Pipefitter Jack Hubler’s experiences in 1969 encapsulate the two sides of the typical male Alberta worker’s narrative during the on-and-off energy boom of the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, the construction companies, faced with labour shortages and huge contracts that they did not want to see interrupted, made significant short-term concessions to the trades on wages and benefits. On the other hand, in their search for profits, they organized the work process in such a way that accidents were inevitable and plentiful.

The typical female worker’s narrative was somewhat different. Women workers, whose numbers jumped from 26.1 percent of the provincial labour force in 1961 to 42.2 percent in 1981, were rarely well paid, and while they were less likely to die on the job, they faced gruelling pressures. Daycare worker Susan Keeley described her work at a private daycare in Calgary in the early 1970s: “My first job was a non-union private daycare centre, horrible conditions. I actually got fired after six weeks because I complained about the conditions. The boss overheard me, so I was out the door. I was
basically responsible for ten infants from the age of six weeks to eighteen months, by myself. If I needed a break there was nobody to go in and watch them when I left. Any time that I would take a break, we’d have to leave the door open and hope we’d hear if there was a problem.” Fortunately for Keeley, her next job was with a non-profit City of Calgary daycare, where both she and the children she cared for benefited from the City of Calgary’s socially responsible attitude to child care, and where she was a member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, thanks to being a city employee. Most women workers were less fortunate, enjoying neither a socially responsible employer nor a union to protect their interests.

This chapter attempts to capture various narratives, both male and female, of workers’ lives in Alberta from 1960 to 1980. It was a period of great prosperity overall in the province, but prosperity poorly shared between employers and workers, men and women, urban and rural residents, the employed and the unemployed; nor was it shared with the working class generally. During this period, the population of Alberta almost doubled, jumping from 1,265,572 in 1960 to 2,094,212 in 1980. Though fertility rates were falling, Alberta’s energy economy benefited from migration to the province of mainly young workers, both from other provinces and other countries. The result was a province where the median age in 1971 was 24.9, the lowest of any Canadian province, and where there were 5.1 children under the age of 15 years for every 10 people in the 15- to 64-year age group. A young workforce with no memories of the Great Depression or World War II had different attitudes than their parents. Though Alberta remained in the main a conservative province with conservative governments, the younger generation absorbed many of the values of its counterparts throughout North America and western Europe. In part, that simply meant an embrace of the consumerism that the media trumpeted in ever-more sophisticated ways as the only way to have a happy life. But it also meant the counter-movement of 1960s and 1970s protest values, which included feminism, anti-racism, acceptance of sexual difference, environmentalism, and opposition to American imperialism. Governments, employers, and the trade union movement alike attempted to co-opt
youth by harnessing their anti-authoritarianism in ways that benefited entrenched interests. However, although only cautiously at first, the labour movement blended the issues of the younger generation with labour’s earlier equality-seeking goals. In the Alberta Federation of Labour and in many unions, that meant a stronger embrace of the human rights orientation of youth groups and a greater focus on non-wage issues, both in collective bargaining and in political life.

Some of the changes that occurred in the workforce and in the labour movement in Alberta during these two decades reflected changes that were occurring nationally. Beginning in 1962, the federal government, anticipating labour shortages and recognizing that western Europeans were less eager to migrate to Canada now that their own economies had fully recovered from wartime ruin, began to allow non-Europeans to immigrate to Canada. Whereas almost all immigrants arriving in 1960 had European origins, half of those arriving in 1970 came from Asia, South America, or the Caribbean. The workforce became more polyglot. It also became more unionized, with 37.2 percent of all non-agricultural workers represented by a trade union in 1980 compared to only 32.3 percent in 1960. Growing unionization in the public sector was bringing more women into the labour movement, but in 1977, 47 percent of male workers were unionized compared to only 10 percent of women.

Increased nationalism in Canada was reflected in the trade union movement. In 1960, about 72 percent of unionized workers were enrolled in unions headquartered in the United States. By 1980, that figure had dropped to just under 50 percent. Breakaways from so-called international unions — that is, American unions with Canadian sections — accounted for some of the decline. The Communications Workers of Canada founded in 1972, the Canadian Paperworkers Union and the Brewery Workers Union in 1974, and the Energy and Chemical Workers Union in 1980 were new unions with significant memberships in Alberta that resulted from the Canadian sections of international unions cutting their umbilical cord from the American sections. But it was the major unions that represented public sector workers and were under Canadian control that accounted for most of the Canadianization occurring in the Canadian trade union movement.

**THE GROWTH OF THE STATE AND PUBLIC WORKERS’ MILITANCY**

The growth of the state in Alberta at all levels reflected the demands of a young population for better services and of industry for subsidies of every kind. Though the Social Credit government, which remained in office until 1971, often gave in reluctantly to demands from below for additional services and attempted to provide such services in ways that penalized low-income Albertans, it could not fully hold back the tide. Neither could the Progressive Conservative government led by Peter Lougheed, which defeated Social Credit in 1971 after that party had held office for thirty-six uninterrupted years, but which shared many of its predecessor’s social values. Indeed, Lougheed, while uninterested in using the state to redistribute wealth among Albertans, did see a positive role for the state in encouraging economic diversification. Although his overreliance on subsidies to companies that created jobs in the province — at least in the short term — helped to frustrate
his diversification aims, Lougheed did preside over a continued growth in state employment.10

The government wanted docile employees, but the workers often proved to have their own ideas. Changing attitudes among civil servants and nurses indicate the evolution that occurred from 1960 to 1980. In 1960, the civil service was still a compact collection of appointees whom the government’s director of personnel regarded as mainly friends and relatives of government officials: the province had yet to hire a social worker with a social work degree as opposed to a Social Credit membership card.11 Unsurprisingly, the Alberta Federation of Labor (AFL) regarded the Civil Service Association (CSA) — the representative of these workers who owed their positions to nepotism and a 1958 AFL dropout — not only as a company union but also as virtually a mouthpiece for the government and its anti-labour policies. In 1968, AFL president Roy Jamha accused “the state-controlled Civil Service Association” of spearheading an organization of company unions in the province.12 The CSA included both managers and workers, and throughout the 1960s, remained largely under management control.

Six years later, however, the CSA was an affiliate of the AFL, and its members had staged their first strikes ever. A formal hiring process initiated in 1959, as well as extensive hirings throughout the civil service, had gradually turned the old Social Credit hires into an insignificant minority relative to the young, better-educated, and more demanding workers who filled the new government employee ranks. In 1969, Social Credit, responding to other provinces having granted their direct employees union rights, rewrote the Public Service Act to give the CSA bargaining rights as opposed to simply advisory rights. But, in line with Social Credit labour legislation generally, the new act gave the minister of Labour the right to determine what issues were negotiable and gave the cabinet, not an arbitrator, the right to impose an agreement if the two sides could not find a consensus.13

The members of the CSA chafed under such a pseudo–collective-bargaining regime, and in 1972, they elected T.W. (Bill) Broad as their leader. Broad, a machinist, had been a union activist in both Britain and Canada. He had joined the public service in Alberta as a NAIT instructor in the early 1960s and was not impressed with the cozy relationship between the CSA and the government. Broad insisted that the new Conservative government remove management figures from the CSA and provide government workers with the same rights as unionized private sector workers.14 In 1974, for the first time, provincial workers went on strike to back up their demands. In the spring, three hundred Alberta Liquor Control Board workers hit the bricks for increased wages; in October, 12,500 civil servants struck for two days, causing the government, which had attempted to unilaterally impose a wage settlement, to negotiate with the union. In 1976, the CSA shed the last remnants of its company union past, changing its name to the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) and removing its registration under the Societies Act to register as an unincorporated union. At a founding convention in Edmonton in November, the new AUPE chose Bill Broad as its first leader.

