In 1949, the Government of Alberta launched a crusade to rid the province of the Norwegian rat. Flyers and posters exhorted people to buy the rat-poison warfarin. A 1950 poster featured the headline “You Can’t Ignore the Rat” and urged the population, “Kill Him! Let’s Keep Alberta Rat-Free.” On the back cover of a 1956 pamphlet titled “Kill Rats with Warfarin,” a map of North America was stamped in red, with only an empty white block for Alberta. Poised on the province’s borders lay rats, ready to invade.

Clearly, this campaign was about rodents. And yet, perhaps unintentionally, the campaign also seemed to be about organized labour: unions who allegedly destroyed property and caused waste in industry, “Reds” who sat on the borders waiting for a chance to pounce on capitalist Alberta so as to wreak havoc and bring everything down from within. The state’s warfarin for radicals was legislation and administrative procedures to restrict the formation and activity of trade unions. This was aided by a labour movement that, throughout Canada, sought to purge its Communist elements and that, at least in part, acquiesced to conservative state policies. The two decades between 1940 and 1960 were revolutionary for Alberta workers. Many began the 1940s by leaving fields and mines for the even more dangerous workplace of war in Europe and Asia. Workers closed these decades having moved in ever larger numbers from farm to city or from extracting coal to extracting oil. In the same years, the home and family changed radically. The war also gave Canada its unique system of compulsory collective bargaining, which the Alberta government later attempted to neuter. Within this new environment, the labour movement faced two internal crises: the expulsion of communists that accompanied the Cold War and the merger in 1956 of its two major organizations, the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Industrial Federation of Labour of Alberta.

**WARTIME ALBERTA**

During the war years, the Army, Navy, and Air Force together became Alberta’s largest employer: seventy-eight
thousand men and forty-five hundred women joined, about 10 percent of the population. It was a dangerous workplace: 9 percent of Canadians who served during the war were killed or wounded. Many who survived without physical wounds were nonetheless scarred by the experience.¹

Soldiers’ Work

For many, military work began with training: drill, often for several hours a day, combined with arms training and related work. In the early years of the war, rifles were scarce, so the recruits to the South Alberta Regiment trained with one platoon using the regiment’s rifles, who then handed them to the next platoon up for training. The regiment’s minister and doctor provided a limited sex education, a mix of conventional morality and the very real threats of disease.² All the training aimed to condition soldiers to give up their freedom: military thinking equated effective soldiering with strict adherence at all times to the commands of superiors.

When Canadians entered the battlefields, their capacity to meet the expectations of their commanders was put to the test. In his memoir And No Birds Sang, author Farley Mowat describes one night-time battle in the Italian campaign:

What followed was the kind of night men dream about in afteryears, waking in a cold sweat to a surge of gratitude that it is but a dream. It was a delirium of sustained violence. Small pockets of Germans that had been cut off throughout our bridgehead fired their automatic weapons in hysterical dismay at every shadow. The grind of enemy tanks and
self-propelled guns working their way along the crest was multiplied by echoes until it sounded like an entire Panzer army. Illuminating flares flamed in darkness with a sick radiance. The snap and scream of high-velocity tank shells pierced the brutal guttural of an endless cannonade from both German and Canadian artillery. Moaning Minnie projectiles whumped down like thunderbolts, searching for our hurriedly dug foxholes. Soldiers of both sides, blundering through the vineyards, fired with panicky impartiality in all directions. And it began to rain again, a bitter, penetrating winter rain.3

After such battles, the soldiers had to deal with their dead. South Alberta Regiment padre Albert Silcox observed, “We laid each on a blanket, wrapped him in its folds, and lowered him, under the Union Jack where possible, into the earth.” When fighting had ceased, the padres divided the possessions of the dead between those to be sent home and those that could be used by others. Finally they “wrote letters to mothers and fathers, wives or sweethearts, to brothers in other regiments, to close friends, and casual acquaintances of whom we knew.” 4

The desire to serve, while widespread, was hardly universal. In 1940, the National Resources Mobilization Act made military training and serving in home defence compulsory for men who were called up. Trainees could, however, petition to postpone their training for such reasons as their work in farming or mining, and conscientious objection to war. The Edmonton district granted 47,773 postponements of orders for compulsory military training; this constituted 97 percent of requests, a higher percentage than in any other province.5

Women’s Work

Women’s labour changed drastically during the war years. Though Alberta’s munitions industry was modest, wartime demand for uniforms created numerous jobs at the Great Western Garment (GWG) plant in Edmonton. By 1940, seventeen-year-old Norah Hook had left school for a full-time babysitting job, but she wanted something better. She first tried responding to an ad in the newspaper calling for saleswomen at Woolworths, but “the line up of girls looking for work was . . . out the door and down the street. So that didn’t work out.” Instead, through a friend, she got a job at GWG making army fatigues. Assunta Dotto, a young Italian immigrant, also found GWG appealing: “I was quite interested because all I could do was clean houses for a dollar a day.” 6

The GWG plant was organized so that each woman along a line did the same task over and over. Dotto’s line comprised about twenty women. As she described it, “the shirt department, it was like a horseshoe. . . . And the girl over here would start right from the first operation. When it came to me [inserting the sleeves], the cuffs were already on the sleeves and so the collars were already on the shirt. So all I did was that and then it went to the next girl. The next girl would sew this like this [indicating underarm and side seam], then it went to the next girl.”

Dotto did “hear some grumbling about hard work and little pay . . . but to me it was just good.” But not everyone agreed. Hook recalled: “I hated it, it was an awful place. I was an outdoors person and I just couldn’t be shut up like that, it was like being in jail almost.” Getting out of the factory during the work day was
important. Dotto and several friends left the GWG plant every lunch hour for the confectionary store across the street, rather than eat in the noisy plant cafeteria.

In the summer of 1945, as war work was dwindling, the appeal of leaving during working hours became too great. One day, Dotto was at lunch with four other women:

We started to talk about the exhibition, and I said, “Gee I’ve never been to the exhibition.” I’d already given my notice that I was going home to be married. I thought, well, why not now? So three of the girls said yes. Juliet, Anne, and Elsie. . . . So I was sitting to the front by the window, or the doors, there was all glass there and I saw the streetcar or the bus, whatever, is coming, and I said, “Come on girls, let’s go.” . . . So anyway, we had a good time. . . . We were all on special machines, but the line would stop without us being there. . . . The next morning, we reported for work, we had to wait downstairs. The bell went and everybody stood up. . . . Mrs. Nufer said, “You, you, you, and you, in the cafeteria.” She said, “I hope you had a good time. Now you can go back to the exhibition.” She handed us the pay envelope. . . . “You can’t fire me,” I said, “I’ve already quit,” but she ignored me. So we left and I felt horrible because the other girls had lost their jobs. But shortly after that I heard that they were all rehired, and they didn’t rehire me because they knew I’d already quit.

Even as wartime production wound down, GWG needed to keep its staff. It might threaten free-spirited workers with dismissal, but then it took them back. Earlier in the war, the company had been even more insistent on keeping its employees. After a few weeks at GWG, Nora Hook, along with a workmate, Wanda, applied at Aircraft Repair, which was also hiring women. Indicative of the need, even in Edmonton, for women labourers, “the next thing was GWG wouldn’t let me quit because it was wartime and . . . we were considered . . . essential services . . . so you couldn’t move around in jobs. So they weren’t going to let me quit. . . . My mother got involved and because I was under eighteen, I could quit, so I went to Aircraft Repair.”

At GWG, Hook seamed the backs of jeans. At Aircraft Repair, she was a sheet-metal worker. She preferred that job: “I could move around. There was light, there were people you could talk to, the work was never the same two days in a row. One day you might be working on whatever, next time you might be riveting on an airplane, it was interesting, it was exciting. There was a war on. You were helping, you weren’t sitting.” The responsibility and freedom this work offered, in contrast to the work at GWG, provided a positive experience for many working-class women during the war. But at war’s end, though paid work at GWG and Woolworths remained available, skilled blue-collar jobs at places like Aircraft Repair disappeared for most working women.

