There was total shock that we were not only fighting the company, the government and the courts, but also police from across the province,” commented Ian Thorne, Energy and Chemical Workers Union staff representative, about the appearance of two hundred RCMP officers, along with dogs, on the picket line in Fort McMurray on 8 May 1986. It was an array of forces that many unions confronted in the 1980s, most spectacularly the Gainers workers in Edmonton, whose long confrontation with capitalist Peter Pocklington sparked the most visible demonstration of labour solidarity in the province’s history to date.

The 1980s proved the most militant decade in Alberta labour history. An economic downturn led to employer intransigence and government introduction of neo-liberal reforms that together threatened working conditions and workers’ quality of life. Legislation that was intended to destroy trade unionism in the construction sector was only the most blatant effort to make unions disappear. Workers’ efforts to defend and extend earlier gains produced a decade that transformed the province’s labour movement, reviving a tradition of protest politics that had characterized its earlier days. Many workers became militant because they realized that, as an Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) convention resolution noted in 1983, neo-liberal policies “were having a devastating effect on all sectors of our community.” These neo-liberal policies reflected pre-war notions that business alone should direct the economy while governments and unions should support business needs as defined by large business interests.

Private sector employers, supported by government, responded to the economic crisis with efforts to make the workers, rather than those whose decisions had caused the mess, pay the price to bring back prosperity. Until the mid-1970s, the postwar compromise among business, labour, and government meant that at least some progress had been made toward “soft” human resource management at work, legal protection of worker rights, and the promise of a steady improvement in the standard of living. Now, however, workers were expected to accept increasingly precarious employment,
restrictive legislation, and an ongoing campaign of cutbacks and privatization.

By 1980, the economies of the Western world had stagnated, but without the stubborn inflation of the 1970s giving way. Economists applied the term *stagflation* to this double whammy, marked by a long slowdown that turned into a recession in the last quarter of 1981. Neither Alberta workers nor their public services were spared as both the federal and provincial governments introduced restraint measures popularly associated with Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States. In fact, Thatcher and Reagan simply accelerated their predecessors’ policies that rejected expansion of government spending and the money supply as the means to kickstart private-market sluggishness. Instead, the focus was on restoring profits by making companies meaner and leaner, which, of course, meant accepting high unemployment. In Canada, too, monetary policy had been restrictive since 1975 and fiscal policy gradually followed.

Initially, companies claimed to offer workers long-term gain for short-term pain. For example, Lorraine Stallknecht, a Safeway clerk and president of the Fort McMurray Labour Council, recalled Safeway’s complaint that it was suffering. “They were asking their workers to take cutbacks. The union really believed them, the president or CEO at the time, who was promising them [the workers] that once they got their money back, they would share the wealth. Of course, that CEO no longer exists with Safeway.”

**THE RECESSION OF 1981**

Canada’s relatively brief but sharp recession in 1981–82 was deeper and more long-lived in Alberta because of the province’s excessive reliance on oil. The Lougheed government’s schemes for economic diversification during the boom, which had relied excessively on initiatives by the private sector, had failed. As the government itself later admitted, “many entrepreneurs in Alberta who could have further contributed to diversification committed most of their cash and efforts to expansion in the energy and real estate fields.” What diversification did occur was mostly in “satellite industries” serving the oil industry. Little had been done to develop a large-scale independent manufacturing base.

The Lougheed government attributed the downturn to the federal National Energy Program (NEP) of November 1980. The NEP proposed oil self-sufficiency for Canada, a secure oil supply particularly for the industrial base in eastern Canada, domestic ownership of the energy industry, lower prices, development of alternative energy sources, and increased government revenues through a variety of taxes and agreements. It proposed a level of government intervention, including a greatly expanded Petro-Canada, to help “Canadianize” the entire oil industry, which the industry and the Alberta government rejected.

Albertans were barraged with messages that the program was an outright attempt by the federal government to take over their resources. The Petro-Canada building in Calgary was dubbed “Red Square,” and stickers on pickup trucks declared: “Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark!” Albertans were generally resentful when Pierre Trudeau’s Liberals were returned
to office in February 1980, winning only two seats west of Ontario. As political scientists Larry Pratt and Garth Stevenson note, for those who had always regarded Trudeau as opposed to the aspirations of western Canada, “the new federal initiatives, with their emphasis on the redistribution of resource wealth and a much stronger role for the national government, seemed designed to keep the West in a position of permanent subordination.”

Claiming that the NEP threatened the constitutional rights of ordinary Albertans, Premier Lougheed cut shipments of oil to the rest of Canada and slowed down tar sands projects. The oil industry, supported by substantial elements of Canadian business and finance, “responded by cutting back new capital investment and exploration activity, and by launching a powerful lobbying campaign against the NEP.” Exxon’s Canadian subsidiary, Imperial Oil, shelved a proposed $8 billion heavy oil project in Cold Lake, threatening five hundred jobs. Customs officials at the Coutts US border crossing reported a massive exodus of oil rigs from Alberta as early as November 1980, and drilling activity dropped dramatically.

On 1 September 1981, Prime Minister Trudeau and Premier Lougheed announced a compromise agreement that scaled back the initial ambitions of the NEP. But by then, the international energy industry was facing great difficulties. OPEC had lost its ability to either maintain high prices for energy or restrict oil supplies. As the Western economies slowed, demand for oil and gas fell, and prices dropped in response to a glut of available fossil fuels. Nothing that governments did seemed to persuade the oil companies that new, stable investments were possible.

As oil companies laid off thousands of employees, related services suffered, and bankruptcies, business closures, and foreclosures became commonplace. Real estate values tumbled, as imploding markets led to unprecedented migration out of Alberta. Real per capita provincial incomes dropped, only recovering in the late 1980s. Edmonton fared worse than Calgary. Though the city issued a record number of building permits during 1980 and 1981, development ground to a near halt in 1982. As the capital city, Edmonton’s economy was further affected by government job cuts. When oil prices plunged from US$27 per barrel in fall 1985 to US$8 per barrel in August 1986, more jobs disappeared. By 1987, Edmonton’s unemployment rate was 11.1 percent, and almost twenty-four thousand Edmontonians had turned to welfare and the Food Bank.

The federal and provincial governments offered incentives to business and cutbacks to public services. Labour lawyer G. Brent Gawne later observed:

The vast wholesale migration of drilling companies out of the province, and the alarm that it caused in the streets of Calgary was seen as necessitating a fundamental change. The eighties saw a lurch to the right in Alberta, driven by a combination of factors that conspired to sacrifice the rights of workers in the misguided hope that these changes would kickstart the economy and return us all to prosperity.

In a province where bumper stickers proclaimed, “Oil feeds my family and pays my taxes,” the public accepted an Economic Resurgence Plan that included billion dollar royalty holidays, tax cuts, and other incentives anchored by a $5.4 billion Alberta Oil and Gas
Activity Program announced by Premier Lougheed in April 1982. Other grants followed. When Shell Canada president Bill Daniel set a 30 April deadline for increased federal participation in its proposed tar sands project, Alberta and Ottawa each agreed to put up 25 percent of the $14 billion cost. Even this could not stem the investment cuts, however. Perhaps the fatal blow came when Ed Czaja, president of Alsands Energy Consortium, announced that the consortium would not be proceeding with its megaproject after all, blaming a lack of confidence and poor cash flow for the decision.

This was a judgment based on international energy markets, not the emaciated NEP. For the Alberta government, which could not explain its failure to diversify the economy or its subsidies of billions of dollars to energy companies to create jobs, it was expedient to blame the NEP. Why accept that international oil prices and the province’s one-industry economy were the culprits when it was easier to blame Ottawa and the controversial NEP? As American prairie studies professor Frances Kaye observes, “To be sure, the drill rigs left Alberta and their departure was hastened by NEP incentives to explore on the ‘Canada Lands’ in the North and East — but they pulled out of Texas as well. The same bumper stickers appeared on trucks at both ends of the Great Plains: ‘Please God, if You let us have another boom, I promise not to piss it away this time.”

When Brian Mulroney and his federal Conservatives came to power in 1984, one of his first acts was to dismantle the NEP but not before myths associated with the program had fueled widespread separatist sentiment in Alberta. The federal Liberals would remain “the enemy” in the minds of many, rendering Alberta a secure base for the Conservative party to the present day.

GOVERNMENT RETRENCHMENT AND LABOUR’S RESPONSE

The climate of uncertainty that attended the economic slowdown made public spending, debt, and deficits a focus for governments, setting the stage for cutbacks and hard collective bargaining in the public sector.

