They tried to say it’s violent. The first three days were probably the best and the worst. My first experience of actually being on strike. The first day the buses were stopped. It was like, wow, this is cool. . . . Then the second day when they came across the cornfields on the buses . . . that tells you how much they really care about their team members’ safety, when they’re willing to bounce them across the cornfield to bring them into the plant. Then that night comes. I’m home and I can hear sirens. I’m like, oh god what’s going on out there. Next thing I hear a bunch of supervisors get off a bus and start beating picketers. . . . Then the next day comes, the buses are stopped, production don’t go. Then that night, they were trying to give Doug papers . . . they run him off the road. I don’t know about you, but to me that’s attempted murder. When you’re running somebody off the road, going a hundred kilometres an hour down the highway, it’s bad enough to hit an animal at that speed, let alone you got cars trying to box you in and run you off the road. It was like, oh my god . . . will they stop at nothing to make sure this union is out?  

When we heard the plant was going to close] a lot of them came to the realization, it’s an old plant, it’s gonna shut down. . . . They all thought they could walk out and get jobs. In the first couple of rounds of layoffs . . . it was mostly the younger guys that went, with least seniority. They all did walk into reasonably high-paying jobs in the oil industry, because they needed the people. But as we came to the end and the guys were getting from their twenties and thirties into their forties, they were finding it a little more difficult to find work. A lot of the guys in their middle to late forties wanted to stay in the Edmonton area. Well these jobs didn’t exist in the Edmonton area, or were tougher to get. The last hundred that went in June are like me, they’re fifty and over. . . . You’re looking at four thousand people who lost their jobs and a significant income. If you start turning that into terms of families, you’re talking maybe twelve thousand people that have been affected by this. Now they’re not taking as big a role in their communities. They’re not able to, they don’t have the income anymore. . . . But the politicians didn’t want to . . . pay any attention.  

They tried to say it’s violent. The first three days were probably the best and the worst. My first experience of actually being on strike. The first day the buses were stopped. It was like, wow, this is cool. . . . Then the second day when they came across the cornfields on the buses . . . that tells you how much they really care about their team members’ safety, when they’re willing to bounce them across the cornfield to bring them into the plant. Then that night comes. I’m home and I can hear sirens. I’m like, oh god what’s going on out there. Next thing I hear a bunch of supervisors get off a bus and start beating picketers. . . . Then the next day comes, the buses are stopped, production don’t go. Then that night, they were trying to give Doug papers . . . they run him off the road. I don’t know about you, but to me that’s attempted murder. When you’re running somebody off the road, going a hundred kilometres an hour down the highway, it’s bad enough to hit an animal at that speed, let alone you got cars trying to box you in and run you off the road. It was like, oh my god . . . will they stop at nothing to make sure this union is out?  

But the politicians didn’t want to . . . pay any attention.
Two stories. The first, from former Celanese worker Bill Climie, is about the closure of a petrochemical plant that served as a mainstay for Fort Saskatchewan for fifty years. The second is Ashley Grandy’s tale of the ugly Lakeside Packers strike in Brooks, a unionization drive pitting a diverse workforce against a fiercely anti-union employer. Each story provides glimpses of an Alberta in transformation in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first of the twenty-first. The new Alberta was more diverse but more hostile to workers than ever, which in turn incited new groups of workers to fight for justice. Other workers, however, like many during the boom of the 1970s, shared the government’s vision of new prosperity as a supercharged tar sands boom took hold in the early 2000s (though like that earlier boom, it was followed by a bust). Like Alberta’s workers, the labour movement’s responses to a neo-liberal government enmeshed with corporate forces committed to leaving the province’s fate to global markets also varied — from resistance to capitulation.

Alberta’s era of full-blown neo-liberalism began 5 December 1992, at the Northlands Agricom in Edmonton, when Ralph Klein won the leadership of the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party and the premiership. He defeated his opponents by essentially running against the Getty government in which he had served as a cabinet minister, promising to make massive budget cuts to end deficit financing and eventually provincial debt altogether.

An account of the 1990s and 2000s must start, then, with Ralph Klein and his election. But despite his central and flamboyant role, the real story is that of Albertans and how they responded to the forces of globalization and the rise of neo-liberalism.

CONTEXTUALIZING A REVOLUTIONARY ERA

The cracks in the postwar Fordist compromise accelerated in the 1990s. The global shift of power to transnational corporations continued as trade rules were weakened and the international flow of capital was liberalized. The strength of international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank intensified, culminating in the focused power of the World Trade Organization, formed in 1995. Labour politics and social democracy entered a phase of deep crisis, unsure how to respond to the new world order of free capital and constrained states.

The Canada-US Free Trade Agreement was expanded in 1993 to include Mexico, becoming the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), without the debate and acrimony that accompanied its predecessor. Canada also experienced a serious recession in the early 1990s, placing great pressure on government budgets and throwing thousands of workers into unemployment. In 1992, unemployment reached 11 percent. Canada’s constitutional issues also contributed to an atmosphere of malaise and unease, as both the Meech Lake Accord and the Charlottetown Accord were defeated, discrediting mainstream political actors, reinvigorating the Quebec sovereignty movement, and promoting the rise of the right-wing Reform Party.

The retreat from Keynesian economics, evident in the 1980s recession, was even more marked in that of the 1990s. Trudeau had accepted the continuation of the Bank of Canada’s tight-money policies when the recession occurred in 1982, but, while he had avoided Keynesian counter-cyclical spending, he had not cut government programs much. By contrast, the Mulroney
government cut social spending, especially grants to provinces. It also reduced workers’ protections with a series of restrictive reforms to Unemployment Insurance. The Chrétien government in the mid-1990s further restricted access to unemployment benefits. Instead of drawing attention to high unemployment rates, politicians raised the alarm about “unsustainable deficits” and “big government.”

The last decade of the 1900s and the first of the 2000s witnessed a transformation in Alberta’s economy, politics, and society. The period began with Albertans highly dependent upon oil and gas for their economic prosperity and trying to escape an extended recession. Governments were attempting to diversify into secondary processing and manufacturing. Oil prices then rebounded and Alberta’s economic fortunes bounced up with them, leading to an unprecedented boom in the middle part of the era, only to end up once again on the rough end of an economic downturn. Alberta ended the period more deeply tied to energy, and in particular tar sands, less diversified than twenty years earlier and with a dying manufacturing base. Alberta, the home of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, had become Canada’s energy superpower and was playing a more central role in the politics of the nation.

Alberta was not immune to global economic changes, which accompanied continued deindustrialization in advanced capitalist countries and growth in service industries. This so-called post-industrialism has brought an increased polarization of society. In Alberta, alongside the growing number of Hummers and mansion-sized houses was a burgeoning group of increasingly vulnerable workers, on whose sweat much of the province’s prosperity rested. Many of these workers were part of the changing face of Alberta as migration from other provinces and international immigration brought scores of new workers into the province, and with them, different traditions, perspectives, and cultures. This transformation would challenge the labour movement and its ability to adapt to new realities.

Electorally, the overall picture remained unchanged, but with swirling eddies underneath. The 1993 provincial election found the PCs experiencing their first real threat in twenty years and saw the wipeout of the Official Opposition New Democrats, supplanted by an invigorated Liberal Party. But the Liberals proved a paper tiger in the next four elections as the Tory grip on power strengthened. The Liberals remained an anemic second party, while the NDP struggled to maintain a toehold in a handful of Edmonton ridings. The security of the PCs’ electoral fortunes played heavily in the political dynamics of the era, though the province’s oil barons reigned supreme, as demonstrated in part by the emergence of the Wildrose Alliance, discussed below.