**Internment**

Wartime disruption of people’s work lives took different forms. Tets Kitaguchi worked in pulp mills in Vancouver in the late 1930s and the early war years. When the Canadian government interned all Japanese-Canadians in British Columbia in 1942, he and his wife were required to register. The authorities seized most of their possessions, including his accordion and many books, and they received no compensation. Given the
option of internment or voluntary relocation to an inland agricultural community, the Kitaguchis moved to Raymond, where a sister of Tets lived. Assigned to a sugar beet farm, the Kitaguchis were given charge of twenty-five acres, which they cultivated for the owner in exchange for a portion of the return on the crop and a place to live. The accommodations were meagre: “A one-room shack. . . . We had one bed and a stove. You could sit on the bed and cook on the stove. It must’ve been an old granary at one time. It was filthy.” The work was hard:

From the time it was planted, we waited until they sprouted up two leaves. Then you go out there with a hoe and separate all the beets to about twelve inches apart. It was a backbreaking job, especially for my wife. Never been on a farm or anything. I used to break in the heart when I see her work. . . . During the fall, around September, “this is very nice weather,” I says to the farmer, “why don’t you harvest it? The weather’s great.” He said, “Oh, we can’t do that. We wait for the first frost to bring up the content of the sugar.” So that was harder still. We got to pull those things out of the ground, bang them together, get all the mud off them. It was tough work, but we got it all harvested. After harvest, we were paid our share. The wife and I, we ended up with ninety dollars to live on through the winter. But we were kind of lucky. He was one of those kind of guys that took in the cattle or sheep during the winter months from the stockyard and fattened them up, then sent to the packers. So he hired me on for twenty-five dollars a month through the winter. It was good. We managed.7

The Kitaguchis were not alone; as many as twenty-six hundred Japanese internees worked on sugar beet farms in Alberta at any one time during the war. In addition, prisoners of war were hired on a daily or term basis from camps: by 1945, four hundred German prisoners were permanently on loan to beet farmers.8

Some non-Japanese were interned too. In the late 1930s, Patrick Lenihan served as an alderman in Calgary, having won election as a coalition “people’s candidate” without hiding his Communist Party membership. When war was declared in the fall of 1939, the Soviet Union remained neutral, Stalin having signed a pact with Hitler. On 3 December 1939, Lenihan spoke at a meeting in the Calgary Labour Temple denouncing the war and labelling some of the Canadian government’s actions as fascist. Soon after, he was arrested, charged with sedition and causing “disaffection to His Majesty’s forces.” A jury exonerated him.

The fall of France and the rest of Western Europe prompted a second arrest in June 1940, but this time Lenihan was interned at a camp in the Kananaskis under provisions of the War Measures Act that gave him no right to a trial. The following year, he was moved to another camp at Petawawa and then finally to a new jail in Hull, Quebec. Only in September 1942, was Lenihan released, more than a year after the Soviets became Canadian allies against Nazi Germany.9

Trade Unions During the War

Wartime full employment emboldened workers to join unions, but when the war started, some alleged unions were employer lapdogs, as Patrick Lenihan learned. Though after the Soviet Union was invaded
by Germany, Communists largely opposed strikes until Germany was defeated, many employers still refused to hire individuals whom they feared would later “agitate” workers to fight for better wages and conditions. Lenihan used his connections, as an ex-alderman, to Calgary Mayor Andy Davison to get a job in the city’s transit system. The Street Railway Union in Calgary was passive and elitist. Railway employees could only apply for membership in the union after working for the company for a year; the union members then voted on whether to accept the application. During the war, the president of the Street Railway Union was Sam Sligo, president of the Calgary Labour Council and future president of the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL). As Lenihan recalled, Sligo “was an anti-communist, left-wing hater. . . . His politics were cooperation 100 per cent with management and accept anything. There was no struggle really for improvement in the lives of the people. The union meeting was a matter of reading the minutes, new business and good and welfare and that was it.” Unsurprisingly, Lenihan’s application for membership was rejected several times.10

Many unions were more open, encouraging all workers in a plant to join, but it was challenging to collect dues. Nellie Engley started working at GWG in 1938 and volunteered to work with the union; she became the financial secretary. Collecting dues required “somebody that would sit at the top of the stairs and as you got your pay we’d want your fifty cents . . . for the union and you’d be surprised how they wouldn’t give it to you.” As the women collected their pay, Engley “was right there with all the names all down and how much money they would give me and then I knew exactly if they were paid up to date or how far behind they were.” Anne Ozipko remembers, “At lunch time you’d go to the treasurer and pay your dues then. Well I guess they’d get after you and come to your machine and ask you to pay.” This weekly or bi-weekly direct contact between union and worker, as Engley says, “was a horrible job, nobody wanted it.”11 But it had advantages: in an era when many of the unions were international unions with headquarters in the United States, the need to collect dues in person meant that rank-and-file workers had regular contact with a steward or other member of the local union executive. The dues collector, in turn, had to be prepared to convince, cajole, or harangue the reluctant worker into paying up, which meant regularly reminding workers what the union was doing and achieving at the local level.

**Origins of Compulsory Collective Bargaining**

Though landlocked and some distance from the supply routes for most of the forces, Alberta workers were deeply affected by the war. The clearest example was in coal mining, which employed as many as eight thousand men at one time in more than three hundred mines during the war. Many still lived in company towns and lost ground under wartime restrictions. Wages trailed rising costs, especially in company towns, and rationing further limited access to basic necessities.

Workers across Canada engaged in a strike wave from 1941 through 1943. For the federal government, maintaining wartime production was essential, and measures were adopted to prevent strikes or limit their impact. Coal mining production, though on the rise until mid-1942, failed to keep pace with wartime demand. As more young miners left for the front or for better
wages in other work, production started to decline. In response, in June 1943, the federal government ordered all existing coal miners to remain in their jobs while miners who had taken other jobs were ordered to return to the mines. Nevertheless, nationally there were more coal mine strikes in 1943 than ever before. On 14 October, with Privy Council Order (PC) 8021, the federal government banned strikes and lockouts in coal mines for the duration of the war. But on 1 November, 9,850 miners of UMWA District 18 struck for higher wages, two weeks paid vacation, and time and a half for the sixth day out of seven they were required to work. The strike lasted fifteen days and culminated in the appointment of a Royal Commission on Mining as well as a wage increase and the requested vacation time.12

As with World War I, the Second World War presented workers with an opportunity to wrestle significant advances from their employers. As prices rose and the availability of workers fell, unions — particularly industrial unions — successfully organized many workers and pressed for better wages. Strikes like the November 1943 mining strike led the federal government on 17 February 1944, to issue PC 1003, the Wartime Labour Relations Order. This order introduced a legislative scheme for union recognition, defined unfair labour practices to restrict employer interference with union activity, and mandated compulsory collective bargaining in war-related industries.13 PC 1003 had a relatively limited effect in Alberta since it applied only to industries that the federal government regulated constitutionally or that fell under the War Measures Act. Coal mining was one of the few inclusions.

The federal government also encouraged provinces to opt into its provisions for the duration of the war and then model their own legislation on them. The AFL had begun pressuring the government for similar legislation a year before PC 1003. In February 1943, it asked the provincial government to amend Alberta’s labour legislation to introduce compulsory collective bargaining, arguing that workers had a right to join a union and have it bargain on their behalf; it should not be left to the employer to decide if, when, how, and for whom such bargaining would happen. In addition, the AFL expressed concern that the current legal regime in Alberta was too lenient on employers who engaged in unfair practices. The province, for example, declared legal an employer’s notice to its employees that unionization would result in shutting the shop and relocating.14

Alberta, led by Premier Ernest Manning, Aberhart’s successor, did not opt in, but in 1944, amendments to Alberta’s Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act paralleled much of PC 1003. The most significant difference was that employees under the Alberta act could only unionize following a secret ballot election, regardless of how many had already signed union membership cards.15

**The Decline of Rural Alberta Farms**

The war years witnessed major changes in agriculture: farm income rose considerably and mechanization quickened.16 At war’s end, veterans could apply for land grants in the Peace River country. Changes in income and mechanization were unevenly distributed, however, and land grants in remote areas proved less appealing and profitable than many had hoped. Many
The Alberta Farmers’ Union and its Saskatchewan counterpart went on strike in September of 1946. The farmers picketed at depots and refused to deliver produce. Glenbow Archives, NA-1197-1.
farmers, new and old, owners of their own means of production, were pushed off the land into the growing regional centres and cities, and into paid labour. Even still-prosperous farmers could not persuade their children to remain as farmers. In previous generations, farmers’ children typically took up paid labour only until they either inherited the family farm or were able to buy one of their own. Now a majority turned to paid labour permanently. By the beginning of the 1950s, a slim majority of Albertans were urban dwellers.¹⁷