Cutbacks and Neo-liberalism

While it was widely assumed that these cutbacks were a response to a drop in government revenues, Alberta’s politicians began to target public spending long before deficits became an issue. David Cooper and Dean Neu explain: “Political pronouncements and media coverage of the deficit/debt are reminiscent of ‘Chicken Little’ of children’s story fame who announces that ‘the sky is falling, the sky is falling’ to anyone who might listen.” Indeed, economists Melville McMillan and Allan Warrack have shown that, despite the investment drought of 1981–82, the Alberta government’s real per capita revenues grew at a healthy rate until 1986, outstripping other provinces. The same goes for government expenditures, which grew in real per capita terms until 1987.

According to economist Sten Drugge, the decline in government revenues and the beginning of provincial deficits that accompanied falling oil prices in 1986 were more attributable to corporate giveaways than to spending on public services. Lougheed’s 1982 plan alone doubled the tax credit on Crown royalties from 25 percent to 50 percent and the maximum annual allowable credit from $1 million to $2 million, which cost the Treasury an estimated $1.6 billion over the next three fiscal years. This amount was supplemented by further “stimulants” estimated at $5.6 billion between...
1982 and 1986. The annual report of the provincial Auditor General found that in the fiscal year that ended 31 March 1983, Alberta’s corporate sector received $162 million more from Alberta taxpayers than it paid in taxes, royalties, and fees.

An important feature of the neo-liberalism of the 1980s was the prominence of political formations and “think tanks” that consistently promoted measures to relax rules on business, downsize public services, promote the private sector, and submit wages and working conditions to market rule. The Business Council on National Issues (BCNI, now the Canadian Council of Chief Executives) emerged in the 1970s to play a leading role in influencing pro-business government policy. Chief executive officers of over one hundred of Canada’s largest companies — such as Air Canada, AT&T, Bechtel, Bombardier, and Canadian Pacific — came together under the leadership of Thomas d’Aquino to define a new direction for Canada.

Whereas the BCNI was simply the capitalist class without disguise, the so-called think tanks were corporate-sponsored ventures masked as independent research institutes. When a Canadian Chamber of Commerce study revealed that Canadians suspected business organizations and their research to be motivated by self-interest, a different public relations strategy became necessary. The Fraser Institute, created in 1974, helped to defeat David Barrett and the first NDP government of British Columbia and was regularly solicited by media and policymakers for a “balanced business perspective.” Promoting “a free and prosperous world through choice, markets and responsibility,” its well-funded and aggressive program of publication and public relations attacked everything from rent controls to public education, reserving special venom for government spending, debts, and deficits.

The National Citizens Coalition, another pro-business organization, formed as a lobby group in 1967 to oppose Canada’s new national health care act and gained prominence during the 1980s as a leading advocate of privatization, public spending cuts, and reduced taxes. Canada’s current prime minister, Stephen Harper, served as president from 1998 to 2002, during which he masterminded campaigns in support of “more freedom with less government.” Favoured targets included the Canada Health Act, the Canadian Wheat Board, closed-shop unions, and “gold-plated” pension plans for MPs and federal government employees.

**Workers Serve Early Notice**

 Strikes by four of Alberta’s largest unions took place even before the recession-related retrenchment of the early 1980s. The pattern was set in April 1980 in the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) strike discussed in chapter 6, the first of three general nurses’ strikes in the 1980s. UNA vice-president Jane Sustrik, who became a nurse shortly after that milestone strike, explained why the nurses saw the need to strike frequently. Initially employed at the University of Alberta Hospital and a member of the Staff Nurses Association of Alberta, she noted:

> I started around $7 or $8 as a nurse in 1982. Prior to that, one of my first jobs was teaching swimming as a lifeguard; I made more money teaching swimming as a lifeguard than I did at nursing. . . . So wages were a priority, to get wages in a more realistic zone compared to other health care professionals and people with equivalent education.
When six thousand nurses walked out of sixty-nine hospitals in February 1982, the Alberta government enacted a Disputes Inquiry Board and demanded a vote on its findings. Instead, the UNA held its own vote, receiving a mandate for a walkout. When they finally returned to work, an arbitrator awarded a 29 percent wage increase, as well as other improvements. Margaret Ethier, who served as UNA president from 1980 to 1989, attributed this and other victories to rank-and-file decision-making, backed by a fan-out system of communications that allowed the union to cope with an increasingly bureaucratized health system. Laws could not stop nurses from striking, she said. “You can fine me, but you can’t make me go to work. You could get the army out and march me to work, but can you make me work? No!”

As we saw in chapter 6, a wildcat strike in July 1980 by members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees was also successful in bringing the government to the bargaining table. It occurred in the midst of the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) walkout from Calgary School District No. 19 over the issue of class size. That labour action ended 29 September 1980, when the minister of Labour ordered the teachers back to work and created a commission to examine the relationship of class size to quality of education. The eventual report supported the teachers’ position but the government dismissed the report’s recommendations as too costly. However, it remains ATA policy that “maximum classroom enrolment should be 20 students.”

A forty-two day strike by the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), which represents inside
workers, began in 1981, just as the Government of Canada was moving to corporatize the Post Office as a Crown corporation. That year, CUPW made maternity leave a bargaining priority, and on 1 July, some twenty-three thousand postal workers began their fourth strike in seven years. After six weeks on the line, CUPW became the first national union to win maternity rights for its members. Its motto — “The struggle continues!” — would describe labour relations in the Post Office for the remainder of the decade.

*Turning Back the Industrial Relations Clock*

The Trudeau government’s wage controls of the 1970s evolved into a series of legislative controls on collective bargaining rights during the 1980s. In July 1982, the federal government limited wage increases in the federal sector to 6 percent and 5 percent over two years, later extending those limits to increases to old age security, family allowances, and federal public service pensions. The Alberta government, for its part, set out to limit public sector negotiations by issuing “bargaining guidelines” established by cabinet.

At its May 1982 convention, the Alberta Federation of Labour passed several resolutions declaring wage controls an attack on democratic principles of free collective bargaining. One resolution directed that “in the event government announces it intends to impose wage controls in any form, the Executive Council immediately organize a program of industrial action to culminate in a national general strike.” But no such national or provincial strike materialized during the decade that followed, despite constant imposition of wage controls.

The Alberta government moved determinedly to limit unions’ ability to represent their members. After being snubbed by the nurses in their 1982 strike, the government passed the *Health Care Continuation Act*, which made illegal any further strike by nurses before the end of 1983. The legislation threatened the union with severe sanctions if it failed to live up to its “peace” obligations, including huge fines, decertification, and an unprecedented prohibition on all union staff and officers, even if they had played no role in the strike, from holding office in any Alberta union. In 1983, this temporary act provided the template for Bill 44, the *Labour Statutes Amendment Act*, which replaced the right to strike for all hospital workers with compulsory arbitration in which arbitrators, in turn, were limited by government policy. Penalties for disobedience included huge fines for non-compliance, the right of an employer to apply for a six-month suspension of dues, the right of cabinet to decertify a union, and relaxed service requirements for court and board orders.

Claiming that too many “frivolous and vexatious” appeals were launched under Alberta’s *Employment Standards Act*, the government introduced a revision in 1984 requiring workers to post a $300 bond when appealing the decisions of employment standards officers. In 1985, further amendments to the *Individual Rights Protection Act* saw the concepts of “reasonable and justifiable” introduced as a defence for employers against discrimination charges by employees. Then the government, headed by the new Premier Don Getty, amended the *Industrial Wage Securities Act* in 1985 to remove a requirement for employers in the coal industry to post security for wages. This eliminated legislation passed in the 1950s to correct long-standing practices in an industry notorious for not paying its workers.
The erosion of regulatory protection during the economic downturn was particularly noticeable in the area of occupational health and safety, where unions were compelled to bargain for the most basic health and safety rights. Alberta remained the only Canadian jurisdiction that did not require Joint Health and Safety committees on worksites. Bill Flookes, president of the Brewery Distillery Soft Drink Local at the Calgary Brewing and Malting Company, recalls the conditions that moved his local to demand a committee in his plant:

"The plant differed from area to area. It’s very noisy and dangerous in the packaging area. But the other areas, like the brewing areas, cellars, fermenters, not so much. Except in a lot of places you’d have to work alone, and that’s one of the things we changed as well with the committee. You’d have to get in the tanks and you’d be by yourself. There were gases around, etc., and there were dangers that way."35

Glen Taylor, currently mayor of Hinton, recalls how empowering it was to become involved with his union’s safety committee in the town’s sawmill. “For the first time I was able to work with fellow employees to help an employer understand that there might be a safer or better way of working. . . . Health and safety can be a way to achieve many other things than just a safe and healthful workplace.”36