The Alberta government, unhappy with the new militancy of some of its employees, moved to limit the ability of their unions to represent them. The 1977 Public Service Employee Relations Act (PSERA) created

![Bill Broad, the first president of AUPE. Courtesy of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees.](image)
a Public Sector Employees Relations Board, which was empowered to serve as a counterpart for provincial employees to the Alberta Labour Relations Board. But the act banned strikes in favour of arbitration and removed from the scope of arbitration such issues as work organization, promotion, training, and termination of employment. The legislation covered not only direct employees of the state but also the teaching staff of universities and colleges. Professors were barred from following the lead of their counterparts in other provinces who had unionized under the Labour Act and were limited instead to representation under the Universities Act and the Colleges Act. While the International Labour Organization ruled that the wholesale ban on striking violated the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, which Canada had signed, the Lougheed government proved immoveable.15

Although such a ban might have been respected by the Depression-born workers of the Social Credit era, it was treated with contempt by the members of AUPE, a union that represented about forty-one thousand workers in 1980. Faced that year with rampant inflation and an employer determined not to let public sector wage settlements match those in an overheated provincial private sector, three thousand government employees, mainly corrections workers, struck for almost a month in a successful effort to get the government to concede better wages.16 Corrections worker David William Potter recalled: “We went into the strike very much knowing that we were in a strike that was illegal. We more or less said, to hell with it. Illegal or not, we’re not paid...
properly, not taken care of properly, so we’re in it for the long haul. We defied it.” Potter and fellow guard Walter Watt noted that the strike yielded not only better wages for the corrections workers but also the appointment of a labour relations coordinator, to whom the guards could bring complaints about the ways in which prisons and juvenile homes were organized. The managers, they noted, often had no experience as guards and did a poor job of classifying prisoners, with grave consequences for the guards.

About half the AUPE members in 1980 were women, but the union was largely led and staffed by men in the early years. That was not the case with the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA), and the transformation of attitudes among nurses between 1960 and 1980 was even more dramatic than the transformation among the CSA/AUPE members. Despite their training and responsibilities, nurses, like many other women workers in 1960, were not regarded as either real workers or professionals. Their wages were determined by their employers, though the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses (AARN), their sole organization, attempted to have an impact on nurses’ pay and working conditions through its efforts to regulate membership in the profession. Despite such efforts, the wages of Alberta nurses lagged behind those in several other provinces.

Working conditions in the pre-union period were terrible. Medicine Hat nurse Barb Charles, a founding member of the UNA, recalls:

You had to work thirteen shifts in a row to get a weekend off. There was no such thing as overtime. If you missed your break, you missed your break. Days off were few and far between. You would know your schedule one week or two weeks ahead of time. If you wanted to plan going to a wedding or anything, it just didn’t happen, because you didn’t know when you were going to be working. So as we’ve come through and things that we’ve got, we’ve got overtime, we have scheduling twelve weeks in advance, stat holidays off, you get paid for your stats. It’s amazing how it’s changed. Maternity leave, pensions. Married women never used to be able to belong to the pension plan, you could only be single.

Efforts to win better wages and working conditions for nurses began with baby steps. From 1964 to 1966, staff nurses’ associations formed in various hospitals: by the end of 1966, fifty had received recognition from either a hospital or the Board of Industrial Relations. Within the AARN, the Provincial Staff Nurse Committee (PSNC) formed as a bargaining group and excluded nurse managers from its ambit. But the nurse managers’ control over the provincial council of the AARN limited the PSNC’s ability to act as a union. In June 1977, the nurses, who had decided that they needed a negotiating body independent of the AARN, formed the UNA, an independent trade union organization. Angry about low wages and understaffing, the nurses in seven urban hospitals undertook the first-ever strike of nurses in the province one month later. The government, making use of back-to-work provisions that had been added to the Labour Relations Code in 1960 (sections 112 and 113), ordered the 2,349 striking nurses back to work in four days, forcing binding arbitration. Though nationwide wage controls were in effect from 1975 to 1978, the arbitrator gave an award that was slightly higher than the mandated wage-control maximum.
The UNA's first full-scale negotiations with the hospitals in 1978 produced a contract that the nurses regarded as successful, but negotiations for a second contract stalled. In April 1980, the UNA struck at seventy-nine hospitals. "We are not Florence Nightingales," UNA president Marg Ethier told the media proudly. The days when nurses were akin to self-sacrificing missionaries rather than proud workers demanding humane working conditions and wages that recognized their education and responsibilities had passed. The trade union movement eagerly took up the nurses' cause, creating huge picket lines at all the hospitals. When the government ordered the six thousand striking nurses back to work after three days, the union challenged the order in court while resuming negotiations.22 Faced with public opinion that sympathized with the nurses' grievances and with the threat that a militant UNA would resume the strike despite the back-to-work order, the government agreed to a 29.8 percent wage increase over two years, a large award even at a time of 10 percent annual inflation. It also agreed to better work schedules and a number of improvements in working conditions, along with a professional responsibility clause that gave nurses more power to demand better standards of care and increased staffing on hospital wards.23

Teachers, no less militant than nurses during the 1970s, learned that militancy paid off in better wages and working conditions despite the Alberta government’s propensity to limit workers’ efforts to achieve gains by invoking the egregious back-to-work clause. In the teachers’ case, the government relied on the alleged “unreasonable hardship” that a strike imposed on third parties. There had been only one teachers’
strike in the province in the 1940s and four each in the 1950s and 1960s, none involving the large urban school boards. That changed in the 1970s, when nine strikes occurred, including one each by the Calgary and Edmonton public school teachers: the former involved 4,113 teachers and the latter, 1,978. The Calgary teachers struck again in 1980, this time with 4,644 teachers on strike. In each case, the government ordered the teachers back to work, fairly quickly in the 1971 Calgary and 1978 Edmonton strikes, but only after forty-one days in the Calgary strike of 1980.24

During this period, the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) had only cautious relations with the Alberta Federation of Labor (AFL). Since 1936, by legislation, all teachers in the province had to become members of the ATA, which set standards for their work, judged their competence, and bargained for them. Because of these sometimes contradictory roles, the ATA was cautious about the extent to which they wanted their organization identified as a trade union. Nonetheless, from 1968 to 1987, ATA chief executive officer Bernie Keeler, a socialist, did encourage ATA-AFL co-operation on public issues. Keeler had come to Edmonton to become the principal of Jasper Place High School in 1961 and served as ATA president in 1967–68.25 But most ATA leaders were more conservative: for example, Halvar C. Johnson, the 1976–77 president, later became a Progressive Conservative cabinet minister, and K. Mac Kryzanowski, president from 1977 to 1982, was also quite visible at PC conventions.

In 1960, some of the representatives of municipal employees were also quite conservative. Gil Levine was hounded by Cold Warriors in the leadership of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) because he had once been a card-carrying Communist and remained a committed socialist. Fortunately for him, one NUPE leader, Patrick Lenihan, also a former Communist, defended him from the establishment-oriented leaders. NUPE had been part of the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) before the merger of the TLC and the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) in 1956. Its CCL counterpart was NUPSE, the National Union of Public Sector Employees. The merger of NUPE and NUPSE in 1963 produced the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), for which Levine became the founding research director.26 By the 1970s, to Levine’s delight, his union, and the Canadian union movement more generally, had moved beyond the business unionism of an earlier period and was actively involved in efforts to promote social and economic change in Canada. CUPE’s national membership shot up from 80,000 in 1963 to 294,000 in 1983.27 In Alberta, CUPE organized a broad array of municipal workers and non-ATA school employees, including social service workers in both the public and private sectors.

A colourful character in CUPE’s early Alberta history was Fred Pyke, a wartime munitions plant worker who later took a job as a custodian for the London Board of Education while studying nights to become a priest. His union involvement caused him to decide that organizing workers rather than serving as a priest was his life’s mission. Appointed a full-time Alberta representative for the union in the 1970s, he was labelled “Strike Pyke” by the right-wing weekly magazine Alberta Report when the magazine did a feature on him shortly after a strike by Royal Alexandra Hospital employees, the first CUPE strike in the province.
Ironically, his role in that strike was minimal, but the label stuck. Pyke was a great believer in strikes and received much publicity for his role in a number of strikes in the 1970s, such as those of hospital workers in Grande Prairie and Fort Saskatchewan. Years later, he defended the early resort to strikes in collective bargaining, noting, “The workers, I don’t believe they’ve ever lost a strike. Because if you don’t stand when you’re pushed to the wall, and mark your place by letting the employer know they can only go so far, you’re going to be pushed further the next time. You must stand at some point in time and defend what you believe are principles that should be supported. When workers will do that and stick together, they can accomplish a lot.”