Though farmers had no legal right to unionize, the Alberta Farmers’ Union (AFU) made one last attempt at continuing 1930s’ radicalism into the Manning era. In 1946, the AFU joined its Saskatchewan counterpart to try to force the federal government to introduce pricing parity for farm products: that is, the tying of farm product prices to the increases in farmers’ production costs and to the overall improvement in incomes within Canadian society. This was seen as the only hope for the small family farm. After a one-day farmers’ holiday in June and the balloting of members of the AFU and the Saskatchewan Farmers’ Union in August, on 6 September 1946, more than sixty thousand farmers in the two provinces began to refuse to deliver any produce. The strikers organized as industrial workers did, with pickets at depots to prevent strike-breaking farmers from making deliveries of grain, meat, eggs, or dairy. In both towns and cities, the stocks of produce declined considerably. At Beaver Siding on 27 September, more than two hundred farmers attempted to stop a cattle buyer from getting a hundred steers to the railway. The confrontation ended in violence, with agricultural labourers, the police, and spooked cows physically breaking the farmers’ line.¹⁵

The striking farmers received support from unionized workers. Walter Makowecki recalled an attempt by strike-breaking farmers to make a delivery to the trains: “My uncle . . . John Zukarko and his son Bill . . . would come with their truck and pick up the picketers at the Ukrainian [Farmer] Labour Temple, drive fifteen miles to St. Paul, and picket to see that the farmers didn’t ship the cream to Smoky Lake or wherever on the trains.” The picketers lined up on both sides of the tracks. If a delivering farmer got through the lines, unionized rail workers received his cream:

The railway guys would open up the doors in the cars, the cream can would go through this door. The farmer thinks his cream has gone to market, and it went out on the other side [passed by the rail workers to the picketers on that side of the train]. The train is gone, his cream is sitting on the other side of the train.¹⁹

Even before the strike began, both provincial and federal governments denounced it, with Manning telling farmers that the strike would be too small to effect change, while hurting those whose produce went unsold. When the thirty-day period originally agreed to by the strikers ended, so did the strike. The governments and the organizations of large farms like the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and its provincial counterparts offered the strikers nothing of value, and the strike marked a last gasp both to organize farmers as workers and to try to protect the small farm. Legislated parity did not materialize, and more farmers and their children left for other work, their land usually bought out by farmers who were surviving by expanding their holdings.²⁰
The remaining farmers generally reduced labour costs through mechanization. They employed fewer hired hands. For some crops, however, such as sugar beets, the effect of machines was less notable. Workers were still needed to thin and trim the fields by hand. But attracting cheap labour to those farms still requiring extra workers was difficult in the postwar environment, when overall employment rates were high. The federal government responded by recruiting displaced persons as well as recent and poor European immigrants to work in the fields. When this pool dwindled, the farmers, aided by the government, turned to First Nations people, mainly from northern Saskatchewan and northern Alberta. The Dominion-Provincial Farm Labour Committee (and its successor), in conjunction with the Department of Indian Affairs, paid the costs of recruiting First Nations and Métis people to work on farms. Farmers were required to provide (low) wages and accommodations for their workers during the growing season, while the government subsidized transport from reserves or communities to the farms, and even trips to some of the regional rodeos paid for by the Sugar Beet Growers’ Association. By the late 1960s, this proved insufficient to meet labour demands, so the Department of Indian Affairs began cutting welfare payments in May and June to encourage Aboriginal migration to farms. This was matched by provincial cuts to non-status Indians and Métis people.21

Coal

The drain from the farms was significant, but the postwar collapse of coal mining — and with it, working-class communities — across the south-central part of the province was even more severe. There were 8,865 coal miners in Alberta in 1948 but only 3,443 in 1956.22 Western Canadian Collieries in the Crowsnest produced 906,000 tonnes of coal in 1945 and 1,279,000 tonnes in 1951, but only 130,000 tonnes in 1958.23 The miners and their families survived as best they could. Bill Skura, a farmer’s son from Manitoba, for example, trekked west intending to reach Yellowknife’s gold mines but ended up at the McGillivray Mine in the Crowsnest in November 1945. “The wages were very low,” he recalled. “They were $7.55 a day for coalminers, and $8.02 for rock mining. That’s what I got a day. There were no holidays, no nothing. When we did get vacation time, you had to work so many days. If you were sick or so, you would lose that month.”24 When Clara Marconi and her coal-miner husband married in 1945, “things were so rough, [my husband] had a little Model A, and he sold it to buy a stove. We lived in three rooms, and eventually we had three kids. Three rooms, three kids, two great big stoves. We used to walk around the tracks to pick up the coal so we could keep the fires burning.”25
By the end of the 1950s, the remaining work in the mines was often intermittent. Joyce Avramenko described her husband’s experience in the mines near Drumheller:

The way it usually worked is once they started to cut down, it would always seem to be after Christmas or January. At first they’d be missing one day a week. Then pretty soon they’d work one day, miss a day, work a day, miss a day, work a day. So now they’re getting three days in a week. Then the next thing you’d see they’re only getting two days in a week. Then pretty soon they’d only be getting one day a week. Then, if they got a large order they might get weeks of work, but then they’d be back again to one day or two days a week. . . . The weather’s getting nicer in May, people aren’t burning the coal, so by that time the mine would be completely at a standstill. September — women are canning again, they need more coal again. October — the weather’s getting cold so people are burning more coal, so now the days are picking up and they’re getting more. Now the cold weather’s really socked in, so now they’re all back working full time again.26

When work was uncertain, the miners “had to listen to the whistle. If it was three, you stayed home. If it was one, you went to work next morning. . . . There were times that we got laid off for two or three weeks. . . . So it was tough.”27

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the towns had few children or working-age people. Avramenko noted:

I think the first hard part of it was when you seen the first family move away to another coalmine. Everybody talked about it at great lengths. The next thing you knew there was a couple more families going, then a couple more families going. It left these empty houses. . . . We left, but my father-in-law didn’t leave. He was one of the ones that was here right to the end. We came back to visit, and you drive down the street and here’s all these empty houses that used to be full of mothers and fathers and children. All of a sudden there’s nothing. Then the sad part about it was there started to be a lot of fires. These houses somehow started to burn. That made it look worse yet. There’s nothing worse than a pile of burnt rubbish, it’s worse than an empty house.28

For many mining families, Avramenko’s included, moving meant going to another mine. Sometimes just the workers moved, and sometimes the whole family.

For others, the move came only after tragedy. Pauline Grigel’s husband, Frank, was killed, along with two other men, by a bump (a sudden shift leading to a collapse) in the McGillivray Mine in 1953. A widow at thirty-two with five children, Grigel received $175 a month in compensation. To keep her family surviving, Grigel planted a large garden. “And I had a cow and chickens and rabbits. . . . When the girls got old enough to go to school, then I’d go out and work a bit. A little bit here, a little bit there.” The money she received was through Workmen’s Compensation: fifty dollars for her and twenty-five for each of her children. “I’ll say one thing,” she recalled. “Coleman Collieries didn’t give me anything. They didn’t even let me know that my husband was killed. I found out by the grapevine that my husband had been killed.” Like many women in similar positions, Grigel’s work life was precarious: “My first job was in the hospital, but that was temporary just to fill in

Alberta Labour and Working-Class Life, 1940–1959
for a couple of weeks. But after that I went out cleaning houses, washing walls, painting, wallpapering, whatever I could do to make a few dollars, eighty-five cents an hour. After that I started working at different stores.”

The threat of accidents was omnipresent in mining communities. In the weeks that followed Frank Griegel’s death, two more incidents and four more deaths occurred. Bill Skura observed, “That year there was nine killed in Alberta and seven of them were killed in McGillivray.”

Many mines were unionized, often by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). In an era of declining demand, however, the unions had limited success. As Bill Skura said, “We got the conditions improved, but slowly.” But there were flashpoints. The first big, multi-mine strike in the Crowsnest after the war was from 27 September to 22 October 1945. Still faced with strict meat rationing, the workers of UMWA District 18 demanded that rations either be doubled (for fresh meat) or removed altogether (for prepared meat, like sausage). The strike ended with only minor concessions; it marked to a great degree the end of the previous era of union activism in the Crowsnest and Alberta generally. Here was a strike across several workplaces and employers against the policies of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board. In the post-PC era, this was clearly an illegal strike, and such political strikes subsequently became rare.

A year later, the UMWA mines started their first organized pension plan. In October 1946, the operators of the unionized mines in District 18 began putting into a trust fund three cents for every tonne of coal moved out of their mines. The two trustees, representing the unions and the employers, invested the money in Dominion Savings Bonds while further details for the plan were developed.

