s work belied a more militant and radical strain in the labour movement running through especially the province’s coal seams. Alberta’s miners, together with their counterparts in British Columbia, had for some time been growing increasingly disillusioned with the association of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and with conservative and craft-dominated international trade unions. There was dissension regarding the UMWA’s cautious paths throughout the war, which even included agreeing to guarantee industrial peace for its duration. This position was taken despite longstanding and unanswered grievances from the miners themselves. By 1918, a majority of western workers had determined to shake off conservative approaches in favour of more radical ones. They increasingly argued that organizing industrially and adding the general strike to their arsenal were necessary innovations that would together usher in a new, more equitable industrial order: a “syndicalist” economy in which worker-operated co-operatives would replace privately owned profit-seeking corporations. History, too, was on their side, they believed. After all, the successful Bolshevik Revolution in Russia the year before had clearly illustrated the possibilities of more militant approaches to industrial relations.

A critical first step toward fashioning changes along industrial lines, western workers believed, was to convince the Trades and Labour Congress at the annual convention of the immediate and pressing need for industrial (as opposed to craft) unionism and for the adoption of the general strike as an industrial tactic. But although central Canada and Atlantic Canada would later experience an upsurge of postwar radicalism, the balance of both conservative and radical delegates from east of Manitoba favoured the conservative sufficiently to vote down the western proposals in favour of maintaining the business unionist status quo that characterized the American Federation of Labor.

Undeterred, western workers returned home from the convention determined to fashion a workable industrial alternative to “Gomperism.” That pejorative term referenced Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor from 1886 to 1924 and chief spokesperson for the view that unions should be organized only to protect particular crafts and should ignore other workers as well as socialist movements. Leaders of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), operating out of its Vancouver headquarters, organized a wholly western labour conference to take place at Calgary in March 1919. The SPC initiative had a good deal of support among western labour leaders, winning endorsement from such leading figures as Joseph Knight and Carl Berg in Edmonton, for example. The 239 delegates representing workers across the Prairies and British Columbia met in Calgary’s Paget Hall and voted unanimously to form what they called the One Big Union (OBU). It was, the Calgary Daily Herald reported on 14 March, a “momentous . . . pronouncement in the annals of the labor movement in Canada.”53 Through the course of the morning and early afternoon, delegates adopted the radical program mentioned at the opening of this chapter.

The OBU, formed at a second conference in June 1919, insisted that workers needed to achieve change in their working conditions by uniting their efforts in combat with employers. It called on workers to turn each strike against a specific employer into a general strike of all workers in order to put maximum pressure
on a struck employer and to demonstrate worker power that would eventually allow workers to seize control of their workplaces and dispense with capitalists altogether. Unsurprisingly, the federal government sided with employers to ruthlessly suppress the OBU via arrests of leaders and brutal suppression of their strikes.54

It would be misleading to suggest that Alberta workers were suddenly united in their embrace either of industrial unionism or of the general strike. Certainly, the fledgling Alberta Federation of Labour was caught between the radicals and the more cautious elements within the labour movement. Before the radical program was adopted at the Western Labour Conference, the federation had moved a resolution that better reflected the positions that it would take politically over the next fifteen years than did the conference’s resolution. They called for the “formation of a political party with the object in view of uniting labour and kindred organizations into a homogeneous political party; believing that a united political labour party is a necessary adjustment to the development of our industrial organizations and to the attainment of our national ideals.”55 The resolution was soundly defeated.

Labour leaders like Alex Ross, future cabinet minister in the United Farmers of Alberta government, and Edmonton’s Alf Farmilo vigorously opposed what they viewed as radical solutions to labour’s problems, frequently pointing out the OBU’s shortcomings in the pages of the Alberta Labour News, the official newspaper of the Alberta Federation of Labour from 1919 to 1935, edited throughout that time by Elmer Roper.56 Nevertheless, as historians Tom Mitchell and James Naylor point out, “local after local in the West passed motions in favor of joining general strikes.”57

In its most visible illustration of workers’ anger, the Winnipeg General Strike, which preceded the OBU conference, finds few matches. It all began, perhaps, ordinarily enough: workers in the building trades demanded higher wages to offset the ever-increasing cost of living. Employers, speaking through the Building Trades Council, refused. The city’s metal-trades workers, meantime, had been demanding higher wages and a forty-four-hour work week through much of the spring. Again, workers’ demands were rejected.
Through the first two weeks of May, other organized workers met with determined employer resistance to wage increases, shorter working days, and better workplace conditions. On 13 May, the city’s Trades Council overwhelmingly endorsed a general strike. Two days later, on 15 May, more than twenty-two thousand Winnipeg workers set down their tools and walked off the job. Participant numbers would eventually reach as high as thirty-five thousand. The story coming out of Winnipeg was impressive. Workers in that city had literally shut down the town. Acting, for the most part, as one, workers from a wide variety of political and ideological persuasions joined forces to challenge their bosses and the status quo.58

The strike’s end was equally impressive, though for different reasons. Following six weeks of national and even international attention, the Royal North West Mounted Police (RNWMP) descended on the city charged with restoring order to what authorities had taken to calling a “Bolshevik Revolution” run by “crazy idealists” and “ordinary thieves.”59 Joining the RNWMP were eighteen hundred “special” constables hired by the so-called Committee of 1000, which represented the city’s business interests. The RNWMP began its work in earnest in the third week of June, bursting through the doors of the city’s labour halls and the strike leaders’ homes, and arresting and jailing twelve key strikers. Finally, the RNWMP charged a large, open-air gathering of strikers at Portage and Main on 21 June — Bloody Saturday — killing one and wounding scores more. The strikers returned to work four days later, their demands unmet.60