That militant philosophy did not appeal to all CUPE locals in conservative Alberta. There was a longstanding feud between the leaders of the inside workers for the City of Edmonton (Local 52) and CUPE National over issues ranging from per capita dues to be given to the national office, to the quality of CUPE’s training programs, to CUPE membership in the Canadian Labour Congress. In 1975, urged on by “Strike Pyke,” the local had struck the city for two weeks to get an additional 1.5 percent increase in wages. Although the city capitulated, the increase was rolled back by the province because it violated the wage-and-price controls that the province had implemented at the request of the federal government. Some workers therefore thought the ten-day strike had been “useless,” blaming their union for taking them out on strike rather than the provincial government for reversing the increase.

In 1978, Local 52 broke away from CUPE altogether, renaming itself the Civic Service Union. CSU 52, a true business union of the pre-1960 type, was determined to be independent from national and international unions and from involvement in political life. It was proud of the very low union dues that it assessed for its members. The Edmonton inside workers were not alone among public service workers who decided not to join the larger public service unions. The University of Alberta’s non-academic staff, who had long been members of a company union, were courted by several unions during the 1970s but decided in 1978 to turn the Non-Academic Staff Association into a certified union.

Militancy among public employees in Alberta echoed the growing willingness of public sector workers across the country to resort to strikes, and within the province, employees of the federal government were among those who demonstrated the greatest militancy in the 1960s. Although federal employees lacked the legal right to strike before 1967, Alberta’s inside postal workers participated in a national postal workers’ strike in 1965, in which rank-and-file workers defied their association’s leadership and won wage concessions from the federal government. This success emboldened the postal workers to create a union, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, to replace an association that was little more than a company union. In 1967, about 120,000 other federal workers, who had also previously been represented only by company unions, created the Public Service Alliance of Canada. That same year, the federal government, faced with militant-sounding unions who demanded the same rights as other Canadian workers, granted its employees the right to strike in the Public Service Staff Relations Act while trying...
to limit both negotiable issues and the right to strike. But the die had been cast, and federal civil servants clearly wanted to be seen as workers and to have wages and working conditions matching those that unionized private sector workers had been able to win as a result of organizing.32

Most public service members appreciated the benefits and services that the unions provided, but some did so only begrudgingly. Andre Van Schaik, a development control officer who was a member of csu 52 in the late 1970s, complained that “as a supervisor, I always had the union against me when I was trying to discipline employees or change the way they operated.” Yet this conservative supervisor did appreciate that the union had fought to get his position reclassified from zoning analyst to the better-paid development control officer position. He also admitted that the unions “are good at protecting employees that need protection from tyrant bosses, the old-style managers,” though he clearly viewed himself as not being one of them:

With the City of Edmonton, I think employees take it for granted that they get health coverage and they get sick days and they get short-term sick and long-term sick at fairly good percentage of wages as compared to private industry. With the city, you can earn up to six weeks vacation a year, which isn’t something that’s normal in private industry. So yes, there were a lot of benefits, but when you become a city employee you kind of take it for granted that that comes with the job. You don’t really recognize or realize that that probably got there due to some unions and hard-working people in the past in those unions.33

Frank McGregor had been a blacksmith in Scotland and continued in his trade when he came to Canada. He began working for the City of Edmonton in 1954 and became active in the Edmonton Civic Outside Employees union, which became Local 30 of CUPE in 1963. He was especially proud of the union’s ability to find accommodation for injured members and to provide decent retirement pensions.

I think back then we had about thirty-three hundred employees. Quite a lot did heavy hard work, and they would sustain injuries where they couldn’t return to their former job. Between us and the city, we established a program where we’d try and find a job for these disabled — well, not disabled, but not able to return to their old job. There was one particular lady in the city, she was quite good and I had found quite a lot of jobs for these people. But the biggest problem was again the heads of these departments. I don’t know if it was justifiable, but they said, “We’ve only got so many jobs. And if we can’t get so-and-so to do the work that’s required, we can’t have her.” Of course, our position was, perhaps you can adjust that position somewhat so that it can meet that condition. There were quite a few managers that was helpful. But then again there was quite a few that were not. They’d fight you tooth and nail. . . .

At private blacksmiths’ shops, of course, there was no pension. But when I came to the city, the city had a pension plan. It wasn’t a great one, but it was a start. Then we had a coalition of unions that used to negotiate fringe benefits. That’s all kinds of benefits. We determined that we could do better under the Alberta Local Authorities Pension Plan. . . . It reached a stage that we’ve got quite a good pension plan.

McGregor retired in 1990, and, looking back, he believed that Local 30 was stronger in the 1970s than in the late 1990s, as neo-liberalism reached into every corner of governance. “The city used to do most of its road work and all the curbs and gutters. That’s all gone practically, that’s all privatized. That has lost a lot of jobs for Local 30 employees.”
ANTILABOUR LEGISLATION AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Privatization was always a threat for many government workers during the 1960s and 1970s. Alberta Government Telephone workers, for example, were concerned in the late 1970s about discussions within the Lougheed government about possibly privatizing the company. But while government revenues remained high and the attraction of getting short-term revenues from the sale of Crown corporations was therefore weak, except for ideological reasons, few major privatizations occurred in the province. Indeed, the Lougheed government, in carrying out its plan to expand the Alberta-based bourgeoisie within the North American energy economy, pursued some nationalizations and public-private investment partnerships. The government bought Pacific Western Airlines in 1974 when it appeared that the airline might go out of business, which would have had a negative impact on energy development in the north of the province. One year earlier, it created the Alberta Energy Company — in which it retained half the stocks — as the government’s investment arm in energy developments, including Syncrude’s oil sands project and the Suffield natural gas field.34

On the whole, then, it seems easy to explain why government workers proved defiant as the Social Credit and then Conservative governments passed anti-labour legislation. Their jobs were secure. Public demand for more and more services meant expanding government payrolls and only a marginal threat that wage gains and better working conditions would lead to massive layoffs. The government workers of the pre-1960 period, mainly people who had lived through the Great
Depression and often Social Credit devotees, made few demands for their fair share of the growing oil and gas wealth of Alberta. Their children and immigrants to the province, however, who were younger and not haunted by Depression memories, unionized and made use of their unions to better their lot.

How did the private sector workers fare during the energy boom, and how successful were unions in ensuring that these workers had collective representation? As the Alberta Federation of Labor recognized at the time, the government’s anti-labour legislation had its greatest impact on the private sector, though some unions in that sector continued to thrive, their workers demonstrating as much defiance of government and employer intimidation as state workers. But anti-labour legislation and enforcement of legislation continued to limit union successes in collective bargaining and in campaigns for better safety legislation and better enforcement of that legislation.

In 1960, the Manning government amended the Alberta Labour Act in a major way for the first time since 1948. All the changes that were implemented met with disapproval from the labour movement, which viewed Manning’s intent as the weakening of labour and the strengthening of capital in Alberta, especially but not exclusively in the prized energy sector. The amendments included a prohibition on information picketing outside a workplace: any union that defied this prohibition could not be certified as a bargaining unit even if it signed up every eligible worker. The government gave the Board of Industrial Relations the power to remove from union membership all those whom it considered to be supervisors or employees with a confidential relationship to management. Another amendment provided a sweeping ban against professional unions, specifying architectural, engineering, medical, dental, and legal professionals as groups who could not have a union bargain for them. Solidarity among those workers who were allowed to unionize was largely forbidden. Both secondary picketing and job action in solidarity with striking workers in workplaces where scabs had replaced striking workers were forbidden. Finally, the legislation gave the minister the right to declare a strike-ending emergency if she or he felt that the strike potentially harmed life or property. The view that the rights of property were greater than those of workers was hardly surprising given the close association of the Manning government with the large energy companies.