The next district-wide strike occurred in 1948, this time in demand of a new collective agreement with a raise. From mid-January until mid-February, when demand for coal was highest, the miners walked the line. They secured a significant victory, including a two-dollar (22 percent) increase to their minimum daily pay and an improved pension fund. At first, the pension fund only provided death benefits to surviving families, but over the next several months, it began to provide a disability pension and then a retirement pension for workers after twenty years of service. By this point, the UMWA was a modern union engaging in few wildcat strikes and mostly concerned with incremental advances in its agreements and in looking after the welfare of its members.

RURAL LIVING PERSISTS

The declining agricultural population and the collapse of traditional extractive industries did not mean there was no work in rural Alberta, which continued to draw some workers even as its relative decline intensified.

Nursing

Jean Shafto trained in Toronto as a nurse, graduating in 1944. The following year, she came west in search of skiing and began work at the Banff Mineral Springs Hospital, a small hospital of thirty or forty beds and two wards. Helen Krizan, a nurse from Port Arthur (later Thunder Bay), came west to Canmore ten years later to join her new husband.
These working women faced significant challenges. Nurses worked day or night shifts in groups of four or five to a ward. In the early years, the Banff Mineral Springs Hospital was both a general service hospital and, because of the mineral springs, a rehabilitative hospital for people suffering from polio and arthritis. As Shafto recalls, there was much less supervision in the hospital in those days: “[I] had to deliver a baby about six months after I came, and that was terrifying.” Krizan described her first shift at the Canmore hospital, which began at eight in the morning:

I believe there were six or eight patients at the time. [The night nurse and matron] gave me a report and said, “Okay, here’s a few things about where things are. That’s it. I’m going to bed.” That was my report. I had no orientation or anything like that. . . . You were on shift by yourself. . . . I remember that day was utter chaos. I didn’t know where things were. I didn’t know the patients. One lady passed away on my shift. They brought in an accident victim from Lafarge, the cement plant down the highway. Then we had office hours and I was helping the doctor. Then about two o’clock a pregnant lady walked in. I had never done a delivery before in my life. I thought to myself, “All that I remember is that if it’s her first baby, it takes longer.” So that was what I asked her, and she said, “No, it’s my fourth.” So I proceeded to do all the things I was supposed to do, and I remembered. But anyway, she delivered the baby in the bedpan. I went hollering for the doctor, and he said, “Get the mat bundle.” I had no clue to where all these things were that I needed. That’s the day I went home at eight o’clock and thought, “I don’t ever want to go back.” It was very scary for me, the rural nursing, because I had not had any time to do that prior to coming here.
The Canmore nurses, working without an elevator, “carried patients up to a surgery on a stretcher up the stairs.” Outside there were “bats at the back door of the hospital” that would “swoop down” at the nurses. One nurse was so afraid of bats that she refused to work nights.37

In addition to her paid work, Shafto, with the other nurses, formed a nurses’ chapter in Banff, which took on the tasks in the mid-1950s of distributing the polio vaccine and running public health clinics for townsfolk. Nurses were not the only working-class professionals moving to rural areas; teachers and some civil servants also took jobs in rural Alberta. The biggest growth in rural employment in the 1940s and 1950s, however, was in the oil industry.

**Leduc No. 1 and the Oil Industry**

By the end of the 1920s, Alberta had the most significant oil industry in Canada, surpassing Ontario’s older wells around Sarnia. In 1940, the province produced more than ten million barrels of oil, mainly from the Turner Valley area. A peak was reached in 1942 before the Turner Valley wells started to dry up. Throughout the war years and after, geologists, geophysicists, and other wildcatters searched for new sources. The discovery of oil at Leduc #1 in February 1947 marked a major shift in the location of oil from the foothills to the great plains, and with it, the potential to access far more oil. By 1948, Alberta’s annual production was over ten million barrels again. In 1950, petroleum overtook liquor as the largest source of revenue for the provincial government, and in 1957, oil production in Alberta equalled Canada’s annual consumption; two years later, the billionth barrel of oil was produced.38

Oil represented a major shift in resource extraction in Alberta, and Leduc #1 is a good example of this. According to oil-industry historians, “located on a weak seismic anomaly and 80 kilometres from the closest attempt to find oil, it was a ‘rank wildcat.’”39 Coal mining relied on large numbers of men digging for years at a seam. Towns built up around the mines, and the workers and their families worked and lived beside each other for years. For them, wildcatting meant striking without notice. Oil was found by small crews of workers who would roam the province away from their homes in small towns or cities; for them, wildcatting was the frontier exploration for oil. Once a well was dug and running, it was left largely to work on its own and the men moved on. The opportunities to organize these workers were limited, and their own self-image as rebel explorers likewise made organizing difficult.

In 1949, Tom McCloy tried to organize drill workers around Leduc into the Oil Workers International Union (OWIU). Having signed up enough workers to get a vote, McCloy was faced with the employers transferring all the drillers to either the Northwest Territories or British Columbia and hiring a new, anti-union crew. This defeat followed earlier failed attempts at organizing oil field workers in the Turner Valley area in 1942 and 1947.40

*The Roughneck*, a magazine for drillers and managers in Alberta that began publishing in 1952, reflected the attitudes that made unionization difficult. It reported on social activities, sports competitions among the drillmen, and safety information, along with humorous items. An early issue provided “An Alberta Schoolboy’s History of Oil”:  

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Oil which lives under the ground was discovered by the Social Credit Company. The oil would not come up for the Liberals because they lived in Ottawa and it would not come up for the United Farmers because they liked wheat better. The president of the Social Credit Company lived in Calgary and he knew the oil was there so he got a driller named Douglas to come over from England but Douglas drilled in the wrong places and he went home. The Social Credit did not give up but kept drilling and by and by the oil decided to come up near Edmonton. That was in 1947 and everyone is rich and happy because the Social Credit Company knew where to drill. And that is the history of oil.41

Clearly satirical, the piece nevertheless capitalizes on stereotypes of the political parties and celebrates Social Credit’s role. To the extent that The Roughneck was representative of wildcatter opinion, it is little wonder the union movement found it difficult to organize the extraction industry.

But Alberta’s oil and gas created more jobs than just extractive ones. Petrochemical plants and refineries that processed fossil fuels opened around Edmonton and elsewhere in Alberta. These urban factories offered ideal prospects for organizing. In 1951, the OWIU moved Neil Reimer from Saskatchewan to Alberta to organize the oil workers. It was never easy. As he recalled:

I learned that there was an undertaking between the Manning government and the industry that they would try to keep our union out. Certainly I wouldn’t say that we were welcomed by open arms. When a lot of our neighbours found out that I was a union representative, I was looked upon as the guy that came here to kill the goose that laid the golden egg.44

Reimer faced organized opposition as he attempted to unionize the bigger plants and refineries. He managed to secure support from two-thirds or more of the workforce in the British American (BA) refinery, and he took his cards and list to the Board of Industrial Relations to secure recognition. The board stalled, and then, recalled Reimer, “for some reason or other the whole board of directors of BA came out from Toronto to the board hearing. They didn’t have enough chairs or a table big enough. Just them all coming was a message for the board.” When Reimer and the pro-union workers held rallies to keep support strong, company officials attended and recorded the names of those present. When the board finally called a vote, the pro-union side lost by ten votes. Many pro-union men were appalled by the outcome. Reimer recounted that

all my supporters . . . quit their jobs and went to Celanese and c1l. . . . There was enough workers quit the BA plant that they had to shut the plant down. It’s an organizing strike. I tried to persuade them not to. [BA] had to then bring in people from other plants, a foreman and what not, to run it until they hired other people. I was against [the workers] quitting, but I couldn’t persuade them. They weren’t going to work for those bastards. I knew if they quit it would be a long time, the anti-union guys would have to die off. They finally did and we got the plant, years later.45

In the months that followed, Reimer was able to organize both c1l and Celanese.
WORKING-CLASS LIFE IN POSTWAR URBAN CENTRES

As the government gradually loosened wartime price controls, the costs of consumer goods started to rise precipitously. Workers responded in various ways. In early 1947, Calgary barbers collectively raised their rates to match inflation. By late spring, women from Calgary and Edmonton had joined a national consumer boycott to protest the rapid rise in food prices. Their efforts culminated in June with an in-person appeal to the minister of Finance in Ottawa to reimpose price controls. He flatly refused.

In Calgary, children joined the boycott in late spring to protest the sudden 60 percent increase in the cost of chocolate bars. Perhaps partly in response, two chocolate manufacturers announced a one-cent price reduction for their bars in July 1947. The concepts of the strike and the boycott, key weapons for trade unions, had permeated the consciousness of many working- and even middle-class Albertans.