The Winnipeg General Strike, though dramatic, was only the most visible sign of what historian Craig Heron has called a much broader national “workers’ revolt” that had begun as early as 1917 and would last until the mid-1920s. In the spring of 1919, many Calgary workers supported a sympathy strike with workers in Winnipeg. Some fifteen hundred workers walked off the job at 11:00 a.m. on 26 May 1919 and would not return for four weeks. They included postal workers, flour and cereal workers, and workers at the CPR’s Ogden railway shops, the latter constituting two-thirds of the strikers.61 In Edmonton, thirty-four Trades and Labour Council locals supported a sympathy strike, and only four opposed one (though eleven locals abstained from voting).62 As in Calgary, the Edmonton general strike lasted four weeks, and in both cities, the strikes were preludes to mass parades and picnics sponsored for another fifteen years by the local trades and labour councils on May Day and Labour Day.63 In Lethbridge, too, workers voted to join the general strike in sympathy. The general strikes appeared to close some of the fissures that had been developing in the province’s labour movement, as strident anti-OBUers like Edmonton’s and Calgary’s trades councils supported the Winnipeg workers. Nor was the strike wave limited to the West. Workers in Hamilton and Toronto, Halifax, and Montreal all engaged in sympathy strikes.64

RECESSION AND ORGANIZATION

But a deep recession in the early 1920s and a ham-fisted employer and state counter-offensive stemmed the growth of this class-conscious working-class movement. Alberta workers’ wages in most industries fell precipitously through the early 1920s as the province,
along with the rest of North America, entered a severe postwar recession, the result of a failure of governments to devise policies to cushion the blow of postwar unemployment. Farm wage labourers’ annual wages fell rapidly through the early 1920s, from a high of $697 per year in 1920, to $463 in 1921, to a new low of $367 in 1922. Falling wages, unfortunately, was only half the problem. Job losses were huge. In 1920, nearly eleven thousand men earned manufacturing wages in the province, mostly in small firms. By the following year, that number had fallen to fewer than seven thousand. The number of women employed in manufacturing rose slightly over the same period, from eleven hundred to sixteen hundred.

In 1919, only 2 percent of trade unionists in the province were out of work. Two years later, that number jumped to nearly 8 percent. And while unemployment figures for trade unionists fell to almost zero for each of 1922 and 1923, thereafter unemployment hovered around 6 percent until the end of the decade. The new United Farmers of Alberta government, elected in 1921, regarded the situation as serious enough to call a special conference in Edmonton on 20 July 1921, to deal with the matter. At the meeting, representatives of various municipal governments, labour organizations, and veterans’ groups agreed that the provincial government should help finance some form of relief work throughout the province. The bulk of unemployed wage earners lived in either Edmonton or Calgary, with smaller numbers living in Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and villages like Redcliff, in Cypress County. Redcliff, like other farm-service centres, played host to a number of small manufacturers. Redcliff’s high-grade shale and abundant natural gas deposits combined to entice a shoe factory, a cigar factory, and a rolling mill and bolt factory, as well as brick, glass, iron, and clay works. The recession caused most of these firms to go under, while jobs in the farm-service sector disappeared as farmers, facing low prices for their crops, limited their purchases.

The recession also affected coal-mining areas. While Alberta miners pulled nearly seven million tons of coal from the mines in 1920 worth a total of nearly $30 million, the largest output of any province, output fell to six million tons in each of 1921 and 1922.

By war’s end, almost 230 union locals represented Alberta workers although most workers remained unorganized. But despite the radical displays of worker solidarity and strength in the spring of 1919, the dramatic end to the Winnipeg General Strike had dealt the “workers’ revolt” a crushing blow. After that event, most of the province’s organized workers were associated with the American Federation of Labor and the rest with national unions, totalling a trade union membership of more than fifteen thousand in 1920.

Although the One Big Union (OBU) had an enthusiastic beginning, state suppression, sometimes supported by established unions, halted its advance. In 1920, 90 percent of the Crowsnest miners voted to leave the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and join the OBU. Recognition of their new union became one of the goals of the miners’ strike that year, along with a rescinding of pay cuts announced by the coal companies as a response to the recession. The coal operators opposed all of the workers’ demands. They had friends in both the government and the UMWA. The former approved a cabinet order requiring the miners to belong to the UMWA, thus ignoring
their democratic choice of the OBU. As journalist Allan Chambers notes, “In a semi-official history years later, UMWA District 18 acknowledged the arrangement to be ‘one of the few instances in history providing such solid evidence of employer-union collaboration.’”

That alliance allowed the UMWA to prevail over the OBU in mines across the province despite majority support for their upstart opponent.

But Alberta’s unionized miners continued to complain that the American head offices of the union took their dues but did not provide sufficient strike relief when they required it. In 1922, for example, Slim Evans, secretary of the UMWA local in Drumheller, withheld union dues from the international union so that starving miners and their families could eat while on strike. For his troubles, he was charged by the UMWA with “fraudulent conversion” and spent three years in prison. By 1925, most miners had had enough of the UMWA and a wave of organization for an independent union, the Mine Workers’ Union of Canada (MWUC), beginning with District 18, began. Though the Communist Party initially opposed secession from the UMWA, it decided that worker opposition to the existing union was too strong for the party to continue its line of supporting the achievement of change within the international union. Communists took the leadership of the MWUC, which, with four thousand members by 1926, was larger than the UMWA in Alberta. Since the Alberta Federation of Labour, like the Trades and Labour Congress, was dominated by branches of American unions, the MWUC joined the rival All-Canadian Congress of Labour, a small but feisty organization of unions independent of American unions.