Alberta’s unions combined to challenge the Workers’ Compensation system when a regulatory change in 1982 eliminated the requirement to report no-lost-time accidents, opening the door to aggressive claims management by employers. Peter Holbein, an active United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 280P member, recalls Peter Pocklington’s takeover of Swift’s Edmonton meat-packing plant in 1982:

“He hired compensation specialists to cut down on his compensation bills . . . to get people to stay in the plant whether they were injured or not, and say they had light duty. But in fact a lot of it wasn’t light duty. They just changed the job a little bit and said, “You can handle it now.” . . . So a lot of people worked injured.”37

One notable victory during this period of anti-labour policy and regulation was related by Mike Tamton, president of the United Mine Workers of America District 18, on behalf of miners who were denied compensation for black lung:

“The offshoot was that, in 1979, black lung was recognized as a compensable disease. We had some of the oldtimers that were able to retroactively apply for claims for black lung. They received some pensions. I’ll never forget when the next time we met with some of those oldtimers, in particular an individual in Canmore, tears rolling down his eyes, when he said thank you.”38

---

FIG 7.3 Canadian Union of Postal Workers national strike, 1981. Provincial Archives of Alberta, J5175-1.
War Against the Construction Trades

Yes, definitely, since '84. That was the crunch, as we called it. We got hammered, and the government did nothing about it. They locked us out and said, “This is what you’re going to get.” Pay went from $18 something an hour down to $12 an hour. The 24-hour lockout — you’re locked out, that’s it.39

Medicine Hat carpenter Bill McGillivray had first-hand knowledge of the shift in labour policy for the construction trades during the 1980s. As business agent for the Medicine Hat local of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA), he could do little when contractors took advantage of an economic slowdown to turn back the clock on collective bargaining rights. Alberta’s oil booms are primarily construction booms, and when construction fell precipitously in the 1980s, contractors took advantage of the huge reserve of unemployed workers to smash the construction unions.

By law, expired collective agreements usually remain “bridged” until a new one is settled and may be terminated only by strike or lockout. When construction agreements expired in 1984, the Contractors’ Association implemented a twenty-four-hour lockout: they locked out their workers and declared twenty-four hours later that a collective agreement no longer existed. Workers were then offered their jobs at vastly reduced rates. To get rid of union contracts that had yet to expire, they set up “spin-off companies” to transfer work from unionized firms to non-unionized entities.40 The Alberta government refused to take action despite repeated arguments from unions and legal scholars that these lockouts violated the legislation’s intention of inducing parties to conclude an agreement and that the spin-offs were “dummy firms” established solely to escape existing agreements.

Huge wage reductions for formerly well-paid construction workers impacted local economies across Alberta. Like many others, Calgary carpenter Brad Bulloch chose not to work under the new regime, becoming a private home renovations contractor instead. He rejoined the union in 1987, in time to organize a walkout over health and safety issues. “The union is about safety, about longevity,” he said. “It’s about having a decent standard of living and the right to work in a safe environment so that you can grow up and cuddle your children’s children. That’s why I’m proud to work for this union.”41

The Independent Contractors and Business Association chose this period to introduce the “merit shop,” an industry-wide, portable benefit plan for “open-shop” (a euphemism for non-union) work. Formed in late 1985, the association grew to over thirteen hundred members, including most of Alberta’s general and trade contractors, explaining its success as “a response to escalating costs of building union and excessive work disruptions and jurisdictional disputes.”42 Although a partial recovery occurred in the late 1980s, the twenty-four-hour lockout and spin-offs are still available to contractors today.

Changes in labour law reflected changing strategies in human resource management, as “soft” human resources increasingly gave way to more traditional methods of “sweating” labour. John Ventura, business agent with United Food and Commercial Workers Local 280P, found a radical change in industrial relations at
THE IMPACT OF LOSING A UNION

All of Alberta’s big contractors were involved in the effort to destroy trade unionism in the construction industry during the 1980s recession. They virtually wiped out collective agreements and left workers at the mercy of contractors for their wages, benefits, and conditions. Brad Bulloch, business manager for Calgary Carpenters’ Local 2103, recalled:

One day, you were working for a union company with a full benefit package and full rate, and twenty-four hours later you were working for a non-union company at what I figured to be a 65 percent cut. It was devastating to anybody that had a mortgage, a car payment, or a family, such as me. We lost members, and some lost their lives through suicide. There were many marriage breakups, people lost their homes, lost their vehicles. In 1984, people were selling their homes for one dollar to get out of the liabilities.

Similar reports came from across the industry. In 1980, Alberta’s oldest craft union, Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers Local #1, was 806 members strong. In 1984, after the twenty-four-hour lockout reduced hourly wages from $18.00 to $12.50, members left the province or found work in other fields, and by 1986, the local’s membership had declined to 254.


the Edmonton Gainers plant in 1984. “Prior to Pocklington, we had good management, and things got resolved — could go for years without an arbitration,” he said. “In fact, when I first became a chief steward, there were only three or four grievances filed for an entire year. After Pocklington, we never had less than a hundred grievances per year.”

Pocklington’s workers and their unions were not alone in confronting employers who refused to adapt their management strategy to accommodate a unionized regime. Bill Flookes explains:

To a large degree, our problem was that we were the decision makers for the union, but the people we dealt with weren’t. . . . A lot of times, the top of the union would be speaking to the middle of the management pyramid. As a consequence, decision makers were speaking to the people who could not make decisions, which is where a lot of frustration came in terms of relationships and communication.

Workers Take On the Law

It didn’t take long for Alberta’s unions to challenge anti-union employers and governments. In April 1983, the day after Bill 44 with its ban on hospital strikes was introduced, Dave Werlin, the newly elected president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, declared a “War on 44.” Action was overdue, he said, “to mobilize support for fundamental trade union and democratic rights and to ensure that in the future, the government would think twice before infringing even further on the freedoms and rights of the trade union movement and general public in Alberta.” The AFL would “solicit support from
organizations outside the Federation, to organize an aggressive lobby against the government, to ultimately change the political pattern of a huge number of voters in Alberta, and to establish a ‘War Chest’ to come to assistance of any union which is ‘persecuted or prosecuted’ under the primitive provisions of Bill 44’.

Most unions in the province, whether affiliated or not, supported a voluntary assessment of forty-four cents per member per month. When the response to public hearings on Bill 44 was so overwhelming that many requests to appear were rejected, the AFL organized its own “Real Hearings on Bill 44.” Although the bill passed, the campaign helped to lay the basis for the militancy that followed.

The Dandelions emerged in 1985 as a largely spontaneous response of construction workers to twenty-four-hour lockouts and spin-offs. While their unions struggled through conventional channels, unemployed workers with little prospect of decent work began to meet, vowing that just like the tough weeds, they would resist efforts to eradicate their unions. Dandelion signs appeared across Alberta, adding considerable energy to the demands of the labour movement for job creation and workers’ rights. Dandelions joined other unions and organizations in Solidarity Alberta (a coalition of various justice-oriented groups that eventually merged into the Action Canada Network), even appearing at farm gates where farmers were threatened with eviction.

In the same year that the Dandelions sprouted, Dave Werlin, in a policy paper for the 1985 AFL convention, charged the Conservatives with manufacturing a crisis to move against organized labour in the legislature, the courts, and worksites, and then withdraw support for public programs at a time when workers...
were experiencing depressed income levels, benefits, and social conditions.49

Mike Wilgus, a representative for the Bakery Workers’ Union, described workers’ attitudes after an extended lockout at Edmonton’s McGavin’s bread factory in December 1985. Restrictive labour laws and Labour Board orders prevented strikers from doing anything about strikebreakers who crossed their picket lines. “We ended up losing,” he said, “but it made our people more militant. . . . More than anything else was their realization that the government had screwed them. It was the government more than the company that had taken their rights away. . . . It changed their political view.”50 Experiences of this kind contributed to major setbacks for the ruling Conservatives in the provincial elections of 1986 and 1989.
GROWING POVERTY AND HARD TIMES

With businesses closing, public employees losing jobs, and cutbacks in public services, signs of hard times began to appear everywhere in Alberta. One of the clearest was the proliferation of food banks that paralleled the mass charity organizations of the 1930s. The Edmonton Food Bank was first opened in 1981 by the Edmonton Gleaners Association, a charity that worked with such groups as the Salvation Army, Operation Friendship, WIN House, Our House Addiction Recovery, the Unemployed Action Centre, the George Spady Centre, and church organizations to provide emergency food relief for the needy. The Calgary Inter-Faith Community Action Association followed a year later. By mid-decade, seventy such banks operated across the province, and Alberta had the highest percentage of food bank recipients in Canada, approximately 40 percent of whom were children under eighteen.