Documenting the problems created for workers by this legislation and lobbying for more worker-friendly legislation became a key goal of the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) throughout the last eleven years of the Social Credit regime and the early years of the Lougheed regime. But there were few successes.

The biggest problem for the unions remained the willingness of the government, via the Board of Industrial Relations, to sanction company unions. AFL efforts to get the government to include a definition of unions in the Alberta Labour Act that would exclude company-based associations failed. When the AFL provided its annual brief to Premier Manning and his cabinet in 1960, they charged that the section of the act that forbade employer interference in workers’ decisions to choose a bargaining unit “has become a big joke.” Though the AFL had documented many cases of such interference, there had never been a penalty assessed against an offending employer.
The AFL’s 1960 brief portrayed a government with no interest whatsoever in defending workers’ interests. The government, it noted, had failed to regulate work camps, and poor conditions dominated these workplaces. Workers often had to bring their own bedding and then slept in cramped quarters where there were few toilets, and men drank water from “unsanitary water containers, using a common drink dipper.” There were some reasonable safety regulations on the books, but the Workmen’s Compensation Board hired few inspectors to enforce them. “The loss of life in trenching and excavation work has been alarming in the past few years,” said the brief. “In each case, this loss of life has been caused by the lack of enforcement of Safety Regulations, and the Board is not adequately staffed to provide inspectors.”

To keep out real unions that might try to change this state of affairs, the government gave active support to company unions, particularly in the petroleum industry. In 1968, AFL president Roy Jamha estimated that there were twenty to twenty-five thousand workers in company unions in Alberta. Jack Hampson, an earlier president of the AFL, summed up the government’s attitudes and actions at a Canadian Labour Congress conference on labour legislation in 1963:

Alberta has bad Labour legislation, and it is administered by a bad government. This is so, because it is the belief of Social Credit that the Trade Union movement is an unnecessary burden on the shoulders of working people. Their view is that our economic problems would be resolved much easier by the Social Credit monetary theory — something which our Federation cannot accept.

The Board of Industrial Relations, chaired by the Deputy Minister of Labour, administers the Labour Act, and sets arbitrary rules to make life difficult for unions.

The Labour Act and the behaviour of the Board (exclusive of Labour’s two representatives) are doing just what the government wants done. It has brought the growth of the labour movement to an almost complete halt. They are not allowing this to alienate the affections of the working man, however. Certifications for bargaining rights are available to company unions without membership, charter, constitutions, aims and objectives, and these ineffective organizations are growing at an alarming rate. For example, the petroleum industry, by far the largest industry in the province and the darling of Social Credit, is almost completely represented by company unions. As an example — of the eight largest oil refineries in the province, the six largest have company unions.

Premier Manning’s close friendships with oilmen made it particularly imperative to foreclose the option of real unions representing energy workers, and the installation of company unions seemed to offer that foreclosure. Reg Basken, a later president of the AFL, organized oil rig workers for the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers’ Union, whose Canadian section formed the Energy and Chemical Workers Union in 1980. But when Basken had signed up a majority, the companies simply shut the rigs down for a few days to scare the workers off from a vote in favour of unionism. This form of intimidation constituted a legal labour relations practice in Alberta. The companies also got away with barring unions other than the company
I became an organizer when I was president too . . . . We have a section of our union in the north — in those big camps. We’ve got three or four thousand members up there now in Syncrude and GCOs [Great Canadian Oil Sands] and all those new camps that are opening up. The entire cooking staff and the camp attendants are members of our union. And wages are very good, they do very, very good. They get good pay. We had to fight like hell to get women to work as cooks. Making the beds up, forty units. We had an awful time getting the women in there. They finally got in and they did a good job. They were good union people. They come to union meetings.43

It was not only petroleum workers, however, who suffered from the government’s antipathy to unions. The Beverage Dispensers’ Union, for example, was frustrated in its continuing efforts to get contracts for Edmonton hotel employees after the debacle of 1954. Organizer Doug Tomlinson turned the union’s efforts to organization of the women who worked at private clubs. While they were often happy to join unions, their employers made good use of the province’s labour legislation to stymie their efforts. Tomlinson’s union had greater success in the northern oil sands camps: union from talking to workers on company property, which is where most of them lived.42

**FIG 6-7** Oil, Chemical and Atomic workers on strike against Texaco, July 1976, Edmonton. Provincial Archives of Alberta, j2554-1.
WHAT MANAGEMENT WOULD CONCEDE TO KEEP UNIONS OUT

While company unions often lacked the experience and the will to face down energy company management on issues of benefits and occupational safety, they did sometimes extract important concessions because of management’s desire to avoid strikes in periods of labour shortages. The Great Canadian Oil Sands Employees Association, organized in 1967, was a standard company union. In 1973, it became the Fort McMurray Independent Oil Workers and successfully sought affiliation with the Canadian Labour Congress. It only finally joined forces with the Energy and Chemical Workers Union (ECWU) in 1987.

ECWU leader Reg Basken’s description of the contracts negotiated by the Independent Oil Workers at Suncor indicates the surprising number of worker-friendly concessions that a company union in a tight labour market might sometimes win from an employer desperate to keep out real unions. His description also suggests a degree of pragmatism that some might view as conservatism on the part of certain senior union leaders: Basken clearly felt that the Independent Oil Workers went too far in getting good things for their members to the point where their contracts threatened the viability of Suncor’s operations. Speaking of a discussion with a senior executive of Suncor, Basken recalls the lengths to which one company went to keep unions out:

I wasn’t very polite to the McMurray Independent Oil Workers. Not at all. I said, they don’t have the concept of what a settlement is. You guys have given so many things to keep the union out over the years, you’ve given crazy things. Do you know that you guys’ insanity went to the extent that if a job becomes redundant in your mine up there, and somebody wants to stay where they were at their rate of pay, they can do that. But if they choose not to do that, they drop down to a labourer’s rate. But if they choose not to drop down to a labourer’s rate, they stay at their trades rate in a redundant job and play cribbage. Do you know that it’s in your collective agreement? You’ve got the kind of stupidity that you’ve got to get rid of. But you offered them so many things to keep them out of the union, and they’re far higher paid than any other oil worker in Canada. They’ve got far better conditions than any other oil worker in Canada. . . . We got the essence of an agreement worked out, which took away an awful lot of those crazy fringer ideas that were in there that were not in any other collective agreement, and wouldn’t have been there if their union had been there. Because we wouldn’t have been stupid enough to ask for them. No company would’ve given them to us. But they gave them to them to keep the union out. And they were successful for damn near twenty years. But their costs were gone through the roof. The mine at that point was in doubt as to whether it would continue.

SOURCE: Interview with Reg Basken, Edmonton, September 2003, ALHI.
Government complicity with private employers in crushing efforts to unionize had a particularly chilling effect on service workers, a rising percentage of the labour force, mainly women and mainly low-income workers. Retail workers dispersed among the small franchises at the growing number of malls and often hired only part-time were difficult to organize anywhere in the country, but in Alberta, the labour legislation made their organization almost impossible. On the surface, it was easier to organize nursing homes, where relatively large numbers of workers were hired and able to find time to collectively discuss their oppression by the employer. The Parkland Nursing Home employees in Edmonton joined CUPE, and sixty of them, mainly women, went on strike in March 1977 after their employer refused to raise their wages from the provincial minimum wage to the same level that Parkland workers elsewhere in the province received. Striking picketers faced police harassment, and the company blacklisted key union activists, vowing never to reinstate them. As the strike dragged on, Warren Caragata wrote:

Early in the dispute, when picketing was making recruitment of strike-breakers difficult, the Alberta Supreme Court granted Parkland an injunction which prohibited workers on the line from singing, placed tight limits on the number of people who could be on the line and then went one step further — forcing the much-reduced picket line to form across the street from the nursing home, in front of a row of apartments. The provincial government has funnelled several thousand dollars a day in subsidies to the privately-owned home and suggested that the workers agree to a blacklist, all the while claiming neutrality.44