**Electoral Politics**

While the OBU organized workers for an eventual collective takeover by workers of their workplaces, more moderate unionists turned to the electoral politics favoured by the Alberta Federation of Labour to advance the labour agenda. In 1919, trade unionists from the province’s cities and towns formed the Alberta branch of the Dominion Labour Party (DLP). Its program, largely based on the British Labour Party’s principles, included the gradual socialization of industry and financial institutions, the allotment of surplus wealth for programs for the common good, and the guarantee of a minimum income for all citizens. This emphasis on systemic change, however gradual, represented a leftward shift from prewar labour politics in which labour candidates focused narrowly on specific social reforms. In the lead-up to the 1921 provincial election, the Alberta DLP formed a sometimes uneasy alliance with farmers disillusioned by the old-line political parties.

There was room for discussion between the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) and the DLP, given UFA president Henry Wise Wood’s philosophy of group government in which occupational groups, including both farmers and workers, rather than geographical constituencies, ought to control the legislature. Wise Wood had long been hesitant to support the idea of the farmers’ movement running candidates for office, preferring to pressure the Liberal government into enacting farmer-friendly legislation instead. But he caved in to rank-and-file pressure for the UFA to run candidates.

The group government idea offered a second chance for labour-farmer co-operation, which the founding
meeting of the Alberta Federation of Labour had promised but could not deliver. The Calgary trades council opted not to join forces with the UFA in 1918, arguing that there was "too much at variance between the aims of farmers and workers." By 1921, however, a coterie of UFA and DLP activists were advocating joint labour-farmer support for candidates in sprawling federal ridings where one or the other seemed most likely to succeed. A long-time labour activist in both Calgary and Edmonton, Elmer Roper, later explained the pragmatic promise of co-operation:

If it is seen to be advisable to cooperate in elections . . . such cooperation should not compromise the position of either group. It should be freely admitted that in East Calgary the farmers had no candidates because they doubted their ability to elect one, and their support was given to Labor as the group that more nearly represented the economic position of the farmers. The same applies to the reverse situation in Medicine Hat.

Indeed, in Medicine Hat, the UFA recognized that to encourage the type of co-operation that Roper envisaged, it needed to nominate a candidate acceptable to the city's railway workers; it therefore opted for Robert Gardiner, a left-leaning farmer who ran on a Farmer-Labour ticket and openly endorsed the DLP.

In the provincial seats, which rarely combined both urban and rural areas, the need for rural-urban cooperation in the selection of candidates was less evident, and the UFA candidates were generally prosperous farmers with little affinity for the labour movement. Still, the election of the UFA in 1921 raised some hopes among workers in the province. Premier Herbert Greenfield, who appeared to support the ideas and philosophy behind group government, appointed newly elected MLA and DLP member Alex Ross as minister of Public Works. In addition to Ross, three other DLP candidates had won election to the provincial legislature: William Johnson in Medicine Hat, P.M. Christophers in Rocky Mountain, and Calgary's Fred White. Christophers, a coal miner, stood out from the others as a strong supporter of both the OBU and the Soviet Union.
Later that year, the DLP rebranded itself as the Alberta section of the Canadian Labour Party (CLP), though its membership remained largely the same. The CLP was the product of a decision by the Trades and Labour Congress in 1917 to establish a broadly based labour party to unite under one umbrella organization reform-minded socialists, communists, and other groups that held political opinions then current in the labour movement. The shaky early alliance between the communists and socialists made some electoral gains, electing six council members in Calgary in 1926 and a majority of Edmonton aldermen in 1928. Its goals remained the social ownership of the means of wealth production and distribution, and employment for all. The CLP also argued for higher taxes on larger incomes, a corporations profit tax, public ownership and control of financial institutions, and public operation of hospitals.

Many socialists had welcomed the Russian Revolution. By April 1919, Communists had staked out a position on the radical left with the publication of a seven-point program calling for, among other things, “the forcible seizure of the governmental power and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Following a formal, though secret, convention in a barn just outside of Guelph in 1921, the Communists established the Communist Party of Canada and set to work bringing the message of communist ideals to “the masses.” Shortly thereafter, the Communist International ordered the party’s underground apparatus dissolved and replaced with the legal Workers Party of Canada (WPC). In Alberta, as elsewhere, the WPC co-operated with the CLP on municipal and provincial political campaigns. CLP leaders, like party president and machinist George Latham, declared anti-communism a tool of the bosses.

But the non-Communist and Communist wings of the CLP had major disagreements with each other. The trade union leaders, who dominated the party, regarded their alliance with the UFA as useful. It had led, they argued, to improvements in workers’ compensation legislation, minimum wage and maximum hours (54) for most workers, improved widows’ pensions, and relief projects for the unemployed. The Communists, by contrast, pointed to the UFA government’s poor enforcement of the Mines Act and its use of provincial police to disperse strikers to argue for labour independence from the UFA government, which would have meant that Alex Ross would have to leave the cabinet. The Communist leadership of the secessionist Mine Workers’ Union of Canada, though it had been reluctant, also created resentment among the leaders of American-dominated unions within the Alberta Federation of Labour.