The Struggle for Better Wages

Some in the Alberta labour movement, like Carl Berg, now vice-president of the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), opposed worker agitation. He told the Calgary TLC:

In spite of many blunders made by Governments, the many inequalities and injustices that do now exist, and while not in any way condemning those who have been forced to resort to strike action, I cannot, now any more than I did in War-time, agree that this is the time to throw our industrial machine and economy out of gear, and into complete chaos through strikes. . . . Strikes will only further retard our building, housing and reconstruction programs, increase scarcity of commodities, and thus increase prices as well as decrease the flow of supplies to a suffering world.

Such “statesmanlike” views served to keep workers compliant rather than seek their share of the prosperity just becoming obvious in Alberta and throughout the Western world.

The more serious response to rising consumer prices came in the form of a national strike by meat-packing workers. Beginning in August 1947, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) struck all of the unionized Alberta packing plants. During the war, in 1944, the UPWA had begun to pattern bargain across Canada. When the three largest firms — Canada Packers, Swift, and Burns — balked at pattern bargaining, the union held strike votes at all of its plants in an effort to get the federal government’s attention. They were successful, and an industrial disputes inquiry commission was appointed in October. It did not, however, recommend national standards for wages or conditions, although the three employers agreed to the basic principles of collective bargaining.

In 1947, the union tried again. It issued the same bargaining positions for all employers: a wage increase of fifteen cents an hour, a work week of forty-four hours, dues check-off, and a single national wage scale. Swift workers took strike votes that were illegal under provincial laws, and after 98 percent of workers voted to strike, they began to walk out illegally across the country in late August and early September 1947. The strikes soon spread to the other big packers and then
the independent and smaller packers. At its peak, 14,150 workers from 47 plants across Canada were out.46

As it did during the Farmers’ Union strike, the provincial government lashed out at the workers and the union. Premier Manning accused the strikers of trying to sabotage the economy and foment revolution. Other Social Credit leaders red-baited the union leaders. Ignoring the membership votes for a strike, the minister for Public Works accused the union leadership of trying to “impose labour totalitarianism” by browbeating the “helpless men and women” who worked for a living.

UPWA members and their federation, the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), responded defensively. They lamented the typical Social Credit line that “all labour unions are wrapped up in one inseparable parcel and led by professional fomenters of industrial unrest, and by inference take their orders from foreign countries — even as far distant as Moscow.” In fact, they pointed out, the CCL had “denounced Communism in all its forms.” In addition, strikes were not imposed on workers; rather, they were called by “democratic means.” This was a tepid response from an association representing twelve thousand Albertans at the time.47

An agreement was reached at the Swift plants in October, and then the Burns and Canada Packers workers went back with an agreement to go to binding arbitration. The arbitrator, C.P. McTague, followed the Swift agreement, thus effectively establishing national pattern bargaining for packing workers.48

In the 1950s, GWG still offered employment opportunities for young women. Mary Romanuk, newly married, moved to Edmonton from Vancouver Island to find work. The only job available for a “twenty one year old girl with no education” past grade 12 was doing piecework sewing at GWG. Within five years, Romanuk, who had been secretary of the local for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), was made a floor supervisor. Romanuk was born in Canada, but many women she worked with in the 1950s were postwar immigrants from Europe. This remained true throughout the decade; when Hungarian immigrant Elizabeth Kozma began working at the plant in 1957, workers included other Hungarian women, as well as “Yugoslavian and uh, Romanian, and Chinese, Korean, what else, Polish, German, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese . . . not many Canadian though.” The factory could be frightening at first, and there were too few translators, according to Kozma.49

Romanuk suggested that several of the immigrant women “had [a] hard life and they would try and get every cent they could; so a lot of them would want to work through the lunch hour if they could, just to make extra money. . . . And of course the unions would say no, you’ve to stop at twelve.” At the end of the day, however, “young sisters were sewing and they always quit at quarter to the hour and they would clean up their machine, they’d go to the washroom and put on their makeup and clean their hair up and [get] ready to go home and I’d try to make them work until at least five to. Well, they brought a grievance against me and they won [laughs]. So that’s all right. It was the boss wanted the machinery and the space used up for the most pieces they can get.”50 Even with this victory, the ILGWU and the women at GWG were still treated like second-class workers. When the union attempted to bargain for better wages or for benefits like a pension, the employer replied that the women had husbands to support them, so benefits were unnecessary.51
Working-Class Aspirations

Anne Ozipko arrived in Canada along with the rest of her family in 1930, when she was three years old. She moved to Edmonton on her own in 1943 and found work at the Royal Alexandra Hospital, “in the kitchen setting up trays and serving trays to the patients. And sweeping the floors, mopping the floors on [the] maternity ward.” By the 1940s and 1950s, courtship and recreation for the urban working class took place in public and often without family chaperones. Anne and her women friends would often go to the Ukrainian hall to attend concerts, eat, or dance to live bands. Her future husband worked during the day at Woodland Dairies and played in a band at night. “They played polkas, waltzes, square dances, fox trots. . . . My husband played the violin, and he played drums. Two of his brothers played as well in the same band. One played banjo and one played guitar.” She first met her husband after one of these evening dances when she and a friend, along with other people from the dance, went to the Puritan Cafe to cool down and socialize before heading back to work.52

As the 1940s and 1950s progressed, working-class people and families developed aspirations similar to those of the middle class. Most important were cars and homes. By 1951, more than 250,000 motor vehicles were registered in Alberta: one for every four people. This was a higher rate of vehicle ownership than in many other parts of Canada.53 Of course, for many
working-class families, owning a car was still an unreachable goal, but as incomes grew faster than the cost of cars, more and more families were able to afford at least a used car.

Even more marked was the boom in housing that began after the war. By 1951, 144,000 lots had been opened up for new homes. The houses were around twelve hundred square feet and were often bungalows. Workers in slaughterhouses, railways, and oil and chemical plants began earning enough to buy a home, and working-class families began to populate the new suburbs of Calgary and Edmonton, as well as smaller cities. These new working-class neighbourhoods were further away from work and from any form of public transit, forcing workers to also invest in a car.

Even so, home ownership came only after a time. Before owning a home, many people had to find a place to rent, and that could be difficult. When Lorne and Agnes Wiley moved to Medicine Hat to work as teachers in 1952, Lorne made $2,700 a year and Agnes earned between $2,000 and $2,400. Despite a respectable combined income, they found few affordable suites; they lived first in a two-room basement apartment and later in an upstairs suite in a house.

Social Welfare

There were, of course, some who could not work, among them the elderly. In 1930, the federal government introduced a shared federal-provincial pension program for people over the age of seventy with an annual income under $125. The maximum that a destitute old person could receive was $20 a month, but most provinces paid less. Alberta agreed to match the federal contribution, so its destitute elderly did receive $20 a month. During the war, the maximum federal pension was raised to $25 a month. In 1942, the Alberta government began supplementing the means-tested pension by $5 a month, raising the supplement to $10 a month by 1950. This policy led the way in Canada. Over the same decade, societies of elderly people, led by prairie feminist Violet McNaughton, began petitioning the federal government for a universal pension without a means test. They were joined by the national labour organizations and other national groups. Finally, in 1951, a universal pension for people over seventy was instituted at $40 a month, an “outrageous pittance” according to the Canadian Congress of Labour. The $10 supplement in Alberta helped, but not a lot.

However small their pensions in the 1950s, the elderly were among the best served by social programs in the province. In addition to their pensions, after 1947 the province provided them with free hospital care and other medical treatment. Municipalities that provided care for the elderly soon also received half the cost of care from the province.