Similarly, in a story that highlights why union efforts to organize and to win better wages and working conditions for their members received negligible and usually rather negative media coverage. Caragata recounts the failed efforts of the workers at CJOC television in Lethbridge to unionize. The station was owned by Southam, the national media giant that at the time also owned the two dominant newspapers in the province, the Edmonton Journal and the Calgary Herald. Southam was determined to prevent unionization of any of its employees and, with no laws in place to prevent the hiring of scabs and no unwelcome media scrutiny of its behaviour, the station simply dismissed its striking workers.45

Here is a typical story of how a union’s efforts were forestalled in Alberta, as explained by Laurier Payment, of Amalgamated Transit Union #569 regarding the Diamond Bus Lines workers of Jasper Place, a separate town before it amalgamated with Edmonton in 1963. In January 1961, the union hired Payment to organize the workers. In February, two workers whom he had signed were fired. But the union signed enough workers to get a board certification that month, and it put forward its proposals to the employer. The employer responded by firing two more workers and largely refusing to negotiate. In March, the union called on the board for conciliation, and the conciliators’ report was received in April. While the union accepted the report, management rejected it and fired six more workers. The conciliators recommended improvements in wages and salaries in June, but by the time the supervised vote was held in August, the workers, many of whom had been hired to replace union-supporting workers, voted it down in an atmosphere of continuing management
intimidation. In short, the Alberta Labour Act’s provisions had prevented the union from striking early on as it became clear that management was truculent, with the result that six months later, when the union might have been in a position to strike, it had lost most of its members to firings or intimidation.46

Even workers who belonged to unions often felt the sting of the province’s anti-labour administration of labour laws. In 1962, for example, the Board of Industrial Relations exempted “inexperienced employees” from the minimum wage, which, as noted by the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), “in effect, means all the employees engaged in the Garment Industry.” 47 Meanwhile, the Workers Compensation Board, adding to the hardships workers endured because they were injured on the job in a province that did little to prevent worker injury, was pushing injured workers “to find lighter work, which in many industries is nonexistent.” The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America in Calgary called on the AFL in 1968 to press the government to provide workers with full benefits until they were “physically and mentally able to resume the regular work in which they were engaged at the time of injury.” 48

Though the Lougheed government made some changes to labour legislation in the province, on the whole, the anti-labour attitude persisted both in the legislation itself and in its enforcement. The Labour Act was revised by the new government in 1973, but the Labour Gazette, the AFL newspaper at the time, complained that “we have simply a new arrangement of an old composition.” 49

At the 1973 AFL convention, the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 488 observed that construction companies were establishing spin-off companies to avoid having to abide by collective agreements. The AFL passed a resolution calling on the Board of Industrial Relations to have the authority to revoke a company’s licence “when it is proved that a spin-off company is not living up to the terms of a collective agreement that is in effect with the parent company.” 50 But the government rarely made changes in response to representations from the AFL, and in this case, their dismissal of union concerns had dire consequences for the construction unions, though the impacts would only become severe in the depressed 1980s. Indeed, many private sector unions, and especially the construction unions, made great gains in the 1960s and 1970s, despite the anti-labour legislation and political environment that would prove fatal to many unions when the boom finally ended in the early 1980s.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND DELUSIONS

Throughout much of the postwar period, unprecedented economic growth along with expanded social programs — though modest by European standards — plus Keynesian economic policies made it appear that the unbridled capitalism of the Great Depression was a thing of the past for Canada.51 Following Keynes’s economic prescriptions, governments, at least in theory, now increased their spending, even if it meant accumulating large short-term debts, to counter the economic cycle when private investment began to decline. Such government spending often had little impact on the poor: the large pockets of poverty in both the cities and the countryside demonstrated that the economic pie was still not shared equally. But in Alberta,
in particular, many young workers, especially males, believed that they had it made. They could make big money in the energy sector even with little education and could save up to buy their own small business, a house, and a truck or two before they turned thirty. Whether or not they were unionized, labour shortages would guarantee them good wages and — provided that they did not die on the job or lose their ability to do hard, physical labour — the world was their oyster. Karl Marx might have thought that workers had nothing to lose but their chains, but these workers thought otherwise and had dreams of becoming capitalists, if only small capitalists. The end of the boom, when it arrived in the early 1980s, came as a huge shock: these workers were largely oblivious to the fact that uncontrolled capitalist booms are followed by busts and that weakly developed state apparatuses are in no position to step in to help the victims when the private economy inevitably cycles downwards.

One couldn’t blame these workers — most of whom voted for right-wing parties that were in bed with their employers and who saved little of what they earned to tide them over in hard times — for being surprised since the evidence before their eyes was that Alberta had become the land of milk and honey. As this chapter’s opening quotation from Jack Hubler demonstrates, the construction unions signed excellent agreements with the major commercial and residential developers in 1969 with regard to wages and even working conditions. In 1975, determined not to be sidelined by non-union contractors, the construction unions negotiated no-strike, no-lockout agreements with companies like Syncrude who were developing the tar sands of northern Alberta. While these agreements guaranteed the companies that there would be no wildcat strikes over working conditions or the treatment of individual workers, they ensured the construction workers excellent wages. The average hourly wage for a construction worker shot up from $9.35 an hour in 1975 to $13.75 in 1977, double the average industrial wage in the province. The private oil companies that were part of the Syncrude consortium had negotiated “cost-plus” financing arrangements with their government partners that allowed them to pay generous wages; continuous production, for a time, became more important than keeping wages low.

Although the construction workers in Alberta negotiated provincial labour agreements, many industrial workers were members of national or international unions that bargained nationally. Alberta’s workers who were involved in national contracts were sometimes more militant in their demands than their counterparts elsewhere because they compared themselves with workers in the energy and construction sectors in the province. So, for example, in 1974, Edmonton packing-house workers rejected a proposed agreement that workers in other provinces accepted. That forced a return to negotiations and resulted in a better national offer.

Union activists did not take for granted the gains that they had made because of their participation in union struggles. Betty and Gerald Franklin, who moved to Hinton in 1956 and worked at the pulp mill during the 1960s and 1970s, both congratulated their unions for tangible improvements in their lives. Betty worked in the office and was a member of the Office and Professional Employees International Union. “If it hadn’t been for the union, we wouldn’t have had the pensions
that we have. As I said, when the union got organized in the office, our wages went up substantially. If I can recall, I think mine went up about two hundred dollars a month, and thirty-five years ago, that was a lot of money.”

Gerald Franklin worked for the mill for thirty-five years, first as one of the construction workers who built the mill, then as a worker in the wood room and the machine room, and finally as a welder. He was active in the United Paperworkers International Union, which later became the Canadian Paperworkers Union, now part of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union. “The union helped tame them down quite a bit; otherwise, they would’ve been hell on earth. It was bad enough as it was, at certain things. Like when I tell people now that I brought my lunch pail home lots of times the same way I took it in because I had no time to eat it, they don’t want to believe me. If it hadn’t have been for unions, we wouldn’t have had no pensions, no overtime, quite a few benefits.”

Franklin talked about how dangerous the jobs were and the efforts the union made to promote job safety. In the wood room, where he worked for six years ensuring that logs were level before going onto the chipper, a machine with sharp blades that chewed the logs into chips, there was a constant danger of falling logs. But in the 1960s and 1970s, the Hinton mill was a fully unionized outfit, from the International Woodworkers of America loggers who felled the trees and the truckdrivers who brought them to the mill, to the various mill workers.