Unemployed Action (or Help) Centres were another sign of the times. These were initiated by the AFL in 1983 after its convention adopted a policy paper entitled “The Bloom is Off the Rose in Wildrose Country,” which directed the AFL executive to “explore ways and means of establishing Unemployment Action Centres across the Province to offer aid, assistance and organization to the unemployed and to promote dialogue on the economic and employment crisis.” The federal New Employment Expansion and Development program (NEED) provided a grant of $466,000 to finance staffing and operation of twelve Unemployed Help Centres across the province for a period of twelve months. In 1984, Keith Rimstead was hired as provincial coordinator and Tamara Kozlowska as assistant coordinator.

Each centre was guided by a board comprising trade union, church, and community leaders. Trade unions supplied equipment and materials for the operation, and in each case, the city or town council provided free space.

While the centres were primarily committed to bread-and-butter issues facing unemployed workers, such as difficulties dealing with the Unemployment Insurance Commission, they also served as a resource for advocacy and information by organizing discussion forums and engaging in public policy advocacy around such topics as housing, human rights, and job creation. A recurring subject, Kozlowska recalls, was renters’ rights, as accommodation costs were rising to record highs in many Alberta cities, and governments had done little to ease the pain for the poor and homeless.

The centres attracted a diverse population. Newcomers who had come to Alberta during its boom mixed with long-time residents who had been reasonably secure before the economic downturn, but who, according to Kozlowska, “found themselves in trouble . . . . Often whole households became unemployed.” Kozlowska also noted differences in political outlook. “Newcomers were often aware of the Canadian reality; they had historical perspective that allowed them to recognize the nature of their hardship.” Long-time Edmontonians, on the other hand, “wanted to be on the winning team. They felt hurt by what had happened; it was as if the ‘family’ had let them down. There was little political analysis.”
LABOUR’S HOUSE DIVIDED

Within the labour movement, however, political analyses were being offered, but not everyone viewed the dilemmas faced by the movement in the same way. The more radical trade unionists recognized that the post-war labour-relations ideal was collapsing before their very eyes. Sometimes referred to as Fordism, this model assumed a workforce doing lifelong assembly-line tasks that mechanization made ever more productive and for which the company, after negotiations with the unions, would reward workers with wage increases that took into account both inflation and productivity increases. The Fordist model viewed workers largely as toilers and consumers within a specific nation, to whom companies and governments catered because they wanted them to be productive workers with enough consumer power to buy what the nation produced. By the 1980s, in an economy that was increasingly globalized, it had become clear that corporations wanted “flexibility” to move jobs and machinery to various plants around the world in ways that maximized productivity and profits. Trade unions, with their defence of Fordism and workers’ rights to lifelong work and constantly improving wages and benefits, were considered dinosaurs in this new environment, impediments to profit-making. Trade unionists who recognized the dangers of the post-Fordist world — which was crushing their former powers to negotiate with employers — saw a need for unions that could fight back politically, both in terms of electing progressive politicians and in terms of uniting a broad section of the working class plus other social groupings in coalitions that would fight the new anti-national and anti-communitarian philosophy of capital.

It was in this context that Dave Werlin, a representative with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), was elected president of the Alberta Federation of Labour in 1983. Werlin became the first member of the Communist Party of Canada to head a provincial labour federation. Born and raised on a farm in Saskatchewan, Werlin became involved in CUPE as a municipal worker, first in Calgary and then in Vancouver. He was appointed as a staff representative in Calgary in 1979. After serving as AFL president, he returned to CUPE in 1989 as its Alberta regional director, where he remained until his retirement in 1996. Werlin’s leadership addressed a broad range of social and political issues, reviving a tradition of social unionism at a critical time in Alberta’s labour history. After kicking off the “War on 44,” he proceeded to take on such diverse causes as farmers facing eviction, the anti-cruise missile campaign, and the Lubicon band’s battle to preserve traditional land rights against the oil and timber industries.

But others within the labour movement took much longer to accept the idea that a new trade unionism was necessary for the post-Fordist world of globalization and the return to pre–World War II attitudes toward unions on the part of employers. In 1982, the building trades unions left the AFL, in tandem with their unions’ secession nationally from the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) to form the Canadian Federation of Labour (CFL). The CFL represented only American-headquartered construction unions in Canada and rejected both political partisanship and social unionism. Such ongoing issues as whether certain work “belonged” to in-house employees or to the construction trades aggravated the CFL-CLC split. There were also divisions over tripartism — that
is, formal collaboration of unions with government and industry; some unions saw it as the only way to secure gains, while others believed it would lead to betrayal of workers. This disagreement became public when the CFL began dealing with the Mulroney government, while the CLC maintained a critical stance.59

The movement for Canadian independence also fueled the split, as national unions attracted thousands of trade union members who broke from their US-dominated internationals during the 1980s. In 1960, 72 percent of Canadian unionists belonged to US-based industrial unions, but by 1989, with expanding public sector unions and breakaways from the US-dominated unions, only 32 percent belonged to these so-called internationals. Some of these breakaways were contentious, such as the Canadian paperworkers’ rupture with the International Paperworkers’ Union in 1980.60 Others were amicable. In April 1980, delegates from the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW), the Canadian Chemical Workers (CCW), and an independent Quebec union of textile workers met in Montreal to form the Energy and Chemical Workers Union (ECWU), with thirty thousand members. As Wayne Roberts notes, “The new union unified the major groups of energy and chemical workers, merging the experiences of the shock troops of Canadian nationalism, partisans of Quebec nationalism, and champions of classic internationalism.”61 Neil Reimer became the national president and kept the ECWU head office in Edmonton. When the split with the Denver-based OCAW occurred in 1986, the international not only handed over all that was owed but also maintained a common strike fund and continued to work with Canadians on such issues as health and safety.62

DEEPENING ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE PEOPLE’S RESPONSE

Financial problems and the collapse of some key pillars of Peter Lougheed’s industrial plan for Alberta were just around the corner when he handed over the reins of government to Don Getty in 1985. By the mid-1980s, provincial revenues had shrunk so badly that the government had to borrow a record $5.5 billion to see itself through the 1986–87 fiscal year.63

Getty’s Reforms

One of the original core of the Conservative Party that swept into power in 1971, Getty had served as Alberta’s minister of Federal and Intergovernmental Affairs and then minister of Energy and Natural Resources. He left government in 1979 to serve on boards of several energy and financial companies, but came back in 1985 to be elected leader of the Progressive Conservative Party, which automatically made him premier. Getty then led his party to a reduced majority in the 1986 general election, and when he lost his Edmonton-Whitemud seat in 1989, a by-election was arranged in the electoral district of Stettler to allow him to re-enter the legislature.64

In 1985, the Alberta government ran its first deficit in over two decades, and when the price of West Texas crude plunged the following year, the drop in energy revenues led to a fiscal deficit of $3.4 billion. Financial woes were exacerbated by a struggling agricultural sector, a failing real estate market, and finally the collapse of several government-subsidized enterprises, including two banks, the Canadian Commercial Bank and the
Northlands Bank. \(^65\) Calls for Thatcher-style reforms sounded anew.

The new premier’s first reaction was to intervene with generous stimulus packages, giving the agricultural sector a $2 billion loan program to address high interest rates and the energy sector almost $600 million in loan guarantees, mainly to Husky Oil and Syncrude for capital projects. Pocklington received a $55 million guarantee (in addition to a $20 million loan) to upgrade his Gainers meat-packing plant. The perception grew that Getty’s administration was willing to spend public money to support large businesses but was indifferent to the problems of working people.\(^66\)

Getty then took steps to reduce and transform Alberta’s public sector. While taxes were raised by $1 billion for 1986–87, program spending was cut by 6.3 percent, including decreases in grants to schools, universities, municipalities, and hospitals. Municipalities, in particular, began to feel the pinch as governments downloaded responsibility for services onto them.\(^67\) None of this seemed to work, however, as budget deficits continued throughout Getty’s term. By the time he finally retired in 1993, the debt-free government he had inherited in 1985 had accumulated a debt of $11 billion.