On the surface, little changed regarding unionization levels in Alberta, with about 27 percent union density in 1990 compared to 25 percent in 2010, a remarkably small drop given the seismic changes of the era. However, the face of labour changed significantly. Demographic changes and stagnation in private sector unionization led to an increase in women and people of colour within Alberta unions. The former union world of the white male goods-producing worker evaporated. By the early 2000s, a majority of union members were women. Growing numbers were workers of colour. Most unionized jobs were in the public sector, and four out of five were in service occupations. And neither new unionists nor old had a friend in Premier Klein.
BIRTH OF A REVOLUTION

Ralph Klein became premier at a time when the range of political debate was significantly constricted and public perception was that “something” had to be done to fix the crisis. Klein — a former mayor of Calgary, where he was regarded as a moderate Liberal and a straight-talking, hard-drinking populist — recast himself as the tough leader capable of making hard decisions to turn things around.

The 1992 PC leadership vote was spawned by the resignation of Don Getty, premier since 1985, whose government was plagued by scandals, spiraling deficits, and plummeting popularity in opinion polls. A series of ventures aimed at economic diversification — including NovAtel (cellular telephones), Millar Western (pulp mill), MagCan (magnesium processing), and the Lloydminster heavy oil upgrader — had become financial disasters. The budget deficit hit $1.5 billion in 1991/92. Klein handily defeated Edmonton-based cabinet minister Nancy Betkowski to win the party leadership on the second round of balloting, becoming premier nine days later on 14 December 1992. Many observers argue that the leadership race result represented an ideological shift that changed the course of the party. Betkowski represented the moderate, urban tradition of Lougheed, while Klein appealed to rural Tories and hard-line, neo-liberal elements.

But while Klein represented a change in style, it is questionable how much his leadership affected the direction of the Progressive Conservative Party. The moderate Lougheed image was exaggerated and reflected the political context of the time. The PCs had already begun to swing rightward under Getty in the early 1990s, as the influence of the upstart Reform Party affected the activist base of the provincial Tories. Klein’s personal ambition to pursue a radical neo-liberal course merely accelerated trends already occurring within the PC Party and within Canadian politics in general.

After becoming premier, Klein quickly delivered a message that his government would be markedly different than that of his predecessor. He reduced the size of cabinet and eliminated the Department of Occupational Health and Safety, which had existed since the early 1980s. To assuage angry voters, he eliminated the MLA pension plan. As a clear harbinger of things to come, the Klein government’s first key social policy decision was to drastically reduce welfare rolls and introduce “workfare” (where social assistance recipients must work for their benefits). As longtime Calgary activist Gord Christie pointed out, “Their very first piece of business was to attack the people on social assistance. At the time, we had nearly the lowest social assistance rates in Canada. . . . We cut those, not just cut those, we trashed those rates. The very first thing they attacked were the most disadvantaged people in our society.”

The May budget on the eve of the provincial election provided a sneak peek into the government’s plans following re-election.

The June 1993 election was unlike any other in Alberta history, in particular for the convergence of Liberal and PC platforms. Liberal leader Laurence Decore called for “brutal cuts” to government budgets and restriction of government’s role. Klein countered with a call for “massive cuts.” Both parties accepted neo-liberal assumptions about fiscal challenges and proposed nearly identical solutions. A blindsided NDP
defended the status quo but found no audience thanks to a successful corporate and media campaign of “deficit hysteria” that made even the former Tory status quo appear too radical. After the election, with a majority secured, Klein moved swiftly on his promised agenda of massive cuts that would rock public services and public sector workers to their foundation. “Ralph [was] off and running,” observed Christie, adding:

You had a government who was elected on slash and burn, you had an opposition who ran on slash and burn, and you truly had no opposition. All of a sudden, it was full speed ahead on health care, education, civil servants, environment, you name it. . . . The first opposition I saw to this, we participated in, is when they passed the budget in the spring of ’93. . . . Jim Dinning and Ralph Klein had a news conference down at McDougall Centre where they’re announcing the agenda, all the massive cuts. Myself and a few other activists were down [there too] to raise some hell about it.13

**DIMENSIONS OF A REVOLUTION**

The two years that followed marked what may be the most tumultuous period in modern Alberta history. As in any revolution, some groups were more affected than others: women, seniors, people with disabilities, and the poor paid a disproportionate price. Public sector unions were also in for the fight of their life. The government took action on multiple fronts at once, moving with unusual speed, determination, and focus. Key minister Steve West articulated the strategy clearly: “Taking more time never makes that job easier. It just allows your opponents time to mount their campaigns. . . . You need to move as quickly as possible.”14 The following section examines the dimensions of these swift assaults, who was affected, and how Alberta workers and their unions responded.

**Budget Cutbacks**

The 1993–94 budget announced an aggressive plan to reduce government spending by 20 percent over three years. The impact of the reductions was widespread. In health care, cuts quickly led to bed reductions, longer wait times in emergency rooms, and hospital closures. Simultaneously, the government regionalized health care delivery, adding further confusion into the system. In education, funding for kindergarten was slashed by 50 percent and class sizes for all grades were increased.

**FIG 8-2 United Nurses of Alberta**

The government also permitted semi-private “charter schools” to open. In advanced education, funding grants were cut by 21 percent and tuition began to rise significantly. Services for people with disabilities were cut back, and Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped (AISH) rates were frozen. Seniors were particularly hard hit, with the amalgamation of five programs into a single, new, income-tested Alberta Seniors Benefit, which proved deleterious to middle-income seniors and of only marginal benefit to the poorest retired Albertans.\textsuperscript{15} Probably the biggest target of the deficit hawks were recipients of welfare. In addition to the announced workfare program, the government reduced benefits for clients deemed capable of work and systematically reduced the total caseload. Between March 1993 and August 1994, recipients fell from about 122,000 to 68,000 — a drop of 44 percent — while fewer than one in ten had moved into gainful employment.\textsuperscript{16} Meanwhile 6,600 core government jobs were eliminated in three years, along with 3,000 nursing positions and thousands of jobs in education and advanced education.\textsuperscript{17}
The short-term impact of all this was cuts to services, longer waiting lists, and higher costs to individuals. But more significant, and by design, were the long-term effects: a weakened public sector less able to effectively deliver public services. Coupled with the other vigorously pursued side of the government agenda, tax reduction, the Conservative goal was to shrink permanently the capacity of the state to play a role in public life.

**Wage Rollbacks**

A central component of the expenditure reduction strategy took dead aim at public sector workers both in the core public service and in health care, school boards, universities and colleges. In fall 1993, Klein asked all public sector workers to voluntarily accept a 5 percent wage reduction followed by a two-year wage freeze, and he entrenched his “request” by ordering that payroll funding envelopes be reduced by 5 percent, effectively forcing the hands of the unions and their employers.

Initial union responses promised a fight. “You are headed for one of the biggest labour battles that you’ve ever seen in this province,” thundered Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) president Carol Anne Dean. She called for a general strike in February 1994. Other labour leaders also promised to mobilize their members to take “drastic action.” Health care unions and education unions formed coalitions to fight the plan. Some unions, including the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA), ran extensive ad campaigns to support their position. The government responded by meeting with health care unions to discuss overall health care restructuring, but discussions went nowhere.