Two other federal programs significantly affected Alberta’s working families in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1940, national Unemployment Insurance (UI), a long-time union demand, was finally introduced, but with significant restrictions on eligibility. As with so much labour and employment legislation, farm workers and domestics were excluded, along with fishers, forestry workers, and other seasonal workers. Other workers who had worked for 180 days in the previous two years and were “capable and available for work” were eligible. The program administrators decided, curiously, that married women were neither capable nor available for
work and excluded them from 1950 to 1957. Payouts were based on employment wages, so the more poorly paid received less. Again, this disproportionately hurt women workers. Nevertheless, UI offered real protections for many workers: even in the post-1947 boom in Alberta, many workers who lost their jobs could now rely temporarily on the program to help them make ends meet until they found their next job.58

The second federal program, the family allowance, was designed in large part to weaken unions and remove women from the workforce. Introduced in 1945, the allowance provided mothers from five to eight dollars a month per child for their first four children, with less for each additional child. It served two special functions. First, because it provided a supplement to families based on the number of young children they had, it allowed employers to argue that they only needed to pay a wage that supported a male worker, and not the worker’s wife and children. The second function was to give married women some financial incentive not to seek paid work. With the monthly cheques made out to the mothers, the family allowance effectively became a little wage for mothers independent of their husband’s wages and thus, at least in theory, theirs alone to spend. To emphasize the point that the government wanted married women at home, the family allowance was coupled with large reductions in the wartime income tax deductions available to men whose wives worked.59 The allowance made a difference for poor families, but the government never raised the payouts, and by the end of the 1950s, if not earlier, it was no competition for a good job.

The provision of medical services remained in private hands throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Just after the war, the provincial government made available some funding to municipalities that instituted local hospital insurance schemes. Under the act, if 60 percent of the electorate in a municipality agreed to set up a local, user-pay medical insurance plan, then the province would pay for half the cost of all hospitalizations over and above a one-dollar flat fee that had to be paid by the patient (allegedly to prevent people from abusing the system).60 It was not a particularly generous plan, and it placed health care costs on either the local governments (which could not rely on oil or liquor revenue like the province could) or the patient. However, the federal Hospital Insurance and Diagnostic Services Act of 1957 offered provinces significant grants in return for provinces providing free hospital care. Premier Manning and the Social Credit government resisted both this interference with provincial responsibilities and the removal of user-pay provisions, choosing to endure reductions in the province’s federal hospital insurance grant rather than get rid of “co-insurance” payments by hospital patients. In the 1960s, these would double to $2.00 a day for active patients and increase to $1.50 for chronic patients.61

**Postwar Labour Law and Organizing**

At war’s end, Alberta workers could organize and operate unions of either a general or craft-specific nature with some security. In 1945, the Alberta Federation of Labour congratulated the Social Credit government as “leaders in social legislation.” But not everyone was satisfied: the Communists demanded significant pro-labour changes, while the Canadian Manufacturers Association continually accused the government of
giving too much to workers. Neither PC 1003 nor the Alberta legislation that followed, however, were designed to encourage unionization. In both cases, the purpose of the legislation was to limit or even prevent workplace conflicts that would interfere with production.

By according unions certain legal rights, the legislation effectively forced unions to buy into the new regime of bureaucratized organizing and bargaining. Along with creating opportunities for unions to secure recognition and challenge unfair anti-union activities by employers, the legislation created a system to decertify unions and entrenched the view that a variety of labour practices were unfair, significantly restricting the scope of union activities. For instance, the legislation made unions liable for wildcat strikes during the life of a collective agreement. Conflicts over the enforcement and application of a contract had to be handled through a grievance procedure and eventually arbitration; workers could not simply put down their tools on the spot in an effort to get immediate relief. If they did, the employer could use the courts to get injunctions that might lead to fines against the union and its leaders, and to imprisonment of leaders. Even when an agreement had ended, workers could not strike if an employer had requested conciliation or arbitration in an effort to get ready for a possible strike, at least until the board of conciliation or arbitration had issued a report. The delay gave many employers the opportunity to stockpile goods and sit out a strike. Throughout the war, Alberta legislation allowed ad hoc groups or employee associations — that is, company unions — to be legitimate workers’ representatives in collective bargaining.
The government’s anti-union bias became crystal clear in 1947 as labour legislation was amended again. That year, the government consolidated its employment and labour legislation into one law, the *Alberta Labour Act*. The government’s desire to limit the growth of unions was evidenced in a provision that certification of a union required not just a majority of those voting, as in other provinces, but a majority of all workers in the bargaining unit. The act also gave the Board of Industrial Relations the right to more oversight of the certification process. The legislation continued to allow company unions and employer-friendly worker organizations.63

Following a major strike at Medalta Potteries in Medicine Hat, the minister of Labour successfully sought further changes to the *Labour Act* in 1948, imposing new burdens on unions and their officers that made the legislation patently anti-union rather than just pro–industrial peace. Some changes superficially achieved balance: for example, unions and employees would join employers in being liable to penalties should they refuse to bargain collectively or to live up to the conditions of an agreement in force. But even getting a union organized became more difficult. The 1947 act had barred employers from interfering in efforts to organize a trade union — for example, by firing activists. Now, however, organizers could only organize on the work site during work hours with employer consent. Conversations encouraging people to join a union occur mainly on the job, so this legislative change undermined earlier protection from firing given to organizers.

New procedures were also introduced for strikes and lockouts. The minister could refer any strike or lockout to a judge to determine its legality. Penalties against unions were draconian, while employers faced a tap on the wrist. If a strike was declared illegal, any collective agreement in force was immediately declared null and void, though the minister of Labour had the discretion to reinstate the collective agreement once the strike ended. Once the collective agreement was null and void, protections in the agreement regarding hiring, firing, promoting, or demoting employees were likewise nullified, and the employer could fire or otherwise punish strikers. By contrast, when a lockout was declared illegal, the employer had three days to let the workers back. After that point, it *could* face a fine of up to a dollar a day for each locked-out employee while the lockout persisted.64

The Canadian Congress of Labour denounced the 1948 amendments for weakening workers’ rights, but Alberta Federation of Labour secretary Carl Berg defended the government.65 A year later, though, the AFL responded to the amendments by using twisted logic to support limits on the right to strike. Since the legislation made striking precarious for unions, the AFL asked that when disputes went to arbitration, the arbitrators’ award be binding. The AFL was prepared to give up any right to strike in exchange for compulsory binding arbitration. Employers, generally favourable toward the act, did not want to be bound by arbitrators’ decisions and argued against any such amendment. The Manning government supported the employer view.66 In fact, when Norman Bezanson started organizing for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers in 1955, he encountered a system that supported employers at every turn:
Employers committed what would even under weak legislation be considered unfair labour practices, but you had to prove beyond any kind of a doubt that this had been done, and that was often almost impossible to do. So personally, I got to the point that if I was making an application to certify, before I took that in to the Labour Relations Board, I'd take a letter to the employer telling him that this was being done. So there was none of this, “Well, I didn’t know this happened when I fired so many people. I didn’t know there was a union on the scene.” And if a campaign was going to be a lengthy one, sometime early in the campaign I’d notify the employer. This may seem very stupid to many committed trade unionists, but I know it saved a number of people from being fired.67

In some instances, though, organizing proved relatively easy. Tets Kitaguchi worked for Lime Works in Coleman following the war. Many of his fellow workers were new immigrants from Yugoslavia, but the foreman was a much earlier Balkan immigrant who controlled the workers with threats of deportation. One worker approached Kitaguchi for help, and he in turn met with Jack Evans of the Chemical Workers Union. As Kitaguchi recalls:

[Evans] came to visit us and said, “You want a union?” I said, “Yeah, these fellows here want a union. They want better living conditions.” “Yeah, I can see that right now, the minute I come in here I was wondering what those shacks were.” I said, “They’re homes.” It was all company owned. Jack said, “You’ve got to have 51 percent to sign up to get a union in here.” So I said, “Okay.” I had a problem there, because these people come from Croatia, Bosnia, and that has a history of people that never got along for years. . . . But we managed to sign everybody but two of them. We still needed the 51 percent for next morning. Jack was coming back to get this signed petition. During the night I said, “We gotta get hold of those two guys somehow.” Almost midnight I went to their home and said, “You gotta sign this.” He was a real grump. He wouldn’t sign anything. Young fellow and his wife. But he finally signed it. I guess that bothered him for a couple of days at work. One night at work, he didn’t like me at all, he was going to clobber me with an iron pipe. But I had a friend with a black belt behind me, grabbed him and threw him against the wall. Kinda shook him out and straightened him out a bit. He said, “We’re not going to get anywhere, you just make trouble for us.” “Never mind,” I said, “we’ll find out what’s going to happen.” So he signed it, we got a union.68

Other organizing efforts faced a variety of impediments, including the craft unions’ desire for respectability. Neil Reimer kept office hours in downtown Edmonton after his arrival in the city in 1951 because “in those days the people came downtown to shop on Saturday. The men would drive their wives to the stores. It might take all morning, so many of them came up to my office and we would talk union.” One morning, Ole Nelson Wigger, a powerhouse engineer from McGavin’s Bakery, came to the office and indicated that the company’s maintenance workers wanted a union. Wigger asked Reimer to come to the back of the bakery, and Wigger introduced him to the men. The bakery had been organized by the Bakers and Confectioners Union, but the maintenance men had been left out. Reimer
learned “that [the] John Howard [Society] had placed them there. They all had records of some kind.” The bakers’ union did not want a group of ex-convicts in its local. So the maintenance workers became members of the Oil Workers International Union (OWIU) instead.