Ordinary workers appeared to want Labour to take a more independent stance in dealing with the UFA. Continuing its agreement with the UFA not to divide the progressive vote, Labour only ran twelve candidates in the 1926 provincial election, all in urban and industrial constituencies. Five were elected, along with socialist Robert Parkyn, who ran as an independent labour candidate in Calgary. Significantly Alex Ross decisively lost his Calgary seat. At the time, Calgary and Edmonton each constituted a multi-member seat, with representation provided through an alternative voting system that allowed voters to rank their choices. So workers’ decision to support Parkyn over Ross spoke volumes regarding their views about whether Labour should play second fiddle to the UFA government. The UFA did not offer any Labour member a place in the cabinet as Ross’s replacement.
The rift between the reformists and the Communists continued. In 1928, the Comintern, the organization that united the official Communist parties around the world, reversed its former stance requiring co-operation of Communists with social democrats electorally and within unions. Now the Comintern called on Communists to expose social democrats as “social fascists” and “labour fakirs.” Alberta’s Communists, in line with the Communist Party of Canada, adopted this ultra-left and destructive position. This made it easy for the reformists within the CLP, who might have succeeded anyway in removing Communists from their party, to win the support of individuals and unions who had earlier argued that labour unity required the CLP to include all elements within the labour movement.80

With the Communists gone, the voices in the CLP calling for a more nuanced relationship with the UFA government were muffled. The CLP continued its support of the UFA during the provincial election of 1930, and even its loss of a seat did not cause a reconsideration of its political stance. When the UFA responded in a conservative manner to the mass destitution of the Depression, the CLP was tainted with guilt by association.

**DEPRESSION**

The Depression hit Alberta hard, and all levels of government had trouble knowing how to respond to the devastation. By 1933, 15 percent of Edmontonians, 13 percent of Calgarians, and 13 percent of Lethbridge residents were receiving modest municipal relief, for which only the most destitute qualified. Recipients were households headed by married men, the only group for whom federal and provincial funds were made available. Destitute single women were expected to receive aid from relatives; governments showed little concern that for those who were unable or unwilling to depend on family or friends, prostitution, begging, and theft were the only alternatives. Initially, single men could receive relief, but in 1932, the federal government established relief camps for single men under the control of the Department of National Defence as the only source of relief for men without wives or children to support. Overworked, poorly fed, living in austere bunkhouses, and paid only twenty cents a day beyond their room and board, they built roads and public projects, and faced a grim future. While “family men” remained in the cities and towns, relief could barely feed their families, and a voucher system that limited potential
purchases meant that their wives were stigmatized as they shopped for the family.81

Working people did not accept Depression conditions and government callousness lying down. The Communists organized a union of relief workers across the country, and there were many relief camp strikes. This culminated in the On-to-Ottawa trek in 1935, which began with relief camp workers from British Columbia climbing into railway boxcars and picking up more protesters as they moved from city to city across western Canada. They demanded improvements in camp conditions and the payment of living wages to camp inmates. Their rebellion was ruthlessly suppressed by R.B. Bennett in Regina on 1 July 1935. Later that year, Mackenzie King’s Liberals were re-elected, and the following year, his government closed the camps. This did not, however, lead to just treatment of the single unemployed. Rather than aggregate them in camps or cities, where they had opportunities for collective protest, governments attempted to use them as cheap labour for farmers.82

Meanwhile, married relief workers protested both the low rates of relief and the work rules that cities imposed in order for them to collect the pittance offered to those unable to find private sector jobs. Unemployed relief workers in Calgary called a series of strikes between 1932 and 1935, leading them into several serious confrontations with local police.83 Unemployed organizations made representations before city councils and relief boards, wrote letters of complaint and suggestions to relief policy-makers, and generally advocated on behalf of the unemployed.
No protest more signified both the militancy of the unemployed and the unwillingness of the authorities to improve workers’ conditions than the Hunger March of 20 December 1932. Farmers, farm labourers, and town workers converged on Edmonton from rural points for days. Travelling determinedly by car, truck, rail, and sleigh in mid-winter, the hunger marchers wanted Premier Brownlee to protect “their farms and their living,” and they intended to make their situation clear to him at the legislature.84 The farmers had had a rough go of it through the growing seasons of 1931 and 1932. Owing to dust storms, grasshopper infestations, severe drought in the south, and chronically low grain prices in the north, Alberta farmers, like prairie farmers generally, were in danger of losing their farms and their means of livelihood. Many already had.85 But not only rural workers were struggling. Edmonton’s unemployed workers also faced hard times that December; many were equally intent on registering their dissatisfaction with the province’s relief systems.

The idea was to amass thousands of hunger marchers — both farmers and unemployed urban workers — at Edmonton’s Market Square on 20 December and then conduct an orderly parade westward toward the provincial legislative building some nine blocks away. Organizing the march on the ground was the Hunger March Committee (HMC), a Communist-inspired group representing both the Farmers’ and Workers’ Unity Leagues, which had been organized in the wake of the Comintern call in 1928 for new Communist-led organizations of workers and farmers to replace Communist participation in existing non-Communist institutions. From its headquarters at the Ukrainian Labour Temple, the HMC had for months been busy making the
City officials, too, had been busy. Having learned of the planned march well in advance, Labour Mayor Dan Knott — pressured by UFA Premier John Brownlee, who in turn was under pressure from Prime Minister Bennett — ordered Chief of Police A.J. Shute to deny the marchers a permit to parade. Shute clearly expected trouble, despite the mayor’s ruling. In short order, he assembled special police squads to meet the marchers, made arrangements to call on further reinforcements as needed to restore order, and secured assurances from Premier Brownlee that the province would make available to the city an extra detachment of the RCMP.87