**THE CONSEQUENCES OF CUTBACKS: HEALTH CARE**

I remember a large portion of my time was spent in layoff meetings during those mid-nineties. In ‘92 was the first wave. At the time it was devastating; it was a smaller chunk though than what we were to see. At that meeting, I remember them calling the nurses together from what was termed the nursing float pool, which was this group of nurses that floated wherever the need was. They called in the managers to the same meeting. ... They told everybody there at the same time in the room that the nursing office was going to be eliminated. The IV team was another one ... they were going to be eliminated. It struck me that you’re telling your staff, your managers and staff nurses, together: it was a bizarre occurrence. That was the first wave that had happened. But as we got into the mid-nineties they started to do those kinds of layoffs by units. They would call in the nurses that were going to be laid off into a room. They would have the manager there, they would have some HR people there. My heart knows that it was the right place for the union to be there, but it was some of the hardest days I’d ever experienced as a union leader, to see the young nurses coming in. They were our future, so I knew we were about to get rid of an entire generation. ... It hit you very hard in the face to be sitting in those meetings and realize that some of those young people who had young children and were maybe not married for long, and probably had a mortgage and all kinds of goals and visions and dreams, and were having that totally brought to a halt immediately. ... But my sense is that the morale of the staff nurses or the frontline bedside nurses has never recovered from that. ... It’s been crisis after crisis since then. ... We’ve never had the time to recover.

— Jane Sustrik, University of Alberta Registered Nurse; Staff Nurses of Alberta, and United Nurses of Alberta Executive Member

SOURCE: Interview with Jane Sustrik, Edmonton, 19 April 2007, ALHI.
The willingness to take on the Klein government began to crumble. In December 1993, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) health care locals agreed to the rollbacks in return for guarantees against contracting out. “These people got job security,” said CUPE representative John Malthouse. “There is a ban on subcontracting until March 31, 1995. That’s historic. We couldn’t have paid for that agreement earlier in the year.” The ATA settled local by local in early 1994. ATA president Bauni MacKay justified the settlements as “an essential move’ designed to keep the focus on the bigger picture where it belonged, that the very essence of public education was under attack.”

AUPE held out longest, after members rejected a tentative agreement in June 1994. But Klein threatened that the reductions would be achieved through layoffs: a few months later, members accepted a barely changed offer. Eventually, most unions negotiated settlements that entrenched the reductions and subsequent wage freeze through combinations of wage reductions, unpaid time off, and other concessions. A few small locals, refusing to accept the agreement, eventually had the rollbacks imposed by arbitration.

Several factors produced this outcome. First, the government’s determination to achieve its fiscal goals gave unions a stark choice of wage reductions or layoffs. Second, political mobilization of public sector workers was underdeveloped at the time. Many members, such as nurses and teachers, perceived themselves as professionals but not union activists. Also, many members, as Albertans, accepted the government’s framing of the deficit problem and saw pay reductions as a reasonable way to “do their part.” Unions struggled financially since layoffs translated into loss of members, and thus revenue, and the simultaneous need to spend additional resources to defend members. It is estimated, for example, that public sector unions lost 20 percent of their membership in this period; AUPE lost almost 30 percent of its core government members in three years. Finally, union leadership adept at collective bargaining processes but less confident at political mobilization opted for strategies with which they were most comfortable. Nevertheless, anger over the 5 percent reduction simmered for years and would eventually create difficulties for the government after the heat of the revolution had cooled.

**Privatization**

At the core of the neo-liberal project is the goal to transform the functions of the state to benefit the interests of capital, including moving state services onto the market. Privatization was a key component of the so-called Klein Revolution.

Privatization as such was not new to conservative Alberta. Lougheed had reprivatized Pacific Western Airlines in 1983. The Getty regime had privatized Alberta Government Telephones in 1991. However, the Klein government was the first to embark on a wide-scale effort to privatize public services and to adopt privatization as an ideological given rather than a pragmatic policy option. Minister Steve West claimed, without supporting evidence, “There isn’t a government operation, a government business, a Crown corporation that is as efficient as the private sector, and indeed they’re 20 to 40 per cent less efficient.” West announced the first two privatizations in fall 1993. The government closed public registry offices and contracted to private registry providers on a fee-for-service basis. Similarly,
Fig 8.4 Vance Rodewalt, a Calgary Herald cartoonist, shows the Klein government cutting the dummy named “Alberta” in half, January 1995. Glenbow Archives M-9457-50.
government-owned distribution and retail of alcohol through Alberta Liquor Control Board (ALCB) stores was replaced with private liquor stores serviced by a private monopoly distributor, transforming thirteen hundred jobs into private retail jobs that averaged half the ALCB wages. Ray Gorse, AUPE activist and chair of the ALCB local, expressed the fears of ALCB workers in an Edmonton Journal article: “I joined the liquor board seven years ago because it was a nice, secure job with a fairly good pension plan.” With the government’s announcement, he was left wondering what the private stores would pay: “What’s minimum wage? . . . Ralph Klein and Steve West are destroying a lot of lives.” The union howled, but both moves were politically popular.

Other privatizations quickly followed: highway maintenance, provincial park operation, Alberta Tourism, and the publicly owned radio and TV networks, CKUA and Access. In all cases, privatization led to financial scandal and turmoil, as in the bankrupted CKUA and Alberta Tourism, or to higher costs and lower service quality. And in a different form of privatization, the government passed legislation changing the status of the Workers’ Compensation Board to an autonomous corporation, no longer accountable to the minister of Labour. This launched an extended period of reductions in worker benefits and increased claim denials meant to lower employer premiums.

The privatization push stalled in the mid-1990s. Several planned selloffs — including contracting out enforcement functions in employment standards and environmental protection, and selling the Alberta Treasury Branches — were eventually rejected due to political pressure. However, privatization takes many forms. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the government turned to public-private partnerships (P3s) as a model for construction and operation of new facilities. Under P3, rather than have the state pay for the costs of constructing a new facility, a private sector partner pays costs up front and then receives an annual payment from the government for an extended period. Many large construction projects in the mid-2000s, including Anthony Henday Drive in Edmonton and eighteen schools around the province, were constructed as P3s, a model that has been shown to defraud the public in the long term.

A Communications Revolution

Perhaps the most enduring component of the Klein Revolution was the reshaping of the nature of political debate in Alberta and of public perception about the province. Klein, as a former reporter, demonstrated particular skill at communication, using it to frame issues and debate in a fashion designed to make the neo-liberal agenda appear inevitable. He quickly centralized government communications by heading up the Public Affairs Bureau (PAB) and giving it significantly increased resources: the number of “spin doctors” under the PAB expanded from 47 in 1993 to 133 in 2001. This revamped department provided Klein with unprecedented ability to manage communications, aided by an acquiescent press gallery.

Three strategies were employed to control political debate, all central to the neo-liberal project. First, the government personalized criticism, attacking opponents in ad hominem fashion. Former bureaucrat (and future Liberal leader) Kevin Taft was branded a “communist” for his book Shredding the Public Interest,
which exposed Klein’s fiscal policy as fraudulent.

Albertans mobilizing against plans to privatize health care were labeled “left-wing nuts.”

Second, advocates critical of the government were denigrated as “special interest groups.” Klein dismissed women, people with disabilities, labour unions, gays and lesbians, and anti-poverty organizations as special interests. The implied ideological message was that the government represented the so-called public interest and was preventing narrow interests from hijacking the political agenda. This dichotomy was personalized in Klein’s creation of “Martha and Henry,” who represented the “severely normal” Albertan. Klein filled the vessel of Martha and Henry with values, political positions, and attitudes that reflected the neo-liberal project.