Certification came quickly, and a collective agreement had to be negotiated. At first the bakery workers wanted Reimer to negotiate for them, but he refused, arguing that some of them had to join the negotiating committee for their own collective agreement. “So two of them decided they would come with me,” said Reimer. “I never realized how important that was.” By directly involving them in that first negotiation, Reimer showed that he was not another person who saw these workers as people requiring assistance or charity; rather, he was helping them assert their own rights. Interestingly, management was afraid of these ex-convicts. “It only took us a couple hours to negotiate a whole new agreement, because the employer was afraid of them.”

In some of the bigger plants, Reimer’s greatest competition came from other unionists with different politics. The labour legislation allowed employers to voluntarily recognize unions or employee associations for their workers. Inevitably, these associations, even company unions, would be weak. They might secure minor advances for the workers, but their most important role was to keep more radical unions out. When he attempted to organize Building Products, a plant that made shingles and other asphalt products with oil provided from the Imperial Oil refinery, Reimer was “handing out leaflets in front and Carl Berg came out the front door and he waved a piece of paper and told the guys they had a collective agreement.” Berg had organized the company, not the workers: without consulting the workers, he had negotiated a collective agreement that the company would like. But at both Building Products and Husky Oil, Reimer persevered to organize the workers, comparing for them their union’s sweetheart deals with what workers at other plants organized by the OWIU were getting. Finally, he persuaded workers in both plants to switch to the OWIU.

Being organized was no guarantee of continued success. In 1954, beer parlour and other hotel workers across the province won a conciliation report recommendation that Alberta Hotel Association (AHA)
members reduce the workers’ work week to forty hours without a reduction in pay. The AHA refused, and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union business agent led the workers in a legal strike. They shut down hotels in Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat. In response, the AHA brought in scabs who crossed the picket lines. When picketers at one site tried to prevent their replacements from crossing, they were charged with assault. At that point, the AHA effectively won: their new employees faced no effective interference by the strikers, and thus the parlours stayed open. When the strike ended, the employers refused to rehire strikers: the strike-breakers kept their jobs and the union was broken. In Edmonton alone, the union lost seventeen hotels, and seven to eight hundred workers lost their jobs.71

In the aftermath of this loss, Doug Tomlinson — once an organizer and by now working in a Legion — and others tried to rebuild the union. He continued to face strong opposition from the employers:

The Hotelman’s Association and the rotten bunch that they are, they just held an iron grip. . . . I became an organizer. . . . But we couldn’t get an agreement. [The association] brought a lawyer by the name of Dave Ross in. As soon as we organized, he’d come in there and decimate the staff. The Board of Industrial Relations was useless. [It] was a rubber stamp for the hotelmen. . . . We fought and organized and won and lost and lost and lost certifications. When we did get certified, [we] couldn’t get an agreement. There was no unity in the union. “Oh, they’re a bunch of Reds you know, leave them on their own.”72

UNION POLITICS: THE MERGER OF THE AFL AND IFLA

In 1939, the Alberta Federation of Labour, in line with the Trades and Labour Congress, expelled industrial unions associated with the American Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The following year, the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) formed as an industrial federation representing Canada’s CIO unions and unions that were former members of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour. Alberta locals of CCL unions came together in local councils in both Calgary and Edmonton during the war and later worked together in a planning council. Finally, in 1949, they formed the Industrial Federation of Labour of Alberta (IFLA) as a union central. Alberta’s CCL unions at the time included the United Mine Workers of America, the United Packinghouse Workers of America, the Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (Mine Mill), and the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees. But there were strains within the fledgling IFLA. Should they follow the CCL and endorse the CCF politically, or should they follow the suggestion of Mine Mill and endorse the Communist Party? In a tense showdown that led to a brief walkout from the founding convention by Mine Mill delegates, the IFLA decided by a one-vote margin to support the CCF. By the end of the year, the CCL had expelled Mine Mill nationally, and the IFLA had moved back closer to the AFL.73

Within union politics, the most important event of the 1950s was the unification of the rival federations. Nationally, the TLC and the CCL united in 1956 to form the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Not long after, the AFL and the IFLA came together in a reformulated AFL. The new AFL was to be affiliated with the CLC,
but it took a while for the AFL to break conservative habits from the Social Credit period. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, many AFL leaders were members or sympathizers of the Social Credit party, or at least accommodating to it in an effort to gain some traction or advantage. But their efforts yielded nothing of value to working people. Neil Reimer remembered:

When the federation had a convention, [the provincial Department of Labour] would shut down the offices and everyone would come to the convention. They used to have it at a building on 100th Ave., the Lodge Building . . . They all sat in the front row. I got on the floor and said, “It looks to me this is like what Caesar had, whether they’ll turn their thumbs down or whether they’ll [put] their thumbs up.” 74

Government interference was generally even more direct. Someone from the Department of Labour — often the deputy minister, the highest ranking bureaucrat — would be on the resolutions committee for the convention, effectively vetoing resolutions before the convention delegates could even vote.

The merger of the AFL and IFLA did not initially change these habits. On the October 1957 weekend of the founding convention, Donald Macdonald, the secretary-treasurer of the newly founded CLC, was in town, yet the AFL invited Premier Manning to give the address at the opening banquet. Macdonald, not surprisingly, declined to attend the banquet, though he attended the convention itself. In his profoundly conservative speech at the banquet, Manning commented that in Alberta there was a horn of plenty from which

everyone could receive a fair share; Alberta workers received what they deserved and it was inappropriate to ask for more.

The next morning, Reimer, speaking to a resolution, commented: “I come from the farm. One time we had a sow that had thirteen piglets and twelve tits. . . . We’re that thirteenth piglet, as far as Manning is concerned.”75 Many delegates chastised Reimer: “You can’t talk that way in Alberta . . . . They [the government] won’t do you any favours.” Reimer replied, “I’m not getting any anyways.”76

THE REDS

Unsurprisingly, many labour organizers and militants were leftists. In the 1940s and 1950s, many on the left remained Communists or Communist sympathizers, but within the unions, the Communists were always a minority.

For some, especially Social Crediters, all unionists and leftists were communists. In 1951, two cabinet ministers raised the communist bogeyman. First, Municipal Affairs Minister C.F. Gerhart told the Canadian Manufacturers Association that there were between five and six hundred communist spies among Alberta’s workers. He urged employers to scrutinize job applicants more closely, to fingerprint all employees, and to report suspicious behaviour to the RCMP. Later that year, Minister of Labour J.L. Robinson commented that communists intended “to mislead rather than lead, the workers. Their purpose is to use and seduce their fellow-travellers in the CCF and their purpose is finally to confuse and befuddle everyone.”77 The newsletter The Canadian Social Crediter in 1955 described the platform of the CCF (the forerunner to the NDP) as “Communism . . . in Short Pants” and asserted that “one does not have to have a Communist membership card to follow the communist line.”78 In his weekly radio show and in other places, Premier Manning thundered against communists and called for vigilance: “There is happening in this world today a whole chain of events that is paving the way for the ultimate world government of the Anti-Christ and his ruthless communististic dictatorship.”79 Nationally, the federal government took an active role in purging the civil service of communists, communist sympathizers, and others, such as gays, whom only a distorted logic linked with communism.80

The defection of Igor Gouzenko, a Soviet embassy employee in Ottawa, and his revelation of Soviet spies in Canada and beyond marked the first of a series of anti-communist spectacles in the postwar period. Ben Swankey, a prominent Edmonton communist, was interviewed by an Edmonton Journal reporter when Gouzenko’s defection and claims were revealed, several months after the actual defection:

The Edmonton Journal came to me and said, “Were you involved with Gouzenko?” Of course I said no. I didn’t know anything about Gouzenko at that time. So they had a big article in the Journal: “Swankey denies any support or connection with Gouzenko.” So people would say, “Well, it might be true or it might not be true. They must’ve asked the question for a reason.”81

Such public exposure had serious ramifications. Swankey noted, “The children of communists were harassed in school, which is a terrible thing. Even in the public school, never mind high school. They were harassed because their parents were communists.”82
This public exposure was paralleled by intensive RCMP surveillance of suspected communists, a continuation of the surveillance that had begun long before the war and never stopped. When Patrick Lenihan was released from internment, he remained a member of the Labour Progressive Party (LPP), the party that grew out of the reorganization of the Communist Party after it was banned by the government in 1941. The LPP assigned Lenihan to organize in the Calgary city unions. Soon after he started in the Calgary street-railway shops, he was visited on the job by RCMP officers:

They said, “Look, Pat, we want to talk to you. We have information that you are back in the Communist movement and that you are in charge of trade union work. You know you’re not supposed to do this. You could be interned again.”