Another union that gained many concessions for its members was the Brewery Workers Union. Like the paperworkers and chemical workers, the brewery workers broke from their former American-controlled union in the early 1970s and formed the Canadian Union of United Brewery, Flour, Cereal, Soft Drink and Distillery Workers. But during the 1960s and 1970s, the brewery workers were often on strike or locked out by management. In the early 1970s, Bill Flookes started working for Calgary Brewing and Malting (later bought out by Carling O’Keefe and then Molson’s before being shut down in 1994) and became active in the union. Flookes recounted the militancy of his fellow workers in 1979 when the breweries in the province joined to lock out their workers in an effort to reduce the workers’ demands:

At the time, the Labatts plant had a paid half-hour lunch, and we didn’t have one at our plant. So you can imagine, this is seven and a half months. So we took it back to our members and our members said, we want the half-hour lunch. We got it. After seven and a half months, they were still willing to say, “We’re not going back.” I can remember afterwards walking around the plant talking to people and people saying, “Ha, it was worth it.” Especially at lunchtime. It was an epic battle. I remember going around trying to find money so we could pay our picketers so they could eat. My first son was born during the dispute. It was hard, but for a lot of the people who went through it, it was probably one of the funny moments of their lives. . . . One fellow who celebrated his fiftieth year of working for the plant, for the old Calgary Brewing and Malting, on the picket line — I can remember having a big party for him at the strike headquarters.”
Jim Cardinal, an International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) activist, typifies the rags to semi-riches stories of unionized skilled workers in the tar sands in the late 1970s. Like many Métis in Alberta, he grew up in a family marginalized by racism. He described his early life and his experiences as an IBEW member on strike at a relatively rare strike at Suncor in 1978:

I was born in Lac La Biche, back in 1951, and grew up in Owl River. A type of farm, but not really — almost in a homesteader-type style of living. My dad did a lot of trapping and fishing, and that’s how we survived. With sometimes work here and there for farmers and stuff, that’s the only type of work we had around Lac La Biche. There was twelve of us. The older ones, when I came of age they’d already moved on. By the time I grew up, there was eight left at home. . . .

[We were] very isolated. My parents went into town once a month to shop. Other than that, we ate wild meat and what we grew in the garden. . . . I didn’t know how to speak a word of English when I went to school. I had to learn the yes and the no, and how to ask when I wanted to go to the washroom. Nowadays we say washroom; back then it was just the word pee. So, “May I go to pee?” I did speak Cree. . . .

[I worked on our] trap line. We had muskrat, beavers, and all that. It was my job, from the age of twelve and up, to maintain that area after school. It was like a job for me. But the money didn’t come to me, it went to the family. It went for food and all that stuff. Many times, Dad would go two or three months at a time. He would leave in the fall and not come back ’til Christmas. That was part of life. He’d be gone, and I was the oldest boy. I did all the work and the trapping and looked after the animals. Not bragging or anything, but that’s the way it was. That’s what I had to do. Mom was a very hardworking woman. She had to do all the washing, and they had to haul all the water for that. Any hot water, you’d have a wood stove to boil it. We were busy.

Dad would work for local farmers. After I was about fifteen, then Dad and I would both go. That’s where I discovered peas. I never had peas in my life until I worked for one farmer. . . .

In 1978, we had a six-week strike. They locked the gates and then the next morning when the buses came they couldn’t get through. Then they wanted to cut the locks off. A bunch of us who were there wouldn’t let them do that. The buses are waiting, and they’re getting rocked and they’re ready to be tipped over. Just to talk about a bit of ’78, I was carrying a bat and walking back and forth, throwing my ball up in the air and hitting it and fetching it myself. During the strike, I got a letter from Suncor that they were going to sue me for $2 million for carrying a bat on a picket line. Some things sometimes you destroy. I ripped it up and said, “Here’s what I think of your $2 million.” I wish I’d have kept it; it would’ve been beautiful history to be able to show that.

SOURCE: Interview with Jim Cardinal, Fort McMurray, 2005, ALHI.
The long-established United Garment Workers local at GWG in Edmonton also saw improvements. According to long-time union president Anne Ozipko, she and her associates built on the successes of her predecessor, Ann Baranyk:

I’m not sure exactly what year the company gave us benefits, and they were benefits we didn’t have to contribute to. We got long-term disability. The sick benefit didn’t change, but the employees weren’t contributing now, it’s all paid by the company. There’s a dental plan now, but the employees contribute 20 percent. The health care, when Anne Baranyk was there they were paying half. Now the employee was paying 40 percent and the company was paying the rest. Then later we got a pension, which there wasn’t any [before].

While unions whose members dealt with a single employer often did not manage their own pensions, construction unions, whose members worked for a variety of employers, assessed their members for pensions and managed those pensions themselves, though usually contracting with professional pension managers. Wally Shaw, a mason, noted:

I believe our pensions and our health and welfare are probably the thing I would be most proud of. We now have a pension plan. The younger people are going to be fairly well looked after and live decently, compared to the older ones. Our older members had to retire with $300 or $400 pensions. Our younger people are going to be much better off. Our health and welfare helps families that need to be helped. Not as much as we would like maybe, but we’re helping them.

THE SAFETY ISSUE

Better enforcement of existing safety legislation and the right of workers to refuse unsafe work became major issues for the Alberta Federation of Labour and its member unions in the 1960s and 1970s, as it did for labour throughout North America. Worker deaths were not uncommon in Canada but the deaths in March 1960 of five immigrant Italian construction workers who were building water mains under the Don River at Hoggs Hollow, now an area within Toronto, served as a catalyst to lobby for more government inspectors for workplaces. Unsafe company practices, speed-ups, and poor training of workers all played a role in the Toronto-area tragedy. As noted earlier, even before that tragedy, the Alberta Federation of Labour had called on the provincial government to increase the number of inspectors for Alberta worksites so that labour laws regarding safety would not be as regularly flouted. Despite these efforts, though, as industrial relations professor Bob Barnetson concludes, “Canadian inspectors continue to focus on persuasion, rather than coercion.”

Both Social Crediters and the Conservatives ignored such requests, but in 1973, the Lougheed government, following the lead of other provinces, passed the Occupational Health and Safety Act, which gave workers the right to know about occupational health hazards, the right to participate with management in Joint Health and Safety (JHS) committees meant to limit and correct workplace risks, and the right to refuse unsafe work. This proved mainly of benefit to unionized workers, whose representatives often demanded information from management, advertised dangers at their worksite to fellow workers, and encouraged
union leaders to make workplace issues fundamental in collective bargaining. This “internal responsibility system” was implemented at a time “when the influence of labour was near its peak and the standard employment relationship was widespread.” Its weakness lay particularly in the lack of protection it provided for workers in non-union environments and in the “careless worker” narrative that it implied: worker injury was seen to be the result of an individual worker’s ignorance and sloppiness rather than how management organized the labour process.

Studies in Ontario have demonstrated that a minority of workers know their workplace safety rights, and even when they do, few are willing to protest unsafe workplaces. Fear of losing their jobs results in very few workers invoking their right to refuse unsafe work. In any case, there are few rules governing exposure limits for chemicals, and workers are rarely in a position to be able to determine whether substances in the workplace are toxic. The establishment of JHS committees, though supported by trade unions as a means of ensuring worker input, “delegitimizes discussion that occurs elsewhere, such as in a union hall or on the shop floor.” Management power is only limited by a JHS when it is dealing with a powerful union. On the whole, the new occupational health framework did not prove to be an adequate substitute for what labour wanted: clear rules for all workplaces about necessary steps that must be taken to reduce workplace dangers to a minimum and tough inspection by a well-staffed inspectorate.