Even before revenues dried up, the Alberta government had begun to cut services and lay off staff. Divestment of Alberta’s technical institutes, mental health hospitals, and a number of other institutions, all to separate boards, was announced in 1982.\(^68\) In 1984, the government cancelled fourteen hundred casual jobs at the Alberta Liquor Control Board (ALCB), contracted out government temporary services, and privatized large sections of Alberta Social Services. In November 1983, thousands of government positions were cut through layoffs, contracting out, and position abolitionment; this was followed by further cuts in 1984, bringing the total government jobs lost to fourteen hundred.\(^69\)

The assault on government services began in earnest in 1985 as the government began implementing its plans to privatize ALCB liquor stores, hand over certain government services to volunteer agencies, contract out food services at universities and hospitals, and privatize provincial parks and campsites. Transportation Minister Marvin Moore advised municipal districts and counties that they would qualify for their share of regular capital roads funding only if they contracted 50 percent of the work to the private sector.\(^70\)

The Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) responded with a Government Watch program to document cutbacks and an advertising campaign to warn the public of their harmful effects. Social partners such as the Edmonton Social Planning Council publicized the tremendous increases in social problems created by an unemployment rate that had climbed to 10.1 percent in Alberta, problems such as alcoholism, cardiovascular disease, mental hospital admissions, and suicide.\(^71\) Social agencies felt the bite as funding from sources like the United Way shrunk and research contracts from government shrivelled. As Neil Webber, minister of Social Services and Community Health, said, “We don’t fund our critics.”\(^72\)

One of the biggest issues to emerge in the 1980s was the fight to preserve the public health care system in Alberta. An alarm was sounded in 1977 when the federal government abandoned a 50/50 cost-sharing agreement with provinces in favour of a block-funding scheme that failed to tie federal funds to hospitals, medical care,
FIG 7.7 Gainers picketers stop scab buses, 1986. Courtesy of the Alberta Labour History Institute.
or other designated services. When extra-billing and facility fees became the order of the day, the Friends of Medicare was born following an Alberta Federation of Labour convention at which delegates adopted a paper entitled “Friends of Medicare: Concerns on the Erosion of Medicare in Alberta.”73 When the Alberta government passed the Alberta Health Care Insurance Amendment Act in 1980, implicitly legalizing extra-billing, the Friends planted people in doctors’ offices, held public hearings, surveyed and educated the public, and lobbied MLAs. Their reward was to be named “Public Enemy #1” by Alberta Conservatives at their 1983 party convention.74

Former Saskatchewan Chief Justice Emmett Hall, whose 1965 report had given rise to the initial Medical Care Act, released a second report in 1982. The subsequent Canada Health Act of 1984 banned extra-billing as contrary to the principle of universal accessibility.75 The Alberta government’s determination to test this ban resulted in its paying $18 million in penalties from mid-1984 to the end of 1985.76

At the same time, critics of public education were becoming more vocal in their calls for a more traditional pedagogy and for private and charter schools, driven by the marketplace notion that parents should choose where their children are educated. The labour movement had traditionally supported public schools as a basic precondition for democracy and argued that private schools would undermine the ability of the public system to operate. After a 1982 Supreme Court decision allowed a group of Mennonites to withdraw their children from public schools, the province commissioned A Study of Private Schools in Alberta by Woods Gordon Management Consultants, and then increased its funding to private schools to 50 percent of the provincial per-pupil grant. By the end of the decade, the Alberta School Act had been amended to provide ample legal basis for public funding of private schools.77

**Resistance in the Mid-1980s**

With deteriorating economic conditions, unions in all sectors were faced with demands for concessions, making 1985 and 1986 years of much contention. Emboldened by President Reagan’s destruction of the union of American air traffic controllers in 1981, Canadian airlines began to press their employees. Pacific Western Airlines began a prolonged stand-off in 1985 with the United Auto Workers/Canadian Air Line Employees Association (UAW/CALEA), the International Association of Machinists, and the Canadian Air Line Flight Attendants Association by tabling over two hundred concessionary demands. The labour movement joined picket lines and rallies until a tentative agreement was reached with UAW/CALEA after eight weeks, but the strike continued until the other two unions could vote on a conciliator’s report.78

In September 1985, Yellow Cab drivers struck taxi service at Edmonton’s International Airport for eighteen days. AUPE was invited to certify their bargaining unit, based on an earlier organizing drive that had been thwarted at the Supreme Court on a technicality, but this attempt ended once again in failure.79 Members of the United Nurses of Alberta employed by health units went on a ten-week strike in late 1985, agreeing to return to work in late January only when they won wage parity with nurses employed in hospitals. Their bargaining stance remained firm: “A nurse is a nurse.”80
A ten-week strike by about nine hundred members of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union against deep concession demands began late in 1985 when employers reacted to a strike against Carling O’Keefe in Calgary with a lockout at all Alberta breweries, as well as at Alberta Brewers’ Agents.81 That year also spelled the beginning of the end for the Hotel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders Union at the Legions, when members finally abandoned their fight against a lockout at Edmonton’s Montgomery Legion. The Edmonton Strathcona Branch followed suit soon after.82

The next summer, the Gainers meat-packing plant in Edmonton became the scene of a strike that AFL president Werlin later called “a watershed in the struggle of working people in this province.” He went on to explain:

It was a strike which, if won, would stand us in good stead in terms of having demonstrated our ability, our resilience and ability to fight back, and which, if lost, would have set a trend which would have spread throughout the whole country, a trend which Mr. Pocklington and his Bay Street and St. James Street backers had fully intended to achieve through that strike.83

Peter Pocklington had started in Edmonton with several Ford dealerships; he parlayed them into a small empire that included Gainers, Palm Dairies, Canbra Foods, and the Edmonton Oilers. In 1983, he ran unsuccessfully for leadership of the federal Progressive Conservatives.84 His attitude toward trade unions became evident in his management of Gainers. In 1984, members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 280P had stepped back from a strike after Pocklington’s negotiators convinced them that concessions were vital to the company’s survival. They settled for a two-year contract with rollbacks, graphically described by John Ewasiw, a member of the local executive:

We took a hell of an ass-kicking in 1984 as far as wages and benefits were concerned. The starting rate for all the people in 1984 was $11.99. When he got finished, the starting rate was lowered to $6.99, benefits were cut . . . and there was no such thing as a work week from Monday to Friday. . . . Our sick and accident insurance was literally taken away. . . . Alberta Health Care benefits were really cut for junior people. It was just hacked to pieces. We thought there was no alternative.85

Gainers did more than roll back wages: along with the Calgary Burns plant, it broke the back of pattern bargaining, which had brought stability to Canada’s meat-packing industry since the early 1940s. When profits rebounded in spring 1986, company negotiators came back to the bargaining table with further concession demands.

On 1 June 1986, workers began a six-month walkout. Local 280P president John Ventura explained, “The average worker was so ticked off by the way they had been abused by management, we couldn’t have prevented a strike.” Many UFCW 280P members had been on strike before, but never one like this. American meat-packing lobbyist Leo Bolanes had been hired by Pocklington on a $300,000-a-year contract to back public pronouncements that he would never settle with the union, and for the first time, members saw their employer bringing in busloads of replacement workers, precisely the reason
why Bolanes was paid “the big bucks,” said Ventura.86

The community rallied around the strikers. “Pocklington came across as being just a greedy bastard, and it was easy for people to give us their support,” Ventura recalled.87 Gainers and Pocklington became household epithets, and buttons claiming that “Gainers makes wiener with scabs” appeared in the streets. Edmontonians appeared at picket lines, at the legislature, and at Premier Getty’s Edmonton home as he was hosting a breakfast for Canada’s premiers. A Conservative campaign meeting for the Pembina by-election was disrupted, and Prime Minister Mulroney prevented from speaking.88 A national boycott team travelled across Canada to spread what national representative Kip Connelly described as “probably the most successful boycott ever undertaken in Canada, maybe in North America. It really captured the imagination of consumers, and the Gainers dispute itself captured the attention of the media.”89 A poll taken at the end of 1986 showed that 75 percent of Edmontonians were avoiding products bearing Gainers’ B18 federal inspection sticker.90

A settlement was finally reached on 11 December, after Labour Board chair Andrew Sims ordered the company, in no uncertain terms, to bargain in good faith with the union. Pocklington agreed to hire back all strikers and even guaranteed their pensions. Life began to unravel for him soon after, however, and bankruptcies, seizures, and legal prosecutions would follow him to his self-exile in California.