The third strategy may have been the most effective: defining what makes Alberta great. The PAB concocted a slogan, nominally to promote Alberta business externally, but, in effect, to “brand” Alberta. The chosen phrase was “The Alberta Advantage,” and it embodied the neo-liberal Klein agenda: low taxes, competitive business environment, low unionization, trained and flexible workforce, business-friendly government. When delivered as a boast to Albertans, as it often was, it served the function of telling Albertans what values defined them. The framing was so successful that even Albertans adversely affected by the cuts repeated the phrase when contesting who received the advantage, thus accepting the bulk of its implied political assumptions.

By the end of the 1990s, neo-liberal framing loomed large over Alberta politics. While much of the Klein Revolution dissipated after 1997, the communications revolution continued to leave its mark on Alberta well into the twenty-first century.

LABOUR’S RESPONSE

The government’s sweeping agenda sparked furious debate and reaction among Albertans. The atmosphere in the province during 1994 and 1995 crackled with tension, anger, and disagreement. Some commentators suggested that labour “missed an opportunity” by not more aggressively challenging the Klein agenda. Labour certainly grasped the direness of the attack. “Every gain and every benefit that our predecessors have made is under attack,” AFL president Linda Karpowich told delegates to the 1994 convention. “Make no mistake. We’re in the fight of our lives. It will take the strength of the entire labour movement to win this struggle.”

In 1994, led by the AFL, a popular front was assembled. The Common Front aimed to draw together Albertans from many sectors — labour, church, non-profit, students, and so on — to develop a common response to the political challenges. The Common Front organized some coordinated actions, including a few rallies and public meetings, but for the most part, it fizzled. A November 1994 rally at the legislature garnered only three hundred attendees. The AFL’s desire to keep a firm control over the direction of the Front frustrated many non-labour participants, and the Front was never adequately resourced.

But pockets of resistance remained. Small advocacy groups of people affected by cuts formed and offered sporadic actions, including Albertans for Social Justice, the Alberta Disability Forum, and Poverty in Action. Solitary protesters, such as two hunger strikers who camped in front of the WCB in the summer of 1999, also tried to draw attention to their situation. Occasionally, larger mobilizations would arise over single issues,
including the fifteen hundred Mill Woods residents who rallied to save Edmonton’s Grey Nuns Hospital.

An important research advocacy group was born during the tumultuous 1990s. The Parkland Institute was formed as a provincial version of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a left-wing think tank supported by labour. Its launch in 1996 marked an effort by labour to match the efforts of right-wing think tanks like the C.D. Howe Institute, the Fraser Institute, and others. Since its inception, Parkland, housed at the University of Alberta, has provided credible research to support political advocacy. Its roles in opposing health care privatization and in pushing the oil royalty issue to the forefront were particularly noteworthy.

Government workers themselves could have provided the media — to the extent that it was willing to publicize more than the official Klein government’s perspective on the revolution — with details of the cutbacks’ impacts on their clients and themselves. But ministers made it clear that “their” employees were not free to tell their stories to the public, to whom both they and the government were responsible, and Mike
Cardinal, minister of Family and Social Services, threatened publicly to fire ministry employees who spoke out. Youth counsellor and Alberta Union of Provincial Employees activist Guy Smith defied this order in 1996 and was suspended for three weeks, with a threat of dismissal if there was a recurrence.34

Initially, no efforts either profoundly affected the government’s direction or propelled Albertans en masse to speak up against the cuts. Public opinion polls reported that while a majority felt negatively affected by the cuts, similar numbers supported the government’s agenda.35 Why? First, the government assault occurred on many fronts simultaneously, creating significant challenges to mobilization. Second, union response proved fractious: private sector unions failed to defend their public sector comrades. Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (Western) vice-president Rolf Nielsen offered a simple explanation for the passivity of private sector workers: “The private sector hasn’t been hit with rollbacks like the public sector.”36 In addition, Alberta unions had no significant experience with co-operative political organizing and lacked sufficient trust to wholeheartedly engage in collective activism. One local president lamented afterwards, “If we were more unified we could have done something about our circumstances, but certainly that is not the case today. We’re fragmented and driven apart, . . . we turn our guns inward and fight against each other, which I think is really sad.”37

Third, most of the unions involved had done little before Klein’s cuts to educate and mobilize their members to engage in political battle. Thus, when the Klein agenda confronted public sector unions so aggressively, unions proved flat-footed in their response.

LAUNDRY WORKERS VERSUS
THE REVOLUTION

On 14 November 1994, about sixty laundry workers at the Calgary General Hospital, members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), called in sick, effectively launching an illegal, wildcat strike. The next day they were joined by an identical group of workers at Foothills Hospital, members of the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. Why? After taking a 28 percent pay cut in the previous round of bargaining, both sets of workers had just been informed that their jobs were being privatized to K-Bro Linens.

Over the next ten days, the strike escalated to an estimated twenty-five hundred workers across six hospitals and nine nursing homes, while hundreds more workers in other health facilities engaged in work-to-rule and other actions. The atmosphere was highly charged. The strikers had caught the public imagination. CUPE activist Jimmy Arthurs remembered:

We had great support from the people driving to work. Lots of tooting on horns and waves — it was just unreal the support we got from the community. . . . They had seen the devastation to the health care industry that the Klein government had created with their cutbacks, their slash-and-burn tactics. So there was a great understanding of what we were going through and what the laundry workers were suffering. Here they are, some of the lowest paid workers within the health care industry, and their jobs are going to be contracted out to the private sector with no rights or benefits granted to them, and no retraining.38
Within the Alberta Federation of Labour, senior labour leaders discussed how to use the strike to build political momentum. There was discussion of escalating to a general strike, an option ultimately rejected. After ten days, the government “blinked”: it provided a financial package to the Regional Health Authority so that it could delay contracting out for eighteen months. (It occurred as planned eighteen months later.) Both bargaining units, in separate simultaneous ratification meetings, accepted the deal. Reaction to the settlement was divided. Some saw the strike as an overdue first victory against Klein — it was the first time he had backed down from an announced decision. Others lamented the lost opportunity to escalate labour’s response to the political attacks of the previous two years.

The laundry workers’ strike signalled a shift in Alberta’s political climate. While the victory was small and temporary, it seemed to take the wind out of the government’s sails. Klein had reduced government spending by 28 percent in real per capita terms, but now cuts began to ebb, and the remainder of the decade witnessed spending increases. By the early 2000s, with Alberta in a new boom, public sector workers, remembering the painful 5 percent rollback, successfully achieved sizeable wage increases. While the Alberta government retained its neo-liberal credentials, the frenetic crisis of the first two years was not repeated.

It is important not to overstate the impact of the laundry workers’ strike on the provincial government. The government’s loss of zeal coincided with rising

THE BIRTH OF A WILDCAT STRIKE

They have a cafeteria upstairs and they had all the laundry workers there. At that spot they announced to the laundry workers that the laundry was closing. . . . The emotion and the anger, to say the least, was very high. . . . The turning point for everything was when we asked them if anybody was feeling sick. Okay, what do you mean, what’s that about? I said, “Well, you must be feeling sick over the news you’ve just received. . . . So how many people think that they should be going home sick?” All but two people put up their hand. So we sent them all home sick. We told the fellow that was waiting outside — at that time he was in charge of the laundry . . . that the laundry workers were all going home sick, they’re feeling ill, they don’t have the ability to work today. He asked me, “Will they be back?” I said, “Well, not if I can help it.” Then we set a meeting that evening for seven o’clock. . . . It was at that point that a motion was made to actually set up the picket lines the next day at five in the morning. . . . We went up the next day, the signs went up at five o’clock. Everybody did show up. What the idea was is that the trucks moved early in the morning from the laundry, so the intent was to stop the trucks from moving out. That took place from about five o’clock to eight o’clock. Everybody said, okay, well, they actually needed a break at that time. . . . So everybody left and we came back at two o’clock, then the whole process escalated at a high pace from there. The Thursday night we actually went to a meeting that AUPE was having with their laundry workers. . . . So first it was the General Hospital laundry that went out, the next day the Foothills group set up their picket signs, and from that point, the Thursday and Friday, different departments started to come out of the hospital. It just kept growing.