In unionized workplaces, however, improvements did occur. Most of the one thousand to twelve hundred workers at Celanese in the 1960s were Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) members, and their leaders were particularly committed to emphasizing labour safety in their dealings with both management and government. Willa Gorman, a union activist who began working in the plant in 1965 in the fibres area, noted:

We worked with chemicals with absolutely no safety as we know it now. . . . The union got involved, and the safety was really brought up much more and improved over the years, through total knowledge and union involvement both. It increased the safety and the health of the workers. We talk about unions wanting money all the time; that wasn’t always the case. Often it was a safety or health issue that we would discuss for a long time to get a resolution for.
MEAT-PACKING AND “ACCIDENTS”

The pace of work was a significant contributor to workplace misadventures for which the word “accident” seems a misnomer since it implies that an event is unavoidable. Indeed, most unfortunate events in the workplace are avoidable if the workplace is organized according to the principle that a worker’s life and health are more important than potential profits for the employer. Meat-packing worker Vicky Beauchamp’s story of her accident at Swift demonstrates that workers are forced to take unnecessary risks at work and that even when their health is compromised as a result, they often have few options but to resume the same work with little thought to the likely consequence for their long-term health:

There was a gentleman by the name of Joe Farrell, bless his soul, he’s passed on. He’d turn up the machine, and he’d really run it quickly. You had rejects coming and leakers, so you’d throw them here and there. You’re trying to package this; where normally two people did it, I was doing it by myself. That day, I turn around and when this happened, I went to pile the boxes twelve to a case. So there was two boxes, which was twenty-four. I had four boxes by this time. I took two and put two in a pallet. Swung around to put two, and my table was full of wiener’s, and that was it. My back just jarred. I couldn’t get up, I couldn’t do anything.

All Joe said was, “If you can’t do your job, go home.” So they carried me out. . . . With their arms they made a bench and carried me out to the nurse’s office. They took me to the Royal Alex, and I was off with back strain, as they said, no real injury. But eventually I was let go from the plant. This happened in April, and by the end of June I had no job. So I left, and as a result of that today I still suffer with major back problems. Somehow they didn’t seem to find it at the time, but it continually plagued me. I was young, unmarried. Therefore, what does a young person do? You try to get back into the workforce as best you could. You don’t want to go on welfare. . . . I tried numerous places to get employment. Although my qualifications were fairly good — I finished high school — as soon as they found out I had a back injury, oh dear. I guess we will get hold of you if need be. So you knew you were at risk, it didn’t matter what employment you went into. So while Swift’s packing plant was on strike, and Canada Packers and Burns, I ventured out to Gainers, because they had not been on strike. They were separate negotiations. I had applied there, thinking if these were on strike, I would go there and get back into whatever I knew to do best. Which was the meat-packing industry, which was labour intensive.

SOURCE: Interview with Vicky Beauchamp, Edmonton, 1998, ALHI.
Sometimes, on-the-job action was required to force management to accept workers’ rights to refuse unsafe work. Noel Lapierre, chief shop steward for the Canadian Paperworkers Union in Hinton, gave an example that demonstrates why workers without a union rarely took advantage of their legal right to refuse unsafe work:

In 1980, twenty-six of my fellow workers lost their jobs because they refused to work in a terrible snowstorm. When I learned about it, about 2:00 p.m., I . . . called on the shop stewards from each camp for an assembly that evening. Next day, no one worked in the woods. We made it a sit-down day so that the twenty-six guys could get their jobs back. We won after the one day off work.

Lapierre was hit by a tree as he was cutting down trees in 1976 and ended up in the hospital for four and a half months with a broken back. He was off work for over thirteen months. He had also seen several fellow workers in the woods killed by falling trees.65

Wally Land was a coal-mine electrician in Grande Cache in the 1970s who discovered the lack of management consideration for worker safety:

There was one instance where it was a coal-mine pillar retreat method underground. They put pieces of wood in the sides of the entryways, called lagging, to protect the rib from sloughing in and blocking the road. A guy was walking into work one day and the rib sloughed in and knocked him down and killed him. It’s not something you could ever foresee or plan for. More lagging in the rib probably would’ve saved his life. But that’s not what coal mines do. They’re in the business of getting the coal out, not taking the wood in.

Land described how he became politicized, beginning with an event that occurred while he was at NAIT in 1980 taking the course for the fourth year of his apprenticeship:

The six o’clock news came on after school one day. Four guys of my crew were on the news, dead. The roof caved in and killed them. . . . It really impacts you. . . . [I became] a little bit disheartened with the management of the mine, because they really didn’t put a whole lot of effort into health and safety. So I became a shit disturber and a troublemaker. That ultimately ended up costing me my job at the mine. I moved to Hinton and got on with the pulp mill, and got a job with health and safety. Then it all kinda started to make sense. In some cases, underground coal mining is like a macho job. If you whine about health and safety issues, it just makes your working life a little more difficult, possibly. But guys die because other people don’t stand up and say, “Hey that’s wrong.” I decided to stand up.66

LABOUR AND POLITICS

In the face of anti-labour legislation that limited the growth and effectiveness of the labour movement and placed workers’ lives in danger, the traditional left wing within Alberta labour was enthusiastic about the national effort to launch the New Party, which would unite labour and liberally minded people.67 In common with their national leadership, the Alberta wings of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW), the United Packinghouse Workers of America, and the United Steelworkers of America were active in efforts to organize the New Democratic Party (NDP),
whose founding national convention was held in Ottawa in August 1961. Locals of the first two of these unions, along with the Lethbridge District and Labour Council, called on the Alberta Federation of Labour at the provincial convention in October 1960 to support the New Party effort. But the resolution did not come to a vote because seven delegates, beginning with an International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers representative, indicated that their unions wanted to remain non-partisan. While the NDP looked too left-wing to some unions, especially craft unions, it looked too right-wing to some of the staunch CCFers, who disliked the idea of watering down the Alberta CCF’s socialist emphasis on public ownership of industry in order to attract supporters of reform of the private enterprise system. Although many of the old CCFers joined the NDP, they did not like what they viewed as its domination by trade unions and reformist, non-socialist ideology. They created the Woodsworth-Irvine Socialist Fellowship to promote socialist ideas outside the NDP framework in the hope of pressuring the NDP to readopt the socialist thrust of the Regina Manifesto. In practice, though, the national CCF had significantly modified the Regina Manifesto at its 1956 convention, making its peace with free-enterprise capitalism and calling for regulation of big corporations rather than state ownership and for an emphasis on social programs rather than public operation of the economy.

When the Alberta NDP held its founding convention in Edmonton in January 1962, there were 172 labour delegates among the 379 registered delegates. Later that year, at the AFL convention, a resolution passed that urged all local unions to affiliate with the NDP and that encouraged all union members to join NDP clubs (the predecessors to formal constituency organizations for the party) and to “establish and maintain Political Action Committees to better enable local unions and Labour Councils to give full support to the New Democratic Party and the forthcoming election campaign.” Affiliating locals gave the NDP five cents per member per month, a figure that would increase over time. By 1967, six thousand unionists were affiliated with the NDP, but participation did not necessarily follow affiliation. During the NDP’s first five years of existence in Alberta, no affiliated union sent any resolutions to provincial conventions.
At the party’s first convention, Neil Reimer, Canadian director of OCAW, was named party president. Grant Notley, a twenty-two-year-old CCF activist who had done much of the organizing of New Party clubs before the NDP’s official founding, was named provincial secretary. In 1963, Reimer defeated school teacher Ivor Dent, later mayor of Edmonton, to become the first leader of the Alberta New Democrats. He had no sooner become leader when the party was propelled into its first provincial election. While it won no seats and only 8 percent of the provincial vote, that was twice what the CCF had managed in the 1959 provincial election. In 1965, Reimer came within ninety votes of winning a by-election in the heavily unionized Edson seat. The following year, NDP candidate Garth Turcott, aided by the votes of retired miners, won a by-election in Pincher Creek-Crowsnest.