By 18 December, just two days before the planned march, the HMC made clear that it had no intention of cancelling. An undercover officer, posing as one of the prospective marchers, attended a six-hundred–person rally at the Gem Theatre that night, where unemployed organizers insisted that the parade would go ahead as planned. The morning of 20 December — parade day — opened badly. Shortly before noon, city police raided the HMC headquarters, arresting one man on the charge of assaulting a police officer and searching the place for rumoured revolvers and rifles. They found none; instead, they discovered a small group of women busy in the kitchen preparing turkey dinners for the marchers. Moving from the Labour Temple to Market Square, police ensured that hardware storeowners had removed all pickaxes and grub hooks from their storefront displays, lest they find their way into the hands of the marchers. Finally, and under the personal direction of Chief Shute, eighty city policemen lined up on the north side of the square. Flanking the city police to the west were twenty-four armed and mounted RCMP officers. Another contingent of police guarded the square’s east side. Milling about the growing crowd of prospective marchers inside the square itself were dozens of plainclothes police bearing revolvers. The police set-up left open only the south end of the square, facing the steep river valley, for anyone to exit the area. One can only assume that this strategic tactic was meant to force the marchers toward the nearest geographic barrier, the North Saskatchewan River. City police, it seemed, were taking no chances.

Out on the square, minutes before the parade was set to begin, march organizers dispatched a small delegation to the legislature in a last-ditch effort to get the premier to overrule the mayor’s ban and allow the demonstration. Word soon returned to the square that the premier had refused even to see the delegation. With that, according to an Edmonton Bulletin report filed the next day, “hoots, jeers for the police and the government and cries of ‘All right Comrades, let’s go’ filled the square. "Immediately a parade formed up . . . banners which had been concealed sprang up along the march to reinforce those which had been prominently displayed during the speech-making and in a slow shuffle with a number of youths in the lead wearing red badges, the parade moved off.”88

The mounted police moved fast, cutting south and intercepting the parade as it tried to leave the square. Blocking any escape from the rear was the city’s foot patrol, batons in hand, marching steadily toward the back of the parade. The Bulletin described the clash: “Batons rose and fell, yells and jeers filled the air as here and there a rioter went down before the police clubs. Women among the marchers screamed imprecations at the police, charging them with being cowards who were riding down their class, but the steady police pressure continued and the back of the parade was broken.”89
AN ACTIVIST’S STORY

Clare Botsford, a lifelong social and political activist in Edmonton, was shaped by her experiences of poverty and state oppression during the Depression era.

North Edmonton, there was a place called the Martell Block. It was Cold Water Flats. Very poor people lived there. Everybody on welfare. There were wood stoves. You actually had to haul your wood up. The Hope Mission brought us food. . . . Really dark days. And we went out to the dump, we kids, and we found a bunch of wheels. We had four different wheels and we made up a wagon. We went all through the city and picked up wood boxes and broke them down and made kindling and sold it.

Stories of this kind of childhood entrepreneurship have sometimes caused individuals who did well enough in later life to become somewhat right-wing, excoriating the poor of a later generation as lazy people who did not follow their predecessors’ example of making a buck the hard way. But Botsford, who did not come from a left-wing home, had an experience as a nine-year-old petty entrepreneur that influenced her leftwards. She was picking up boxes in Edmonton’s downtown on 20 December 1932 and searching for her dad, who was supposed to meet her, when she encountered the Hunger March that the Communists and their allies had organized. She heard some speeches and then witnessed the RCMP suppressing the demonstration:

You never forget the sound of heads being clubbed. . . . Suddenly this happened. Then the police got down off their horses as well. People ran for shelter in the pyramids of Christmas trees that were on sale. The clubbing went on. The heads were being clubbed inside the shelter of these trees. Some of it you saw, some of it you heard. But certainly a lot of people were injured.

Botsford’s workforce experiences reinforced her sense of social injustice. Too poor to afford clothes for school, she entered the workforce at age twelve or thirteen as a waitress. She worked twelve-hour days for a mere dollar. But restaurateurs were often not content to simply exploit the labour of the young women they employed.

Oh, quite often you had to quit because your employer just took it for granted that you’d be his next sexual victim. Oh many, many times I walked off a job. I knew how to walk. I walked fast. There really was no protection. Who could you go to?

SOURCE: Interview with Clare Botsford, Edmonton, August 2001, ALHI.
THE MAKING OF A COMMUNIST

A farm boy of eighteen, adrift after completing high school during the Depression, Ben Swankey was in despair that his family’s farm was virtually bankrupt and his opportunities of finding steady work negligible. But although he was rebellious, he was largely apolitical. Staying with a cousin in Vancouver, however, he joined a demonstration of the unemployed in 1931 attended by ten to twelve thousand people, about the same number who were part of the Edmonton Hunger March that Swankey, by then politicized, helped to organize. When the police on horseback and on foot attacked the demonstrators, leaving many people bloodied and even baby carriages knocked over, “I was just astounded and shocked that such a thing could happen in the Canada I knew.” Swankey began attending meetings of left-wing organizations and before long had become a committed Communist. As a farm kid, he was particularly impressed by the fact that while “we wanted relief, we wanted work, we wanted food,” food was being destroyed because of the irrationalities of the international capitalist marketplace. “I knew that in the 1930s in California, they were throwing oranges into the ocean. In Brazil, they were burning coffee. In the Okanagan, they poured gasoline on apples.”