— Len Fagnan, CUPE Local 8 President

SOURCE: Interview with Len Fagnan, Calgary, 24 April 2009, ALHI.

THE REVOLUTION PETERS OUT, THE NEW NORMAL MOVES IN

The laundry workers’ strike signalled a shift in Alberta’s political climate. While the victory was small and temporary, it seemed to take the wind out of the government’s sails. Klein had reduced government spending by 28 percent in real per capita terms, but now cuts began to ebb, and the remainder of the decade witnessed spending increases. By the early 2000s, with Alberta in a new boom, public sector workers, remembering the painful 5 percent rollback, successfully achieved sizeable wage increases. While the Alberta government retained its neo-liberal credentials, the frenetic crisis of the first two years was not repeated.

It is important not to overstate the impact of the laundry workers’ strike on the provincial government. The government’s loss of zeal coincided with rising
energy revenues. It balanced its books in 1995, posting a $900 million surplus. Without the rhetorical drive of deficits, the justification for additional cuts withered. But the effects of the cuts to services would be felt for years. Klein had won the battle, and by stepping away from a full-scale counterattack and instead negotiating resolution on the government’s terms, labour may have signalled that the core of the government’s neoliberal agenda was not at risk, thereby entrenching it. The laundry workers’ strike may serve as a symbol of the beginning of a “new normal” of weakened unions, emboldened employers, and a slow creep of gains by neo-liberalism.

Taking Medicare to Market

Efforts to expand private, for-profit elements of health care delivery were key to Klein’s neo-liberal agenda. However, privatizing medicare proved far more difficult than selling off liquor stores. The spectre of reduced public health care sparked a quick response from Albertans, and labour demonstrated a willingness to forcefully mobilize and to engage the government’s health agenda.

Klein built on the efforts of his predecessors to impose marketization on medicare. The government used the crisis created by earlier cuts to raise doubts about medicare’s financial sustainability. In spring 1994, Premier Klein made the government’s ideological goal explicit: “Private hospitals and clinics should be allowed to expand in Alberta.” With that clear signal from government, health entrepreneurs began circling, hoping to buy closed hospitals or use closed wings to establish for-profit surgery centres. Lifeshare Healthcare Systems West lobbied to buy the Holy Cross Hospital in Calgary. A shadowy group under the moniker Hotel de Health proposed to take over a floor of the Leduc hospital. A third group wanted to open a facility in Banff for well-heeled Americans. Such proposals were actively encouraged by the government. Cathy Jones, a union activist and board member of the Headwaters Regional Health Authority, remembered the determination of the government to forge ahead regardless of the research results:

Headwaters was targeted as a favoured community because of Banff and Canmore, and the wealthy [who] would come here to recuperate if we had a private hospital. So we had to look into the American, British, and Australian systems. It is my personal opinion that after going through that research . . . that we cannot go for private care systems the way those three countries have, for one practical reason. . . . The numbers of doctors and nurses and physiotherapists and pharmacists aren’t enough to cover two systems.

For many reasons, including public outcry and financial difficulties, most of these proposals dissipated. In 1996, the most serious bid to establish a private hospital was launched by Health Resources Group (later renamed Health Resource Centre), which wanted to lease part of the closed Grace Hospital in Calgary to operate an orthopaedic surgery centre. After initial defeats, the group received a licence to operate, and during the latter part of the 1990s, it survived in large part due to patients sent by the Canadian military and the Workers’ Compensation Board, which fast-tracked injured workers so they
could return to work. In 2010, however, the Health Resource Centre filed for bankruptcy, forcing the government to take over its operation. By that time, the government was allowing the centre to bill medicare for patients and had reduced capacity in the public system accordingly.

Since the 1980s, Alberta has hosted a series of private clinics, mostly eye surgery centres that billed medicare for the procedure and charged patients a “facility fee” for other costs. But the facility fees flouted the Canada Health Act, and Alberta was fined $3.5 million between 1995 and 1997 before finally ending the fees by increasing the medicare payment to these clinics.

The combination of cutbacks and attempts to expand private health care sparked a uniquely strong response from Albertans. The reduced quality of service and proposed bed closures led to large protests and angry letters to newspapers and MLAs. Particularly vocal outcries came from seniors, health care workers, consumers’ advocates, and activists in communities directly affected by closures. But two factors galvanized citizen anger around health care while other issues failed to unite Albertans.

First, a pre-existing vehicle served as a public face for opposition to health care privatization and cutbacks. While Friends of Medicare (FOM) had fallen into dormancy following the 1980s extra-billing fight, it had retained enough structure, name recognition, and credibility to quickly rejuvenate in the early 1990s. This was in stark contrast to most other issues, where players during a period of great stress needed to learn to work together and build trust before their fledgling coalitions could prove effective. FOM had the advantage of incorporating a broad spectrum of Albertans into its actions. The second key factor was the willingness of unions, particularly health care unions, to put their institutional weight behind this ready-to-go organization. Union leadership, especially from the United Nurses of Alberta and the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, as well as from the Alberta Federation of Labour, offered financial resources and institutional support for FOM’s activities.

FOM mobilized quickly, putting out press releases on all health-related matters, and organized the largest petition drive in Alberta history, presenting more than eighty thousand signatures to the legislature. In its campaigns, FOM tapped into fears about “American-style health care,” evoking a strong emotional reaction that the government never had an answer for. But FOM’s strength was tested in 1999 with the introduction of Bill 37, designed to legalize for-profit “non-hospital surgical facilities” and allow them to bill medicare for services. The new facilities were functionally the same as hospitals without emergency departments. FOM fanned fears about the bill, forcing the government to quickly back away and announce a blue ribbon panel to “review” the bill’s risks to medicare.

In 2000, following the panel’s report, the government introduced Bill 11, which mimicked Bill 37; the primary changes were some restrictions on the facilities’ operations and some patient protection. FOM organized the largest campaign against the Klein government to that time, including television ads, two massive rallies in Edmonton and Calgary, and community mobilization. Nightly protests, attended by thousands, as the bill was being debated in the house, capped the campaign. “It became an organic thing when in May of
2001 people rallied at the steps of the legislature. They just kept coming night after night after night,” recalled Elisabeth Ballermann, president of the Health Sciences Association of Alberta.41

The bill passed, but changed little. Due to the intense public response, the government was reluctant to move too aggressively, and it even introduced regulations that diluted its impact. Furthermore, it remained uneconomical to operate a private, for-profit hospital, and few entrepreneurs were willing to risk the investment.

In 2006, the Klein government made one last attempt to further a private health agenda, announcing plans to develop a “Third Way” for health care that would expand the role of private insurance companies in health care, increase user fees, and examine possible services to be delisted. Using the term “Third Way” was a conscious effort to side-step thorny comparisons to US-style health care. Once again, the FOM launched a campaign to oppose the strategy, rolling out ads and establishing Constituency Action Teams in every provincial riding in the province to mobilize community-level opposition. The campaign was less effective in building popular activism than the Bill 11 campaign had been, but it solidified public opinion against private health care options.