Reimer and Turcott unleashed a relentless attack on the integrity of the members of the Manning Social Credit government, which Reimer regarded as a dictatorship masked as a democracy. While Reimer publicly supported all the policies proposed by the Alberta Federation of Labour, his emphasis was on the authoritarian and corrupt character of the Social Credit administration, whose veneer of religious rectitude had generally spared it from close scrutiny. Manning responded by attempting to frame the provincial election in 1967 as a clear choice between Social Credit free enterprise and NDP socialism. The voters doubled NDP support to 16 percent, but no New Democrat was elected, not even Turcott. While Manning won another large majority, the key outcome of the election was the vast increase in Progressive Conservative support. Many Albertans, it seems, accepted the NDP message that change was needed in Alberta but preferred the conservative change offered by the Tories’ new leader, Peter Lougheed, to Reimer’s social-democratic alternative.73

The early Alberta NDP made the Saskatchewan CCF administration, which ran that province from 1944 to 1964, its model in terms of social programs and labour legislation. Reimer left the provincial NDP leadership in 1968 and was replaced by Notley, who, through intensive campaigning, was elected as MLA for Spirit River-Fairview in 1971. But the growth in Progressive Conservative support that year was at the expense of not only the Social Credit government that the Conservatives defeated but also the NDP, whose vote fell to 11 percent. A province-wide survey showed that only 8 percent of voters claimed to have voted NDP in 1971; the survey found that the figure rose only to 15 percent for trade unionists. Yet 66 percent of the unionists indicated that the party that best represented the interests of trade unionists was the NDP, causing one analyst to conclude that “labour has been seduced by high wages and the prospects of continued prosperity.”74

Throughout the 1970s, with oil prices rising, especially after OPEC began raising oil prices dramatically in the wake of the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, the NDP was simply unable to win additional seats despite Notley’s effective performance in the legislature as the voice of workers, farmers, and small-business people who lived with the consequences of the uneven distribution of the gains made from a hot energy economy. Inflation, high urban rents, and insufficient rental units left many Albertans on the outside of the great Alberta economic barbecue. But the passivity that thirty-six years of one-party government under Social Credit had
While many of the elected leaders of the labour movement after the merger of the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) in 1956 were socialists from the old CCL, a number of the conservatives from the pre-merger AFL remained active in the 1960s. Frank Bodie, a Calgary Transit Union member, was president of the AFL in 1960 and became the union’s secretary-treasurer the following year. He remained in that position until 1968, when he became a Northwest Territories government industrial relations officer. Eugene Mitchell, who succeeded him as secretary-treasurer, had cut his union teeth in the 1950s, when he was a process operator at a chemical plant in Medicine Hat called Northwest Nitro Chemicals, and he battled employer opposition in an effort to win recognition for the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) to replace the company union. He was not impressed with his predecessor’s attitude to either the NDP or Social Credit:

Bodie never took a very active role politically. Kind of dragged his feet. In fact, very close to Ernest Manning and the Social Credit. I recall one year we were making a presentation to the government. We went down there every year. Oh, cap in hand, you’d better believe it. Ernest Manning never seemed to like us. It was after we’d made our presentation to the cabinet. I know Frank Bodie stayed behind and was having a chitchat with the premier. It happened that our next executive meeting was coming up right after that. Bodie came in with a proposal to the executive board that the federation co-sponsor, along with the premier, bringing Billy Graham into the province for a tour of Alberta. I know at that time I made a motion to have him fired. The board didn’t see fit to fire him at that time, but it was certainly made very clear to him that there’d be none of that stuff.

SOURCE: Interview with Eugene Mitchell, Edmonton, 29 October 2002, ALHI.

Labour used its political action committees and its various labour schools to educate its members about political issues, stressing that it was hard to win gains in negotiations if the labour laws were stacked against you, and equally hard to hold onto whatever gains you did win when management held most of the cards, thanks to close government-corporate ties. But it faced a difficult task in trying to persuade its members, much less other Albertans, to embrace a social-democratic party. Apart from fighting for better provincial legislation, the labour movement in the province was also involved in federal politics. The Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) and its affiliates joined the Canadian Labour Congress on 14 October 1976, in calling a one-day strike against the federal wage controls that had been created did not abate at all as the Tories settled in to govern Alberta for an even longer period. In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the dissident Waffle group, which mounted a left-wing challenge within the NDP across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, had only modest success in Alberta. The Waffle called for nationalization of the major industries in Canada as a means both to give Canadians control over their economy, increasingly under American control, and to give workers control over their workplaces. But the unions responded with hostility to Waffle attacks on foreign control over Canadian unions, though ironically many of the Canadian sections of American unions did indeed, as mentioned earlier, form Canadian unions during the 1970s and afterwards. The Alberta Waffle called for nationalization of the energy industry, but Grant Notley and most of the NDP and labour movement called instead for higher taxation of the industry while leaving ownership in private hands.75
FIG 6-12 Alberta workers participate in national day of protest against wage controls, 14 October 1976. Courtesy of the Alberta Labour History Institute.
imposed a year earlier and remained in effect for three years. While almost fifty thousand Alberta workers joined the strike, the demonstrations in Alberta cities were smaller per capita than in many other areas of the country. In general, the labour leaders complained that their members seemed unwilling to join political demonstrations, regardless of the issue.76

Labour’s protests did not win changes in provincial labour legislation or cause the national or provincial governments to end wage controls earlier than 1978. But other labour campaigns, conducted in conjunction with other groups, did have an important effect during this period. The national labour movement played the largest role among organized interest groups in winning medicare: together, they convinced the Royal Commission on Health Care appointed by Diefenbaker’s Progressive Conservatives that the private insurance companies’ arguments that private insurance would deliver the goods was false. The minority Liberal parliament from 1963 to 1968 proved willing to implement a variety of reforms, from medicare, to the Canada Pension Plan, to the Canada Assistance Plan. Canada’s social programs, inferior overall to American social programs in the mid-1950s, had left American social provision in the dust by 1980. The Canadian labour movement’s decision to finance a party left of the Liberal Party — which contrasted with the American labour movement’s decision simply to back the Democrats, the American equivalent to the Liberals — was vindicated as a better means of pressuring governments in Canada to act on behalf of workers’ interests.77

In Alberta, the labour movement, though mostly ignored by governments, could point with pride to its efforts to persuade the provincial government to pass legislative guarantees for human rights, which Saskatchewan’s CCF government had pioneered in the 1940s. In 1960, the AFL, in its annual brief to the government, called for human rights legislation that would end discrimination on the basis of “race, colour or creed.”78 The federal government and six other provinces had already passed such legislation, but Alberta did not act until 1966, when it introduced the Human Rights Act, which, characteristically, it attempted to enforce by means of only one person. For its Canadian Centennial convention in 1967, the AFL chose the theme “Human Rights for All,” and convention speakers included a representative of the Alberta Indian Association as well as academic and labour experts on human rights.79 In 1972, the Alberta legislature passed the Individual Rights Protection Act, which created a Human Rights Commission and resulted in the province developing an apparatus for investigating and prosecuting cases of discrimination against individuals on the basis of sex, race, religion, or place of origin.

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Though Alberta suffered from the recession in the early 1960s and again in the early 1970s, on the whole, the growth of the energy sector shielded its economy from any extreme downturns while providing several major upturns. The big energy corporations were the biggest beneficiary of provincial governments that promoted private ownership of provincial resources and instituted labour policies that would ensure that workers’ interests would never trump the interests of capital. But many workers managed to do quite well financially despite the labour laws, particularly if they were in sectors that experienced labour shortages, such as the construction
sector, and if they had strong unions. A macho philosophy regarding worker productivity and risk-taking, promoted by government and management, was shared by many workers. Some of the union leaders recognized that the strong corporate-government link worked against the interests of workers and tried in various ways, particularly through founding and supporting the provincial NDP but also through union educational work, to change the philosophy of government in Alberta. They wanted the provincial government to take a larger role in planning the provincial economy and to make job security and on-the-job safety principal goals in that economy. During the 1960s and 1970s, they largely failed in these objectives, though they did create cadres of union militants who were prepared to fight the good fight both in the workplace and in political life. And they did manage to extract some concessions from the provincial government in the areas of occupational health and safety, and human rights.

The majority of Alberta workers, however, benefited little even as the energy boom created jobs for most of them. Keeping up with the inflationary spiral within an uncontrolled boom economy proved difficult for workers, particularly those in the service sector. As Warren Caragata commented in 1979 in his conclusion to Alberta Labour, “the real fight is still in the unorganized sector, where workers are denied even the basic rights won over the years by the labour movement. For unorganized workers wishing to join unions, the basic issue is still at stake — the very right to belong to a union.” The right of workers to join unions and to negotiate with employers would face even harsher tests in the 1980s as a major international recession stripped Alberta workers of their illusions that they lived in a place free from the economic laws of capitalism.