SOURCE: Interview with Ben Swankey, Burnaby, July 2003, ALHi. Swankey also gives his account of the Hunger March in Ben Swankey, “Reflections of a Communist: The Hungry Thirties.”

The Bulletin reported that following the initial charge, some paraders regrouped at the northwest corner of the square but were quickly put down by both the RCMP troopers and city police constables. Most paraders had quit the square for good by around 5:00 p.m. The large number of unemployed and farmer participants — as many as twelve thousand — speaks to the evident unpopularity of city and farm relief policies and provisions. The march was directed at both the provincial and the municipal governments, indicating that despite government efforts to minimize their responsibility for unemployment, the marchers clearly held them principally accountable for their aid. The march also showed a high level of organization on the part of the marchers. This was no spontaneous “mass” rally lacking in specific goals and precise discipline. It was instead a highly organized and controlled protest against the governments’ relief policies. Furthermore, the marchers were determined to voice their opinions in their own way, even though it meant defying direct city orders. Despite the participants’ determination, however, government officials were prepared to meet their defiance with force to control threats to the existing social order.

THE RISE OF THE CCF AND SOCIAL CREDIT

The view that governments’ response to the Depression implied a defence of the interests of the wealthy rather than the working people, both urban and rural, sparked the formation of new political forces in the 1930s in Canada. The willingness to support third parties actually began in the 1921 federal election with the success of the national Progressive Party of Canada, the
farmers’ protest party for which the UFA at the time was the Alberta wing. The Progressives formed the Official Opposition. Neither the Progressive Party nor the UFA had much ideological cohesion: they simply represented disappointment with what farmers regarded as the old-line parties’ dismissiveness regarding their interests. Two Labour MPs were also elected in 1921: J.S. Woodsworth from Winnipeg and William Irvine from Calgary. The Labour MPs were non-communist socialists and they formed an alliance, often called the Ginger Group, with the more radical Progressive members, most of whom were from Alberta.90

It was the small Ginger Group of MPs who decided at a meeting on 1 August 1932, in Calgary that the time had come to create a Canadian national version of the British Labour Party and other social-democratic parties in Europe, but with a name that would reflect the party’s commitment to both farmers and workers. The founding convention of the party, which adopted the name Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), occurred in Regina in July 1933. It adopted a program of emergency measures needed to get people back to work and to give them income if no work was available. But its long-term aim was more revolutionary. The “Regina Manifesto” promised: “No C.C.F. Government will rest content until it has eradicated capitalism and put into operation the full programme of socialized planning which will lead to the establishment in Canada of the Cooperative Commonwealth.” 91

Attempting to get organized nationally and provincially as soon as possible, the CCF did not initially focus on grassroots organizing. Instead, it tried to coalesce existing labour and farmer parties and political lobby groups in each province. This worked quite well in several provinces. In Saskatchewan, for example, the CCF brought together the United Farmers of Saskatchewan (UFC-SS) and the Independent Labour Party, while in British Columbia, it brought a truce among rival socialist and labour parties. In Alberta, though, the attempt resulted in a disaster that should have been predictable.

The UFA and the Canadian Labour Party (CLP) together became the Alberta CCF, an inauspicious and confusing beginning for a new party. After all, the UFA was the governing party of Alberta and by 1933 had demonstrated that, under Depression conditions, it was more of a friend to the bankers and businesspeople than workers or farmers. Premier John Brownlee had no use for CCF socialism, and R.G. Reid, who replaced him in 1934 when Brownlee was forced from office as a result of a sex scandal that still remains controversial,

FIG 4-10 Child poverty was widespread during the Depression. Provincial Archives of Alberta, 6-1.
was equally conservative. So why would anyone think that this organization could offer the people of Alberta hope? The confusion occurred because while the UFA government moved to the right, the UFA organization, dominated by federal MPs, moved significantly to the left. It did so, however, without getting rid of conservative UFA MLAs. Much of this party chaos occurred because of a degree of naiveté in the thinking that had shaped the UFA’s move into politics in the first place: believing that farmers had common interests and world views, the UFA had no real platform, and farmers simply picked a successful local member of their profession to represent them in Edmonton. Those individuals ranged across the political map but were generally conservatives who wanted to limit government spending and therefore farmers’ taxes. The larger presence of radicals among the UFA MPs occurred because the farmers were more restricted in their choices of MP candidates in mixed urban-rural ridings, where they had to appease labour interests in their choice of a farmer as a successful candidate.92

By the time the UFA organization, responding to the Depression, decided that the capitalist system was a disaster for farmers, they lacked the will to throw out their conservative provincial representatives and instead focused largely on federal politics. But the conservatism of the provincial UFA discredited the entire UFA organization. The CCF’s decision to hitch its cart to this woebegone provincial organization rather than start something from the grassroots doomed the CCF in Alberta in its early years. The CLP’s adhesion was also no gift to the CCF: the party that had joined the UFA in beating up Hunger Marchers hardly resembled a party that would not rest until capitalist exploitation had disappeared.