Two other meat-packers were struck that summer of 1986. The American meat-packing giant Tyson had turned the small Lakeside plant at Brooks into Canada’s largest beef slaughter plant and was firmly resisting organizing by UFCW 473. In Red Deer, UFCW 1118 went on strike against Fletchers Fine Foods on the same day as the Gainers walkout began. Union representative Allan Johnson attributes their settlement to the fact that the company’s plant in Vancouver was also out on strike. As well, said Johnson, Fletchers was owned by hog producers, who were more interested in finances than ideological warfare. The workers took the company on again in 1988, however, successfully enduring an eight-month lockout imposed to crush the union.91

Highly publicized strikes against the meat-packers overshadowed other industrial actions in the summer of 1986, such as the longest — and last — strike by Alberta Liquor Control Board employees, which began on 31 July 1986. Gord Christie, then president of AUPE Local 50, explained why members maintained an illegal strike for fifty-seven days:

In the eighties, our members made $25,000 to $30,000, had a reasonable pension plan, health care benefits, dental, etc. They took those jobs and made them into wage and casual jobs without benefits, where people were on call twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, but worked two or three hours a day, if at all. That was the atmosphere we went into.92

In May 1986, the McMurray Independent Oil Workers (M1OW) began a strike at the Suncor Plant in Fort McMurray. Many of the members had come from unionized refineries and mines in the Maritimes, explained President Dan Comrie, and were prepared to remain firm. In 1986, M1OW had filed over four hundred grievances, and the Energy and Chemical Workers Union (ECWU) sent in staff representative Ian Thorne to assist.93 When the company turned down a "stand
pat” union offer on 1 May 1986, and instead served lockout notice, MIOW responded with strike notice, and on the same day, affiliated with the ECWU. Suncor immediately obtained court injunctions to limit pickets and sued the union for 55 million in damages. Even though the union said it would obey another injunction on 8 May, almost two hundred RCMP officers accompanied with dogs appeared at the picket lines.94 Members turned out en masse to walk the lines and, when led away by police, were replaced by wives and other members. In the course of the strike, 152 arrests were made.95 In early October, after the failure of yet another back-to-work tactic, Suncor met with ECWU director Reg Basken to negotiate a settlement offering mid-term wage increases, employee assistance programs, and a radical change in industrial-relations strategy.96

By the summer of 1986, members of International Woodworkers of America (IWA) 1-207 had been on strike at Zeidler plywood plants in Edmonton and Slave Lake for over a year. Founder Fred Zeidler had maintained a cool but respectful relationship with the union, but when he passed away, his son-in-law, Neil Cameron, took advantage of a depressed labour market to destroy the union. While the strike in Edmonton was relatively peaceful, aggressive tactics employed by the RCMP in Slave Lake prompted AFL president Dave Werlin to complain to the government that government involvement was strictly to serve the interests of the employer and was neither protecting citizens nor maintaining law and order. The union remained on strike until 1988, when it lost to a section in the new Labour Code that declared a strike ended once it had lasted over two years.97

FIG 7-8 McMurray Independent Oil Workers strike in Fort McMurray, 1986. Courtesy of the Alberta Federation of Labour.
LABOUR LEGISLATION: AMENDMENTS AND CHALLENGES
Labour Law Revised — for the Worse

Public reaction to the long hot summer of discontent in 1986 prompted the Alberta government to sponsor yet another review of labour legislation in 1987. The Alberta Federation of Labour responded by organizing Change the Law meetings across Alberta. For the first time, names and contact information of all participants were preserved on a computerized database, allowing the AFL to maintain contact with over ten thousand individuals for union-related activities. Coalitions spawned by the Change the Law campaign were put to use in worksite organizing, May Day festivals, and other activities for years after.98

After taking a “road show” through Alberta, across Canada, and even to other countries, Labour Minister Ian Reid drafted revisions that extended restrictions in labour law to workers in both public and private sectors. Among other changes, the Alberta Labour Relations Code demanded that a representation vote be held before the Labour Board could certify a union, even when a large majority of workers had signed cards. As well, prohibitions on employer access to employees during organizing were withdrawn, providing a green light to harass and even fire workers who had signed union cards.99 Employers could frustrate a union drive and simply write off whatever penalty might be imposed as the “cost of doing business,” said Werlin.100 The only remedy available to the Labour Board would be to order a vote in a “poisoned” environment.

The province also began to cut worker compensation costs, just as it was pursuing fewer prosecutions for health and safety violations. When courts ruled that employer negligence was the cause of death, employers were fined an average of just over three thousand dollars per death from 1985 to 1987.101 Workers’ Compensation Board (WCB) CEO Ken Pals announced plans to further reduce the role of the WCB, causing the AFL to initiate a province-wide coalition of injured workers.102 Demonstrators at WCB offices across Alberta demanded full public hearings and immediate action on outstanding claims and appeals.

FIG 7-9 Workers march on the Alberta legislature in 1987, demanding that the government rescind anti-labour laws. Courtesy of the Alberta Federation of Labour.
On the positive side, unions saw some progress in their long-standing demand for workers’ right to know about workplace hazards to which they were exposed. In 1986, the federal government created the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS), which required suppliers to provide information about materials they were shipping. But Alberta did not enact WHMIS until a year later, and even then, failed to incorporate some key provisions, such as full union participation and adequate worker education. The ECWU took the impetus of WHMIS a step further, however, negotiating a deal at Edmonton’s Petro-Canada refinery to deduct three cents an hour from workers’ pay to finance union education and training in health and safety.

There were also rumours that the government was planning to pass right-to-work laws modelled on laws in effect in parts of the US. These laws banned the “agency shop,” that is, a unionized workplace in which employees must pay union dues, although they are not officially required to join the union. Opponents used the misleading term “closed shop” to imply that workers were being coerced into joining the union. No such coercion existed, but the courts had ruled in the late 1940s that because all workers benefited from the union’s efforts, they should all contribute to the union’s functioning. Otherwise, the union would become a “free good,” a service that everyone receives whether they pay for it or not — a situation that tends to cause the service to disappear for lack of funding. A worker at a Hinton union meeting recalled assembling facts and figures about infant deaths, average wages, life spans, literacy rates, and so on that showed how the general population was suffering in right-to-work states. “It was really lucky,” he said, “that the AFL put the effort and time into organizing that battle, because I believe that the Alberta government was going to put in that legislation, and it was just stopped by a hair.”

Labour and the Charter

On 17 April 1982, the Constitution Act, which included a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, was signed by Queen Elizabeth II in a ceremony in Ottawa. Alberta government officials expressed concern with a document “intended to constrain government action inconsistent with those rights and freedoms,” particularly when such action is “designed to regulate the behaviour of labour or management.”

Canadian trade unions had done little to influence the Charter process and unsurprisingly found little immediate support in the Charter for collective bargaining rights. While a few unions sent submissions, no trade union representative appeared before the Special Joint Committee on the new constitution. The main pro-union intervention came from Svend Robinson, NDP MP for Burnaby, who proposed that section 2(d) of the Charter on “freedom of association” be amended to say “freedom of association including the freedom to organize and bargain collectively.” His amendment was defeated, and trade unions would wait over twenty years before they could turn to the Charter to protect these rights.

Three Charter cases in 1987 established that the freedom of association provided in section 2(d) guaranteed neither the right to strike nor the right to bargain collectively. The lead case came from Alberta, when the Alberta Court of Queen’s Bench postponed a case.
brought by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees to refer the issue of the right to strike directly to the Supreme Court.109 The case dealt with the Public Service Employee Relations Act, the Labour Relations Act, and the Police Officers Collective Bargaining Act, all of which prohibited strikes and restricted the scope of arbitration. The outcome was damaging, as it established that the rights of trade unions could not be greater than the rights its members enjoyed as individuals. Speaking for the majority, Justice McIntyre said, “People cannot, by merely combining together, create an entity which has greater constitutional rights and freedoms than they, as individuals, possess.” 110

Justices Beetz, Le Dain, and La Forest took McIntyre’s argument a step further, arguing that trade unions could not be distinguished from other forms of association when interpreting their rights.111 But Justices Dickson and Wilson disagreed, arguing for special status for trade unions. They wrote:

In the context of labour relations, the guarantee of freedom of association in s. 2(d) of the Charter includes not only the freedom to form and join associations but also the freedom to bargain collectively and to strike. The role of association has always been vital as a means of protecting the essential needs and interests of working people. Throughout history, workers have associated to overcome their vulnerability as individuals to the strength of their employers, and the capacity to bargain collectively has long been recognized as one of the integral and primary functions of associations of working people. . . . The right of workers to strike is an essential element in the principle of collective bargaining.112

Such decisions created the presumption for the next twenty years that the Charter did not protect the right to engage in collective bargaining or to strike.113

A separate workers’ rights challenge occurred in October 1987, when Olive Dickason, a professor at the University of Alberta, complained to the Alberta Human Rights Commission that the university’s compulsory retirement policy contravened section 7 of the province’s Individual’s Rights Protection Act by discriminating on the basis of age. A provincial board of inquiry agreed with her, but the university appealed the decision all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada, which decided that mandatory retirement was reasonable and justifiable within the narrow meaning of the act.114

A SOCIAL AGENDA FOR LABOUR

While mainstream media focused on jurisdictional battles between Edmonton and Ottawa, trade unionists were forming coalitions with social activists to lay the foundation for a robust social movement in the province. The Council of Canadians emerged in 1985 to oppose the domination of Canada’s social, economic, and political fabric by American corporations. Its tours, “days of action,” conferences and demonstrations were supported by the AFL and individual unions, who also began to use Council research reports and organizational capacity in their work.