At the 2006 Conservative leadership review, Ralph Klein received an embarrassing 55 percent support from PC Party members, which led immediately to his resignation as premier. The backlash to the Third Way plan was widely considered a contributing factor in Klein’s downfall. Following his resignation, incoming Premier Ed Stelmach put the Third Way to rest publicly.

While FOM’s role in Ralph Klein’s downfall is unclear, it is clear that the organization played a leading role in preventing the privatization of Alberta health care. The campaigns — a mixture of grassroots organization, research, and media savvy — were effective in winning battles that had been unsuccessful with other issues. How FOM was able to “punch above its weight” is best encapsulated by Elisabeth Ballermann: “One of my fondest memories is of course when Ralph Klein at some point said the Friends of Medicare have run this million-dollar campaign. I knew at the time what kind of resources we had marshalled. . . . We hadn’t even spent a tenth of that.”42
Remaking Labour

At the dawn of the Klein era, labour feared anti-union labour law reforms on the model of New Zealand, Australia, and many US states. An early salvo in 1994 saw the government dissolve the Public Service Employee Relations Board and merge its functions into the Labour Relations Board. In 1995, the following motion narrowly passed in the legislature: “Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly urge the Government to initiate a study to examine the implementation of Right to Work legislation in the province of Alberta.” Right-to-work, a concept that originated in the southern United States, gives every worker the right to opt out of union membership, effectively overturning the Rand formula and thus weakening unionization. The AFL quickly built a campaign against the initiative, adopting the phrase “The Right to Work . . . For Less.” The Building Trades Council also mobilized, accusing supporters of “an irrational hatred of unions and the benefits that unions provide to workers.” Fortunately for labour, many large unionized employers also opposed the initiative, fearing destabilization of labour relations. The committee set up to examine right-to-work legislation received 225 submissions, the vast majority of which opposed a right-to-work provision. The committee’s final report recommended against the initiative.

Following the defeat of right-to-work, the government changed its approach. Rather than full-scale changes to legislation, it settled into supporting the status quo while quietly reshaping key elements of the system. A particular target was the Labour Relations Board. In 1999 the government, in an unprecedented move, fired the chair of the board, Bob Blair, over accusations that he was not sufficiently employer friendly. Then they overruled a selection committee and appointed a member of the anti-union construction employers’ group Merit Contractors to the board, the first time a non-union employer had joined the board. In the decade that followed, union activists believed it became more difficult for unions to receive a fair hearing at the Labour Relations Board. The president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 401, Doug O’Halloran, then in the middle of a difficult round of negotiations, expressed a common frustration regarding time delays:

[Last] March we filed this bargaining-in-bad-faith charge. They had it scheduled for December 21 of this year . . . That is how terrible this labour board is. The company snap their fingers, they get a hearing the next moment. At this stage, we’re fighting the company, we’re fighting the Labour Board, and we’re fighting the people in the plant that don’t want the union.

The only significant Labour Code changes came in 2008, when, after years of lobbying by Merit Contractors and other anti-union groups, the government passed a bill banning two practices common in the construction sector: “salting,” involving a union organizer soliciting employment with a non-union employer to start an organizing drive; and “merfing” (an acronym for Market Enhancement Recovery Fund), in which employers invest in a fund to subsidize wages or benefits, making their bids more competitive. The bill also stripped ambulance workers of the right to strike.
Building-trades unions barely mobilized against the changes, despite the problems they posed for their members. Other unions, not affected by the amendments, remained on the sidelines. The change was widely seen as payback for the ill-fated anti-Tory campaign waged by labour during the 2008 provincial election.

**The Quiet Withering of Worker Rights**

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the government launched numerous reviews of employment standards, but few substantive changes resulted. In 2010, the Employment Standards Code stood mostly as it had in 1989, with a few minor changes to maternity leave and other provisions.

In contrast, the Occupational Health and Safety Act and its regulations underwent significant overhaul. Extensive amendments in 2002 increased penalties, afforded new powers to the minister, and enshrined key safety principles. However, many initiatives beneficial to workers were promised but never implemented, such as publishing the names of the worst offenders and mandating Joint Health and Safety committees.48

The most significant change to the government’s occupational health and safety regime was the formation of the Partnerships Program in 1990. Partnerships established a “collaborative” relationship between employers and the government and de-emphasized active regulatory enforcement, which led to a hollowing out of state enforcement capacity. The enforcement arms of the Occupational Health and Safety and Employment Standards departments received disproportionately large cuts in the 1990s: Alberta Federation of Labour research conducted in 2000 found that Occupational Health and Safety suffered a 42 percent budget reduction in that decade.49 In 2010, the Auditor General released a scathing report indicting Occupational Health and Safety enforcement as ineffective and disorganized. The evisceration of that department is aptly illustrated by the reduction in workplace health and safety prosecutions: an average of 39 a year between 1985 and 1988; 10 between 1989 and 1994; and 2 between 1995 and 1999. After some modest re-investment, the average number of prosecutions between 2004 and 2009 rose to 12.50

Alberta’s minimum wage also underwent a slow withering of spending power, languishing as the lowest in Canada for most of the 1990s — it rose from $4.50 in 1990 to only $5.90 in 2000.51 After 2000, periodic rounds of agitation from the AFL, the Parkland Institute, and anti-poverty groups resulted in one-time increases, such as in 2005 to $7.00. Labour earned a short-lived victory in 2007, when the government tied the minimum wage to average weekly earnings. But the economic downturn scuttled the policy in 2010.

**Division 8 and the De-unionization of Construction**

Alberta’s Labour Relations Code contained an unused, largely forgotten section (Division 8) permitting an employer to bypass the normal construction bargaining regime and negotiate a single master (“wall-to-wall”) agreement for a project. In 2004, the government invoked the provision on behalf of Canadian Natural Resources Limited (CNRL) for its massive Horizon tar sands project. The effect was to permit CNRL to cut a deal with the Christian Labour Association of Canada.
(CLAC), a union that espoused close collaboration of unions and management, and was widely disparaged in labour circles. For CNRL, it meant restricting wage gains during a time of tight labour supply. The building-trade unions howled but could do little. In an analysis, the AFL stated, “[The AFL] believes that what’s happening with the Horizon Project is yet another example of the Alberta government using its legislative power to tip the playing field in favour of a large employer — in this case, one of Canada’s wealthiest energy corporations. CNRL has been handed a big stick that will almost certainly be used in an attempt to beat building trades workers into submission.”

The move gave CLAC a leg up in the booming tar sands construction. It also sparked a divisive fight between building-trades unions and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP), which also negotiated an agreement with CNRL, raising the ire of traditional building-trades unions. The feud lasted until CEP abandoned its construction experiment in 2009.

Labour Relations Board Credibility, Bill 27, and Using the Courts to Fight Back

The era’s other major piece of labour legislation was Bill 27 in 2003. The amendment was requested by health care employers responding to the amalgamation of Regional Health Authorities. The bill defined the parameters of health care bargaining, creating four functional groups — direct nursing care, paramedical and technical, auxiliary nursing care, and general support services — and region-wide bargaining units, thus forcing a series of runoff votes. It also removed the right to strike from community health care workers.

Health care unions, led by the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) and CEP, launched a legal challenge against the legislation, while the AFL submitted a series of freedom-of-information inquiries to find out the extent of employer involvement in the bill’s creation. The inquiries unexpectedly revealed that the Labour Relations Board was actively engaged in drafting Bill 27, an egregious breach of its mandate. For many unionists, this confirmed long-held suspicions of the board, and a large scandal erupted. The AFL commissioned reputed administrative law scholar Dr. Lorne Sossin to evaluate the breach and propose a set of protocols. In spring 2007, the Labour Relations Board agreed to implement protocols loosely based upon the Sossin recommendations in return for withdrawal of the legal challenge.