Enter Social Credit. Led by the popular radio preacher, William Aberhart, Social Credit was based on a loony monetary ideology, but, in fairness, it may have been no more loony than the capitalist system itself, which Social Credit only challenged tangentially. Social Credit theory — originated by C.H. Douglas, a British engineer who was extremely paranoid and anti-Semitic — rejected the socialist notion that depressions occur because of a maldistribution of wealth between capitalists and workers. Instead, argued Douglas, the problem was that the combination of wages and dividends (the distribution between the two, he claimed, did not matter) in a given firm was less than the value of the product produced because of the need for a firm to buy inputs. So, he claimed, money was leaking out of the economy. In truth, since firms were buying from other firms, there was no leakage across an entire economy except in terms of what might be lost through unfavourable international trade balances. Nonetheless, Douglas’s solution — a bonus to every adult to make up for the alleged leakage — caught many people’s attention. Aberhart promised twenty-five dollars for every adult in the province each month and a smaller amount for care of their children. This was a great deal of money at a time when the average worker earned less than a thousand dollars a year and when farmers were often spending more to produce a crop than they could possibly earn from it.93

Social Credit swept the province in the provincial election of 1935. Both the UFA and the CLP lost all their seats; indeed the CLP candidates received only a negligible vote despite the fact that the labour movement firmly opposed Social Credit, viewing it as a demagogic movement, and continued to support the CLP. The era
of direct labour representation in the legislature under its own name had ended in the province. Efforts were made to dissociate the new CCF from the past errors of both the UFA and the CLP. But before World War II, the CCF in Alberta had only a tiny audience. Anti-socialists, of course, rejected their message, but even pro-socialists regarded the party as inauthentic because of its past association with the UFA and CLP. Social Credit, though it was ideologically amorphous, was given more slack.

In its early years, while William Aberhart was the premier (until his death in 1943), Social Credit was something of an anomaly. Though this party would gradually become rather business-friendly, particularly once Ernest Manning became premier upon Aberhart’s death, it was hated by the business community during its first term of office. Belligerent and authoritarian, Aberhart had no use for the leaders of either business or labour. He struggled to produce a legislative program, realizing once he came into office that there was no money for his ambitious Social Credit schemes and that, under the terms of the British North America Act, provincial control over banks was negligible.

But it was not until the 1940s that Social Credit took a firm stance in favour of capitalists over labour; it did pass some pro-labour legislation in its first term. In 1936, Aberhart, himself a former teacher and school principal, made it compulsory for all teachers to be members of the Alberta Teachers’ Association, and the following year, he gave teachers a form of tenure, with any dismissal requiring a ruling from an independent tribunal. Also, in 1936, the government restricted most trades to licensed individuals, which won Social Credit kudos from many crafts unions. In 1937, Alberta became only the second Canadian province, just a few months after Nova Scotia, to give legal status to collective bargaining. The Freedom of Trade Union Association Act established the process for certification of unions as collective bargaining agents for specific groups of workers and prohibited employers from interfering in workers’ efforts to sign up enough members to force a vote on whether a union should be recognized for a particular group of workers.

Social Credit was, however, hardly an unqualified friend of workers or the labour movement. Though it had promised to treat the unemployed with greater humanity than the UFA had, it largely failed to change regressive policies. It did not follow the federal government in closing down all relief camps and provided relief to those whom it classified as transient only if they went to the camps. Unemployed single men who remained in the cities were not given food vouchers like married men were; instead they were expected to eat at municipal soup kitchens. The province also forced single relief workers to work as farm labourers during the growing season for five dollars a month, the same rate of pay that they received in the work camps.

Although the Aberhart government received hundreds of complaints about the mistreatment of the unemployed, it was largely intransigent. It was equally unsympathetic to complaints about a hardening of attitudes on the part of the Workmen’s Compensation Board. And within a year of legalizing collective bargaining, it passed the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1938, which imposed a fourteen-day delay before a strike could begin, time enough for an employer to hire scabs and otherwise take steps to limit potential losses of profit from a withdrawal of work by a unionized labour force.
Glenbow Archives, NC-54-4345.
DEPRESSION-ERA STRIKES

Though the strikes of the unemployed captured the most public attention during the Depression, workers who had not lost their jobs sometimes risked everything to protest wage cuts, speed-ups, and dangerous working conditions. Three-quarters of the strikes were miners’ strikes and, in Depression conditions, the bosses usually won. Most miners had only a few days’ work per month as the mines cut back production, and working conditions, always dangerous because of company efforts to cut costs, deteriorated further. On 9 December 1935, for example, sixteen miners died in a CPR mine at Coalhurst, near Lethbridge, because the company had not sealed off old sections of the about-to-be-closed mine, which allowed gas to accumulate. As Harvey Murphy, a Mine Workers Union of Canada (MWUC) official, later recalled: “They were getting out all the cheap coal they could and turned the mine into a death trap. Sixteen of our brothers have been destroyed, 23 orphans and 11 widows remain, because the CPR wanted cheaper coal.”

The MWUC joined the Communist-controlled Workers Unity League and did its best to lead the miners in their fights against the coal bosses. But the companies responded ruthlessly, forcing workers out of their homes in company towns and blacklisting them from further mine employment. With work so scarce, there were always enough miners who were too desperate to work to join the strikes, and the companies could encourage divisions among the miners by taking advantage of the desire of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) to take back mines from the MWUC. Indeed, in most areas, the UMWA slowly regained its former prominence.