Another expression of social activism in the 1980s concerned food security, as the growth in corporate control of the food industry caused increasing concern about the cost and quality of food available to Canadians. Trade unionists participated in the Peoples’ Food
Commission, which held public hearings across Canada and published *Land of Milk and Money: The National Report of the People’s Food Commission* in 1980.\(^{115}\) Alberta coordinator Lucien Royer explained that the “Commission process naturally began to identify the linkages between international trade, food exports and imports . . . as well as issues like who controls prices.” \(^{116}\)

Although it had only a brief lifespan, Solidarity Alberta, founded in 1984, brought trade unions into a coalition with the unemployed, youth groups, senior citizens, Aboriginal people, farmers, the disabled, welfare recipients, the peace movement, and church organizations.\(^{117}\) It merged into the Action Canada Network (ACN) in 1987, forming perhaps the largest network of national and provincial organizations and coalitions ever to appear in Canada.\(^{118}\) Encouraged by the National Farmers’ Union, one of the ACN member organizations, labour chose to speak out on rural issues such as the abolition of the Crow Rates. An AFL brief to a House Committee on Transportation in 1987 called on Ottawa to “nationalize the CPR, if as a private enterprise, it is unwilling to meet its public obligations.” \(^{119}\)

As early as 1982, the AFL joined with the Alberta Status of Women Action Committee (ASWAC) to promote equal pay for work of equal value. At the time, the average woman worker earned only 55 percent of average male earnings. By the 1980s, the National Action Committee on the Status of Women (NAC) — an activist organization dedicated to such issues as daycare, birth control, maternity leave, family law, education, and pensions — had grown into a large national coalition encompassing some seven hundred groups. ASWAC was the provincial umbrella group and was active within NAC.

The decade also saw increased attention to international solidarity, including the anti-apartheid movement and the California grape boycott launched by the United Farmworkers of America to compel California to enforce legislation won by their struggle in the 1960s and 1970s. Employers continued to spray grape fields with insecticides and herbicides, poisoning farm-workers, their families, and their communities. CUPE representative Clarence Lacombe recalls his meeting with perhaps the best-known American labour activist of the last century:

> When I was a representative in Red Deer, and also president of the Labour Council, we collected money for the California farm workers, and when César Chávez . . . came to Red Deer, I had the opportunity to talk to him. I consider him to be one of the brightest leaders in the labour movement, and somebody who’s an example to other people as to what can be accomplished when you have a strong enough desire to do something.\(^{120}\)

Some sections of the labour movement also played a significant role in the expanding environmental movement. AFL staffer Lucien Royer was a founding member of Save Tomorrow, Oppose Pollution (STOP) in 1980. In January 1983, STOP won a case against Panarctic Oil, which was fined $150,000, placed on probation, and ordered to draft a remedial plan after a Territorial Court in Yellowknife found it guilty of dumping waste scrap metal and chemicals into the Arctic Ocean.\(^{121}\) STOP helped to found the Alberta Environmental Network (AEN), which welcomed any Alberta-based non-profit, non-governmental organization engaging
in action for a healthier environment. This included the AFL, which had formed a standing environment committee in 1982. With the release of Our Common Future (the Brundtland Report) in 1987, the focus of that committee switched to sustainable development and immediate action to stop the destruction of our global environment by unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. Roundtables on the Environment and Economy, organized both nationally and provincially, included such labour nominees as ECWU president Reg Basken.

But, as on many other issues, the labour movement was not united on environmental causes or on how to handle alliances with social movements. Many in the environmental movement regarded the labour movement’s stances on the environment and on willingness to work with others for radical change as too limited by its historical ties to the dominant social model, which viewed economic growth as essential to social progress and human happiness. Ecosocialists called for a radical shift in thinking toward no-growth economies with a radical redistribution of wealth; a significant emphasis away from private property, including cars; and an end or significant rollback of polluting industries, including the petroleum, chemical, and nuclear industries. Political scientist Laurie Adkin notes that this call for the reframing of humans’ relations to the ecology was met with some hostility among unions; they had, after all, fought successfully to improve the material lives of their members who had worked in industrial-era firms that were now seen as major polluters — members who had bought into the dominant paradigm of the industrially produced good life. As a result, it was hardly surprising that a union such as the Energy and Chemical Workers Union (ECWU), whose members worked in industries targeted by environmentalists as destructive, was reticent about alliances, even though it was pressuring the companies in these industries to do more to protect the health of their members and to limit environmental impacts on their communities. As Adkin observes, “The higher proportion of skilled tradespersons in the ECWU, in addition to employer campaigns, have contributed to the formation of a ‘professional elite’ culture among ECWU officials which is resistant to the militant, grass-roots oriented campaigns and tactics and to the formation of alliances with non-union organizations.”

Labour’s position on peace issues in the 1950s, as we saw in chapter 5, had also resulted in divisions with some taking the pro-Western side and often red-baiting both pro-Communists and pacifists. But by the 1980s, the Alberta labour movement was more united in favour of peace initiatives. This was evident in AFL presentations in August 1985 to the Special Joint Committee on Canada’s International Relations, in which the AFL objected to Canadian participation in President Reagan’s Strategic Defence Initiative: this initiative would supposedly create a mythological nuclear shield around the United States while it continued to increase its own nuclear forces aimed at others. Trade unions were instrumental in a thirteen-day Anti-Cruise Easter March, which went from Cold Lake to Edmonton in May 1983, passing through towns where committees were typically formed around a CUPE local in a small-town hospital.
The struggle continues

As the 1980s came to a close, economic conditions in Alberta deteriorated further and demonstrated the extent to which its government, locked in a close embrace with large corporations, had failed to protect the public interest. An example was the failure of the Principal Group, an Edmonton-based trust company central to Premier Lougheed’s vision for Alberta. Its investment subsidiaries were shut down on 30 June 1987, by court order, and the parent company went bankrupt soon after, affecting more than sixty thousand people, including investors and employees. The government paid out $85 million to the investors but ignored the suddenly unemployed workers. A court-ordered investigation led by Calgary lawyer Bill Code revealed a decade of government failure to protect the public interest, including its duty to administer and enforce the Investment Contracts Act.124

Working people were not impressed with their government’s efforts to deal with continuing hard times. Mounting cutbacks, privatization, and layoffs led to more industrial action. The postal unions led rotating strikes in 1987 against concession demands, cutbacks, and privatization of postal services; the federal government responded with back-to-work legislation with binding arbitration. The private sector, meanwhile, saw multi-year strikes led by IWA 1-207 at Zeidler’s in Slave Lake and the United Steelworkers of America at Wittke Steel in Medicine Hat, and strikes and lockouts at XL Beef and Centennial Packers in Calgary.125

The United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) went to the bargaining table in 1987 asking for improvements in safety, patient care, and professional responsibility, but were met with an unprecedented list of concession demands. When the Labour Relations Board issued a cease-and-desist order against a UNA strike vote, nurses at 104 UNA hospitals held a vote anyway. They began a nineteen-day strike on 25 January 1988, the seventh walkout in the union’s eleven-year history. This produced severe retaliatory measures, including a board order declaring the union’s actions illegal. When the UNA stayed out, it was charged with contempt of court, and seventy-five individuals were also charged, with many terminated. Moreover, Justice Sinclair found criminal contempt and imposed a fine of $250,000, followed by a second fine of $150,000, with $26,750 for civil contempt — the largest penalties in Alberta history.

The AFL formed a strike support committee with representation from all sectors of the union movement, church and women’s groups, and the NDP. It also formed the Friends of Alberta Nurses Society (FANS), which collected over $425,000 in contributions to meet the stiff penalties faced by the UNA.126 This was one of several formations organized to assist unions on the front line of attack and to change labour legislation. Other support groups were formed for the private sector strikers mentioned earlier, and the Alberta Workers’ Rights Action Committee organized in 1989 to support the building trades against the introduction of merit shops in Alberta. For example, on 30 March 1989, the Action Committee held a rally at the Banff Springs Hotel to protest a meeting organized by the Merit Contractors Association and the Independent Contractors of British Columbia.127

The decade closed with a lengthy strike by caregivers who had been affected by privatization and
closures of care facilities. On 1 May 1990, social workers, child care counsellors, and others in Alberta Union of Provincial Employees Local 006 walked out to support two key demands: downsizing case loads and implementing pay equity. Local member Guy Smith said, “We took the stand that we are for quality public services and that we cannot provide those services unless we’re given the resources to do so. Part of that is having decent working conditions and decent workloads.”