The unions’ legalistic response to Bill 27 was an example of a growing trend across Canada. Unions were more often turning to the courts to address perceived legislative injustices. This strategy was at times successful. Some key Charter of Rights and Freedoms decisions struck down restrictions on secondary picketing, guaranteed the right to unionize for farm workers, and enshrined collective bargaining as a Charter right. However, this approach had limitations. Many legal scholars suggested that the courts are not well disposed to union rights and the Charter is not constructed to recognize collective rights. In addition, unions’ growing hesitancy to resort to collective action and their increased reliance on lawyers to defend worker rights reflect the slow decline of union activism in Canada.
The Changing Face of the Labour Movement

Alberta’s labour movement in 2010 looked different from the movement constructed after World War II. Unionization rose at less than half the rate of employment growth in the province, which was dominated by industries with low union density such as oil and gas, high technology, and the service sector. Private sector organizing almost ceased: application success rates were below 50 percent, with new certifications generally small and precarious. The Christian Labour Association of Canada possessed the highest certification rate. Public sector unions therefore rose in prominence, profoundly affecting the direction of the labour movement.

The period from 1990 to 2010 also witnessed the rise of female labour leadership and, more tentatively, space for workers of colour. Internal fights and financial difficulties hobbled the AFL for much of the period, limiting its role to that of a support player and ending a short-lived period of a more activist AFL sparked by departure of the building-trades unions in the 1980s.

The vociferousness of the government’s attack during these two decades, rather than galvanizing public sector unions, divided them, creating tension and competition, particularly in health care. Animosity was strongest between the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE), a feud fueled by CUPE’s early settlement during the 1993 negotiations. Through the 1990s and 2000s, the two unions waged a series of raids and counter-raids. The unions presented their attacks as attempts to ensure stronger representation for health care workers, but in reality, their battle amounted to a resource-draining turf war that distracted both unions and opened a long-lasting rift in the labour movement. While AUPE was more victorious in runoff votes, CUPE was able to cast its opponent as a “black sheep” in the labour movement. The conflict climaxed in 2001 when AUPE, still Alberta’s largest union, was suspended from its national affiliate for raiding and thus became ineligible for AFL membership. AUPE blamed CUPE and the AFL for the expulsion and continued a campaign of raiding in retaliation, further entrenching tension and division. AUPE remained outside of the house of labour for the rest of the decade.

AUPE’s departure sparked a financial crisis at the AFL, forcing layoffs and restricting its political capacity. The AFL had also not benefited from the collapse of the Canadian Federation of Labour in the late 1990s. Most building-trades unions remained outside the federation, opting to remain with the Building Trades Council. The financial struggles only eased with the affiliation of the United Nurses of Alberta and the Health Sciences Association of Alberta a few years later. Both unions were constitutionally non-partisan and most of their members considered themselves professionals rather than unionists. Their arrival shifted the AFL’s political strategies: ties with the NDP weakened and rallies and public meetings gave way to more focus on advertising, lobbying, and communication strategies.

Strikes

Strikes were infrequent in Alberta between 1990 and 2010. Work days lost to work stoppages were consistently a fraction of rates in the other large provinces. Strike failures at Zeidler and in construction during
the 1980s had set the stage for subsequent union reluctance to use the strike weapon.

Private sector employers imitated the government and implemented more sophisticated union-busting tactics. The use of private security firms to patrol picket lines and intimidate strikers became commonplace. American-style consultants filtered into Alberta to advise employers how to remain union-free, break existing unions, and survive long strikes. These trends, combined with restrictive picketing rules and use of replacement workers, made striking a challenging proposition.

Some important disputes did arise, however, drawing mixed levels of broader labour and/or public support. The location and nature of the disputes reflected the changing nature of Alberta labour. The engagement in these strikes of new kinds of workers — immigrants, women, younger workers, and professionals — posed challenges to traditional union methods of mobilizing but also opened opportunities for new models of collective action, only partly realized by the end of the era.

**The Public Sector Fights Back**

The 1995 laundry workers’ strike turned the tide in public sector labour relations, emboldening public sector unions. In 1997, the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) pushed the government to the brink of a province-wide strike just weeks before a general election, gaining sizeable wage increases. Soon after, three health care unions (CUPE, AUPE, and the Canadian Health Care Guild) representing hospital support staff and auxiliary nursing staff jointly staged an illegal walkout that earned the workers their first wage increase in five years.

Then, on 24 May 2000, ten thousand AUPE health care workers, largely LPNs and nursing assistants, staged a dramatic illegal walkout. Their main issue was wage equity with other health professionals, as expressed by striker Myrna Wright:

I believed in what we were doing. It was the team we were on . . . and the fact that we’d been so underpaid and [for] so many years had been promised the other half of the loaf of bread, and we never got it . . . . When you saw what the RNS got . . . you can’t go back and tell your people to take it, because it’s not worth it. It wasn’t worth it and we were being discriminated against.
Less than forty-eight hours later, a tentative agreement, hammered out personally between AUPE president Dan MacLennan and Premier Klein, ended the strike. The deal provided wage increases of between 8 percent and 16 percent, and a further guarantee of no contracting out.

The aftermath of the 2000 strike was significant. AUPE was fined $400,000 (reduced to $200,000 on appeal) for contempt of court and the Labour Relations Board imposed a two-month dues suspension, costing the union hundreds of thousands more. More legal challenges ensued, but in 2009, the courts affirmed the legality of the double penalty.

In 2002, it was the teachers’ turn. A battle had been brewing between the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) and the province since the 1994 cuts. In 2001, the good settlements won by the UNA and AUPE signalled to teachers the opportunity to regain lost ground. With school board contracts expiring, representing over half the province’s teachers, the ATA abandoned its decentralized and moderate approach, and developed a province-wide coordinated bargaining strategy, an overtly political act intended to send a signal to the government. ATA president Larry Booi emphasized that the strategy was not primarily about increasing wages: “I believe the emotional driver for the strike was the classroom conditions issue. I’m not saying that wages weren’t important. But classroom conditions have been a burning issue for at least a decade.”

On 4 February, teachers in nineteen locals struck; they were soon joined by three more. The strike affected 21,000 teachers and more than 350,000 students (two-thirds of all students in the province). After thirteen days, the government declared an “emergency” and ordered the teachers back to work. However, the courts overturned the order, ruling that the government had not demonstrated that an emergency existed. This led to failed one-on-one negotiations between Klein and Booi. The government instead passed legislation imposing restrictive arbitration, angering teachers even further, but by that point, classes had resumed and strike energy had dissipated. Arbitration tribunals eventually settled agreements with sizeable wage increases, but most classroom condition issues remained untouched.

The Changing Face of Private Sector Strikes

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed workers in traditionally low unionization sectors beginning to stand up for their rights by leading a series of strikes, many to gain a first contract. Strikes and lockouts in traditional
industrial areas continued, mainly as battles for survival rather than to acquire gains for workers. Workers at the Gainers plant (now called Maple Leaf Foods) walked out again in 1997, but for the last time, as the plant was shuttered during the strike. Through the next ten years, more strikes occurred to forestall rollbacks, layoffs, and plant closures: Finning International workers struck unsuccessfully to prevent rollbacks in 1997; workers at the Georgia Pacific gypsum plant prevented plant closure through striking in 1998; Altasteel workers struck in 1999 to stop layoffs and wage rollbacks; in 2007, the Molson Brewing Plant in Edmonton was closed following a short strike; and in 2009, workers at Old Dutch waged a strike for a union shop.