The MWUC held out most effectively in the coal mines in the Crowsnest Pass. In 1932, it struck the mines in Coleman, Blairmore, and Bellevue for a variety of reforms, including an equal sharing of work among all the miners rather than leaving workers subject to the will of bosses, with some getting almost no work at all. The companies tried to starve the workers into submission, and the mainly Anglo-Canadian Coleman workers did give up the strike and leave the MWUC to form a “home local,” which they maintained for several years before rejoining the UMWA. But the largely eastern European workers of Blairmore and Bellevue, who had experienced intense ethnic discrimination from their employers, held out for seven months, after which the provincial government, concerned about fuel supplies in the province, forced the companies to make major concessions. The jubilant Blairmore workers promptly elected a “red” city council, which, among other things, renamed the main street Tim Buck Boulevard after the leader of the Communist Party of Canada. But after the Comintern line on Communists going it alone shifted in 1934, the Canadian Communists dissolved the Workers’ Unity League in 1935 and the MWUC rejoined forces with the UMWA.

While the very existence of coal mining in Alberta would soon be threatened, the expanding meat-packing houses became a major site of unionization and strikes in the late 1930s. The Committee for Industrial Organization had formed in the United States in 1935 to focus on industrial organization as opposed to the craft unionism favoured by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL suspended the ten Committee unions in 1936, but the unions continued their efforts to extend the industrial union movement. In
VERONICA FONTANA’S REMINISCENCES OF BLAIRMORE

We grew up through the thirties when the big strike was on. That’s when all the parades and everything were going on, the union was pretty strong. The men were fighting for better working conditions and shorter work time. When they won the strike, they were working five days a week and they got eight-hour shifts. During the strike time, we were all kids going into the parades. We had Violet Manakay and George Peer, they were the leaders of organizing the kids for concerts, which kept the people occupied during their idle times. We’d go on these parades, they’d take us out on the parades, and we’d sing these songs. But there was a separate community. There was West Blairmore and East Blairmore. East Blairmore was all the foreigners and all the big families, whereas in West Blairmore all the pit bosses and that had company houses....

They used to make these concerts, silver collection, that used to help pay for some of the relief for the people. We used to have wonderful concerts. There was the Campeau sisters: Vickie, Mary, Dorothy, and Rosie. They used to sing, they were beautiful singers. And we had all the accordion players. There was Mike Mohalski, Aldo Binoni, John Sekina, and the concerts were wonderful. The people used to just pack into the hall. People just put five cents in, and it added up. That helped provide food and clothes for some of the people who really needed it the most.

Then the big strike was on in Corbin. A lot of the union people from Blairmore all got onto a truck and went to Corbin to help them fight their strike. That’s where the big battle started. The RCMP were on their horses and they had a whip. They used to chase the women off the parade with the whip. A fellow with a tractor from the mine used to come and try to scare the women off with his tractor, and used to chase them right off the road. However, nobody got hurt on that, and then they shut the Corbin mine down. So that was the end of that issue in there. But the one in Blairmore continued. There was Sam Paterson, Eric Tyburg, Harvey Murphy, they were the big organizers for the Pass. They all wound up on the councils and the school boards, which made it good for the working-class kids. They provided free books and pencils for school.

SOURCE: Interview with Veronica Fontana, Coleman, 10 November 2005, ALHI.
1938, they created the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) as a rival federation to the AFL. The CIO’s militant organizing tactics included sit-down strikes in which workers refused to leave factories until the employer agreed to bargain collectively and accede to various union demands. The first group of unorganized workers to get the CIO bug in Alberta before the CIO itself lay down roots in the province were the packing-house workers. In 1935, Alberta’s fifteen hundred slaughterhouse employees accounted for more than one in five of workers in manufacturing in the province. Like the miners, they had no guarantee of employment and no seniority provisions from employers. They lined up daily in the hope of being assigned work, without pay for their time in the line-up. In addition, speed-ups on the job led to numerous accidents.

In 1937, the Canadian Victuallers and Caterers Union, an affiliate of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour, made heroic efforts to organize the packing-house workers of Edmonton and Calgary. In Calgary, workers occupied the building of the misnamed Union Packing, only leaving when the company agreed to conciliation and not to discipline strikers. But the company ignored the conciliator’s report and fired union leaders. Edmonton slaughterhouse employees at Swift, Gainers, and Burns staged sit-down strikes as well, but the companies waited them out and fired many of the strikers. In 1938 and 1939, however, the companies accepted a union that was a direct affiliate of the Trades and Labour Congress and that had been established by Alberta Federation of Labor executive member Carl Berg. By all accounts, the union, under Berg’s direction, behaved almost like a company union, and unsurprisingly, it would be swept away by a CIO union during the war.101

During the quarter century between the beginning of World War I and the beginning of World War II, Alberta workers experienced a roller-coaster economy that moved from boom to recession and back again every few years. The insecurities that the marketplace economy brought with it and the suspicion that capitalism and war-making were closely linked caused many Alberta workers, along with compatriots in other provinces, to embrace socialist ideas. While the revolutionary ideas of the One Big Union proved short-lived in the face of unrelenting state suppression, the postwar workers’ revolt left a legacy in terms of union militancy even during the worst days of the Depression. Social-democratic “labourite” politics remained important in Alberta until the mid-thirties, when Alberta workers, confused by the disconnect between CCF socialist rhetoric and the pitiful performances of the UFA government and the short-lived CLP municipal government in Edmonton, largely tuned out. Many embraced Social Credit as the only other game in town outside the conventional bourgeois parties. As the Depression decade ended, it appeared that the Alberta Federation of Labour’s dream of creating a permanent social-democratic labour party with a chance of eventually forming the provincial government had been dashed to pieces.
FIG 5-1 The campaign to keep “rats” out of Alberta launched in the 1950s. Provincial Archives of Alberta, PA 1579/2.