I knew they wouldn’t answer me, but I asked, “Where did you get your information? I’m working here like a working man and that’s all and I’m minding my own business.”

“Well, we came down to let you know that we know what’s going on. Goodbye.”

The public nature of the interview was aimed at identifying him as a problem to the other workers on the shop floor as well as to intimidate him directly. In this case, they did not succeed on either score. The surveillance and harassment only intensified after the war. After Walter Makowecki’s farmer father opened a new account at the Bank of Montreal in Vegreville:

the RCMP were in our yard. “How’s things? We were in the neighbourhood, thought we’d drop in. You’re a newcomer here. How are things going? Do you know about this neighbour has some kind of trouble with his wife?” Dad said, “I don’t know, I’m new here.”

“Oh yeah, by the way, why did you change the spelling of your name [from cki to ski]?” . . . Dad said, “That’s to accommodate you Englishmen.” It happened over and over again.

When Walter and others bought property on Gordon’s Lake to set up a summer camp for the Association of United Ukrainian Canadians, a Soviet-sympathetic Ukrainian association, the RCMP returned to the farm, asking many questions about the family’s farms and incomes. And the RCMP went beyond interviewing individuals whose loyalty to Canada they suspected. Swankey comments, “What the RCMP would do where I lived, they went to see all my neighbours and said, ‘You’ve got a very dangerous man living here, did you know that? You’d better be careful what you talk about to him. If he says anything that’s wrong, let us know.’”

Labour officialdom, national and provincial, cooperated with the RCMP spies. Jack Phillips describes one of the key early moments in the purges:

Come 1950 we had the convention of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada meeting in Montreal. That was where the cold war in the labour movement was officially launched. Don Guys [from Lethbridge] and I were refused admittance to the convention. I forget the number, but a number of other prominent trade unionists were also refused admittance. . . . “You just can’t come in, you’re communists.” There
was no legislation on the books of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. But they assumed that there was, or they assumed they could act as if there were sufficient policy resolutions to justify what they were doing. . . . I remember the red squad walking up and down in the aisles. I can remember Johnny Hines getting up and saying something that got him thrown out. He pointed out that there was somebody on the floor from the American FBI. Whether it was true or not, I don’t know, but he said so. At any rate, Don Guys and I decided that we would go before the executive of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. We came into this room. Claude Jodoin was presiding; he was the president. There were all sorts of documents on the table. They were petitions. We weren’t allowed to look at them. Petitions from members of the rank and file of the union asking that we be kicked out because we were communists. They had a minority support, but they had some support. . . . They knew more about my background than I did. I figured it out that the RCMP had filled them in. . . . Jodoin . . . looked at me and said, “Mr. Phillips, you work for Joe Stalin.” I said, “No, I’m working for peace.” He said, “Don’t give me your propaganda.” I just listened to him without saying a word after that. At the end of it we had our hearing. Then they sent a chap by the name of Carl Berg out here [to Vancouver] to take over the union.87

Doug Tomlinson recalls how the Edmonton business agent for the hotel union in the early 1950s “went into a rampager. In fact he reminded me of Goebbels. He’d work himself up into such a fury at union meetings.” In 1954, the year of the disastrous strike, Tomlinson “got put on trial in the union for being a Red. They removed me from the executive.” As part of this, “I got expelled from the Edmonton District Labour Council for being a Red. Carl Berg did it. Old Carl Berg, the reactionary.”88 Berg had graduated from being a One Big Union supporter to a left Labourite before becoming a well-paid union leader and Social Credit apologist, an embodiment of the shift to conservatism in Alberta labour circles from the end of the First World War to the end of World War II.

Although many communists were removed from leadership ranks in unions, not all were. Patrick Lenihan, for example, remained in leadership positions in Calgary and then nationally in the public employee unions throughout the period. At the same time, he never lost his personal feelings of sympathy for communist ideals. Fortunately, for him, he had been purged from the party itself in 1945 because of his drinking problems, allowing him to escape the union purges of communists in the postwar period.

Employers also engaged in purges. Many required employees to fill out security questionnaires that asked them about their political persuasion, their church, whether they had ever been union members, and the like.89 The purpose was to root out potential troublemakers, which might include anyone who favoured a more equitable division of resources or having a union in the workplace.

The anti-communist rhetoric was sometimes used in union contests as well. In the aforementioned AFL/TL.C battles with IFLA/CCL unions to represent workers, the red-baiting temptation often cropped up. For example, when Neil Reimer was trying to organize the Celanese plant in Edmonton for the OWIU, he was competing against the International Chemical Workers
(ICW). In an effort to swing the vote their way, the ICW released a pamphlet calling the OWIU a communist union. Reimer, later the head of the Alberta NDP, was no communist, but would not dignify the accusations with a rebuttal. Instead, he said, “We don’t call names, we’re not against things. Here is what we’re for.” Reimer believes that this approach swayed many workers: “To be called communists was just something they weren’t going to accept. So they voted for us more against them.”

Anti-communism was a destructive force not because the communists had all the answers or because the extremely authoritarian Soviet Union was an attractive model for workers. Instead, its destructive character came in the closing down of discussion about workers’ rights, which communists raised consistently, as did many social democrats like Reimer. The desire for respectability on the part of some unionists and the fear of being tarred as communists too often led to them becoming apologists for capitalist greed rather than defenders of workers’ interests. While the IFLA was somewhat better than the AFL in this regard, it also purged communists and showed undeserved respect to the anti-labour premier. For example, after being invited to a state dinner in 1952 in honour of the British king and queen, the IFLA president and secretary-treasurer thanked the premier for inviting them, claiming that it showed that “your government recognizes this labour organization as a responsible, loyal and essential part of our society.”

Despite the purges, Communists remained active and communist ideas continued to be brought up in
union strategy, even if from a minority position. Dave Werlin recalls being hired by the City of Calgary in the late 1950s:

First day I started, a fellow by the name of Gordie Mitchell, who was the shop steward, comes up to me and says, “Hey, you have to join the union.” I had no problem with that. My parents had been socialists and I understood a little bit about it. I said, “That’s fine, but I have no money.” He said, “Don’t worry about it. The initiation fee is a dollar; they’ll take it off your pay cheque.” Fine, I signed up.

When he got to his first meeting, he realized they were right in the middle of negotiating a new contract. Lenihan had reached an agreement with the employer, but at the meeting he faced off against Art Roberts, who argued that they could get more from the city. When the offer came to a vote, the majority voted it down. At the end of the meeting, Werlin went and sat down beside Roberts:

I said, “You kind of remind me of my dad. He used to talk like you do.” I said, “He was in the farmers’ union. But I can remember whenever he talked like that people used to call him a communist.” Art Roberts says, “And what the hell’s the matter with that?”

As Alberta working people marched off to war from 1939 to 1945 or into jobs in an economy mobilized above all for the war effort, most had dreams of a postwar era from which both the destitution of the Depression and the horrors of war would be eradicated. Many never came back from the battlefields to see whether such hopes would be realized. For many who did, the new oil wealth of the province delivered more economic prosperity than they had ever known. But that wealth was poorly distributed, and the Social Credit government, which had come to power in 1935 with radical-sounding promises, had become a shameful tool of the bosses. The trade union movement might have been expected to serve as a fighting force against both employers and the government that kept workers from getting their share of the province’s new wealth. Some unions, particularly those in the IFLA, did mobilize workers and achieve some victories. But the pre-1956 AFL had lost its status as a fighting force and behaved much of the time like an extension of the Social Credit government. The “labour statesmen” in charge of the AFL ignored the anti-union, anti-worker character of the province’s labour law and its enforcement, and turned their fire on workers and unions that did demand better wages and working conditions for workers. The merger would gradually change that as the industrial unions and unions of public servants became the AFL’s strongest voice in the period after 1960. While the Cold War gave Social Credit and conservatives within the labour movement alike an opportunity to add reds and radicals to rats on Alberta’s list of eradicable pests, many Alberta working people struggled to retain a radical purpose for their unions and fought for a better deal for their families and communities.