**LABOUR AND THE POLITICAL SPHERE**

**Electoral Politics**

When Dave [Werlin] was the president of the Federation of Labour, the working people in the province of Alberta have never had better leadership. I think Dave personally got more people to become New Democrats, to become active in the NDP movement, even though Dave himself has long admitted that he’s a communist and has never hidden the fact.

As we saw in chapter 6, Alberta labour’s initial embrace of the NDP was neither universal nor effective. At the 1983 annual convention, AFL president Harry Kostiuk reported about the 1982 provincial election, “It is with some degree of despair that we must report that on November 2nd, a lot of our own members voted for the Conservatives.” But change was in the air in May 1986, when the Alberta New Democrats won 29 percent of the popular vote and Official Opposition status, with sixteen seats in the Legislature. The party won the same number of seats in 1989. The large number of mainly working-class constituencies that went NDP suggested that many workers believed that the party most favoured by AFL union leaders offered programs that favoured the working class. There was even a brief federal breakthrough as Ross Harvey won Edmonton-East in 1988 in a campaign focused on opposition to the Free Trade Agreement. Former NDP leader Grant Notley did not live to see any of this, however: he died on 19 October 1984, when the two-engine aircraft he was taking to his home in Dunvegan crashed into a hillside in a blinding snow storm. Ray Martin, elected as an MLA with Notley in 1982, took over as leader and was joined by Jim Gurnett, who won in the by-election to replace Notley.

While the NDP was making gains in Alberta that proved temporary, the federal Reform Party, which emerged in May 1987, quickly gained popularity in western Canada. Leader Preston Manning, son of the former Alberta premier, focused on free trade and direct democracy (with referendums, initiatives, and recall), a Triple-E Senate (equal, elected, and effective), and opposition to special status for Quebec. Underlying these were a belief in decentralization and a reduced role for government, primarily through cuts to social welfare and cultural programs. Albertan Deborah Grey won a federal seat for Reform in 1989, setting the stage for the near-total collapse of federal Conservatives in 1993, when Reform became the Official Opposition in Parliament.

Labour-backed candidates enjoyed some successes on the municipal front. Ted Grimm, who served as the mayor of Medicine Hat from 1974 to 2001 (excluding one term), credits his success to his experience with the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers when he worked at
As mayor, he worked hard to retain public ownership of the gas fields and utilities that had built Medicine Hat’s reputation as the town with “all Hell for a basement.” He was under constant pressure to sell to private interests. “They knew where I stood,” said Grimm. “I showed them the door. . . . I knew what would happen to the money. It would be squandered, we’d have no asset, and they would have control. I operated on the philosophy that, as far as public utilities were concerned, ownership is control.”

The Edmonton District Labour Council continued to play a key role in the Edmonton Voters’ Association (EVA), which ran candidates for city council and school board, and championed civic issues throughout the 1980s. Brian Mason, later a leader of the provincial NDP, was elected for four terms to City Council under the EVA banner, beginning in 1989.

Jan Reimer, daughter of the provincial NDP’s first leader, was first elected to City Council in 1980 as a member of the Urban Reform Group of Edmonton, and was re-elected for two more terms, becoming a spokesperson for those opposed to concessions to land developers, particularly regarding farmland. In 1989, Reimer was elected the first female mayor of Edmonton, a post she held until 1995. Highlights of her time in office include the inception of a new waste-management system (which included curbside pickup of recyclables) and her resistance to repeated efforts by Peter Pocklington to secure concessions from the city in exchange for his agreement not to move the Oilers.

Labour Takes on Free Trade

The decade that began with the re-election of a Liberal government in Ottawa ended with the Mulroney Conservatives bringing in a free trade deal that would align Canada even more closely with the politics and economy of the United States. Powerful international capitalist forces had been pressing since the early 1970s for an end to national protection of local industries. A key group was the Trilateral Commission, a gathering of the elite of finance and industry that had been launched in 1972 with the goal of “checking the intrusion of national government into the international exchange of both economic and non-economic goods.”

Just after he was elected in 1984, Mulroney announced that Canada was “open for business.” Canada Post was immediately told to operate according to a business model that would eventually result in the closing of all post offices in favour of franchised outlets and privatized service. VIA Rail had its budget slashed and was targeted for eventual shutdown, and the CBC suffered the first of its many budget cutbacks.

Mulroney’s moves to cement a free trade deal with the United States began in 1985 at the Shamrock Summit at Montebello, Quebec, where he joined President Reagan in a duet of “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.” Canadian historian Jack Granatstein commented that this “public display of sucking up to Reagan may have been the single most demeaning moment in the entire political history of Canada’s relations with the United States.” The Canada-US Free Trade Agreement, finalized in late 1987, was to eliminate barriers to trade in goods and services between Canada and the United States, facilitate conditions of fair competition within
the free trade area established by the agreement, and liberalize significantly conditions for investment between the two countries. Two countries that already had more trade between them than any other two countries on earth — roughly $150 billion worth of goods a year — would be brought even closer together.

AFL president Dave Werlin and his executive council left no doubt where they stood on the issue. Participants in the 1986 AFL convention were told: “With no mandate from the Canadian voters, they are preparing to sell out our Canadian resources, our Canadian jobs, our Canadian culture, our Canadian social services, our Canadian standard of living, and Canadian sovereignty — all of it served on a platter to the U.S.-based multinational companies and their disloyal, greedy, junior partners in Canada.”

Before the treaty could be ratified by the Canadian Parliament, a vigorous national debate ensued, with the Pro-Canada Network, a coalition of community and labour groups, giving voice to opponents of the deal. Alberta coordinator Lucien Royer explained, “Although the outside observer would say there are so many different issues we were working on, in essence they were all facets of the same phenomenon, which is the nature of trade agreements and the nature of this particular trade agreement and what it would do to our country.” Anti-trade deal rallies organized in Edmonton and Calgary by the Pro-Canada Network in 1988 attracted thousands from church, community, Aboriginal, and trade union organizations. Even some leading economists and industrial leaders spoke against the Mulroney-Reagan deal. Lobbying was so intense that the Tories might have lost the “Free Trade Election” of November 1988 had it not been for the multi-million dollar advertising blitz launched by some of Canada’s largest corporations under the umbrella of the Alliance of Opportunity and Trade.

The Conservative Party was re-elected and the agreement was ratified on 4 October 1988, coming into effect on 1 January 1989. Said AFL president Werlin, “The recent Mulroney electoral victory was a major setback for working people. It means that, despite the fact that a majority of Canadians voted against free trade, implementation of the deal will be the hallmark of the Mulroney government’s second term. This is the meaning of the Free Trade Deal. Freedom for the corporations: lost jobs and opportunities for Canadian workers.” Early signs appeared to confirm Werlin’s warnings: for example, a Molsons/Carling O’Keefe merger, citing a need to compete with US brewing giants; the sale of Alberta-based Wardair because of the deregulated free trade environment; a buyout of Texaco Canada by Exxon; and the takeover of Consolidated Bathurst by American Stone, with production shifted to the parent’s Michigan plant.

The decade closed with a Pro-Canada Network fight against a new regressive tax, the Goods and Services Tax (GST), in which Alberta labour took the lead. Initially opposed to the GST (primarily because it represented a federal intrusion), the Alberta government of Don Getty refused to do anything about it. So, in September 1989, the Pro-Canada Network, together with the Calgary and District Labour Council, launched a postcard campaign, which over the next few months delivered over a million postcards to federal MPs representing Alberta ridings. This was combined with a lobby campaign of Alberta MLAs and MPs, creating division among the Conservatives.
that forced Prime Minister Mulroney to use a heavy hand on his backbenchers, even throwing two out of the caucus.

... As the 1980s ended, the labour movement in Alberta could look back upon a decade of militancy and achievement. They had taken advantage of a deep recession and blatant anti-union action in Alberta to educate workers about the dangers of allowing only corporations and corporate-minded governments to make the decisions affecting workers’ lives. The Alberta Federation of Labour and individual unions had demonstrated to governments and corporations alike that they would not allow workers’ rights to be trampled upon without fighting back. The trade union movement had created alliances with other opposition-minded civil society groups on issues of common concern, and the NDP, the party that labour had created, reached the peak of its strength in the province. Unfortunately, all of these hard-fought gains could be quickly eroded, as events in the following decades would prove.
FIG 8-1 The Alberta Union of Provincial Employees and the Canadian Union of Public Employees celebrate the signing of an agreement with the Calgary Regional Health Authority, the culmination of a strike of hospital and home care workers in 1995 that began with a walkout by laundry workers. Courtesy of Gord Christie.