The bulk of strikes were in newer sectors. In 1997, ten thousand Safeway workers struck province-wide to oppose employer demands for a two-tier wage structure and to protest broken promises from a 1993 agreement when the union took concessions to prevent the company’s collapse. But the strike, while regionally effective, could not overcome the sheer size of Safeway’s operations, said United Food and Commercial Workers president Doug O’Halloran:

We have a strike vote of 93 percent across the province. We end up with eighty-five picket lines across the province. The strike is seventy-five days long. The one thing that we underestimated was Alberta’s only 7 percent of the company’s market. Their business, except for Calgary, was shut down to about 15 percent. Stores that were doing $400,000 were doing $15,000 or $20,000. Safeway were running trucks up to Fort McMurray with nothing on them.60

The resulting deal disappointed the workers. “The people were pissed off at Safeway, they were pissed off at us, because that’s all they were getting and they were paying high dues,” says O’Halloran, blaming the changing industry. “In hindsight now, if we had known what was going to happen with Canada Safeway, we may as well put them out of business back then.”61

The Safeway strike can be seen as a transitional strike. While grocery has a long history of unionization, changes in the industry toward discount bulk stores, globalized product chains, and downward wage pressure undermined the status of workers in the sector, causing them to share more in common with other retail workers than with oil refinery workers.

In the years that followed, a series of strikes erupted
across the province in the areas of media, casinos, and hotel/catering staff. In 1999, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) surprised many by successfully certifying a bargaining unit of journalists at the Calgary Herald. However, their opponent, outspoken conservative media baron Conrad Black, installed a management team intent on busting the union. The dispute escalated to a lockout in November 1999, which lasted eight months. Intimidation from Herald security and even the Calgary Police was formidable. Strike leader Andy Marshall experienced much of it first hand:

We held our first rally a month into the strike. . . . We had a couple of thousand people at least, in northeast Calgary one evening. . . . We intended to make it difficult for them to get the trucks out. This involved a big sacrifice, because the trucks don’t come out until two o’clock in the morning. . . . But when everyone showed up in the evening, there were Mounted Police on another street, which was very intimidating. During the evening we had a rally and speeches, then we lined up on the road at the entrance to the Herald. The police came, walked down the street in a line, tapping their shields, slow step by slow step toward these very innocent, gentle people, who just wanted a first contract. . . . On subsequent nights, it was even nastier, where the police manhandled people, were very rough. . . . When I was sitting on the ground and a policeman came up, the first thing he did was knock my glasses off so I can’t see. He went for my eye, that’s right, and started putting his finger in my eye. . . . It was quite staggering to see the role of the police in a strike. . . . In my view, the police are co-opted by companies and by the authorities to act against people who are legally striking.62

— Andy Marshall, former Calgary Herald reporter

**LORD BLACK VERSUS HIS WORKERS**

We were in the strike headquarters planning our day. Gordon Christie from the Labour Council phoned up. He said, “Conrad Black’s in town. . . . He’s come to a Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce shareholders meeting being held in Calgary.” A handful of us went down to the inn on Fourth Avenue and sure enough, we heard Conrad was in the meeting room there with the shareholders, maybe 150 people. So we began picketing on the street. There were some media there. . . . I thought, “I’ve gotta talk to Black, I’ve gotta catch him.” So I waited at the doors, and he’s the first out at lunchtime, him and his great big bodyguard. I said, “Mr. Black (he wasn’t a lord then), I’m Andy Marshall and I want to talk to you.” He said, “I’ve heard all about you.” He strode off, so I went along behind him. He stopped at the steps, so we talked some more. I said, “I think we could solve this strike quite easily.” He went into a tirade. . . . That’s when he said, “You’re a gangrenous limb that we’ve got to chop off.” . . . He sort of wagged his fingers in my face. He said, “You’ve got two choices. You come back to work tomorrow or we’re going to wait you out, we’re going to decertify you.”. . . So what he proposed was, we have absolutely no intention of bargaining with you. So come back tomorrow, no contract. Or we just wait you out, no big deal. So what he said on camera with absolute impunity was illegal. . . . It was totally against even Alberta’s labour laws. You have to bargain in good faith. There he was saying, “I have no interest or no intention of bargaining in good faith with you.” That interview knocked the stuffing out of people.

— Andy Marshall, former Calgary Herald reporter

**SOURCE:** Interview with Andy Marshall, Cochrane, 18 November 2005, ALII.
The workers could not inflict economic hardship on the Herald, and as the strike wore on, morale sagged. “I know there have been longer strikes and tougher strikes, but I could see the suffering,” said Marshall. “People were coming unglued. . . . By May, the vice-president said to me, ‘We’ve got to finish this, because it’ll just peter out to nothing.’” Eventually a buyout package was negotiated and the union was decertified.

Other media workers also struck in the early 2000s. Reporters and technicians at A-Channel Edmonton (later City TV) struck in 2004 for a first agreement. A four-and-a-half-month strike produced an agreement. The union has since been decertified. CBC workers went on strike in 1999, 2001, and 2005. Globalization was behind rising conflict in the sector. With content increasingly produced centrally and advertising dollars scattered among myriad new media forms, layoffs in local newsrooms and the downgrading of local production became inevitable.

A second group of newly unionized workers during the Klein era were workers in casinos and hospitality, who were among the lowest paid in the labour market. Consequently, disproportionate numbers of newcomers, young workers, and visible minorities worked in this sector. Unions struggled to organize these workers, making some inroads, only to face anti-union employers. Several disputes ensued. In 2002, catering staff at the Edmonton Convention Centre, recently and precariously unionized by the United Food and Commercial Workers, walked out for a first contract. The strike was plagued by picket line crossing and apathy from the public and the broader labour movement. The employer, the city-funded Economic Development Edmonton, stonewalled until City Council, concerned about the strike’s effect on the upcoming Grey Cup game, forced a resolution.

Four years later, the same union took a group of dealers and serving staff at Palace Casino on a strike that lasted ten months. Doug O’Halloran summarized Palace wages:

> An average dealer makes $8.80 an hour, a server makes $7.01 an hour, a woman who’s been dealing for five years makes $9 an hour. . . . No sick days, full time or part time. The full time can pay for half their benefits, and the benefits aren’t that great. We’ve got these oil workers coming in and saying, “Well, go get a job. Why are you out here on the picket line? If you only make $7 or $8 an hour, why don’t you go work somewhere else?” They don’t understand that the people love the place of work.

The challenge in the hospitality sector compared to traditional industries, as CUPE discovered in their 2005 strike at Casino Calgary, was to create economic hardship for the employer. First, it was easier for managers to fill striking workers’ functions. Second, especially in first-contract strikes, there was insufficient solidarity to prevent large-scale line crossing. Third, the picket line had to also achieve the more difficult task of preventing customers from entering.

Unique challenges forced the unions involved to develop new tactics, such as producing radio ads and billboards, attempting to influence community leaders, and launching consumer boycotts. Increased international ownership of these companies forced unions to engage in actions around the globe (for example, in Australia to settle the Palace Casino strike). Also,
unions framed the strikes differently — adding public health issues, safety, community standards, and other concerns to draw public sympathy. Not all of these strikes were successful, but they demonstrated the need of unions to respond to unique needs of workers in particular industries.

NEW WORKERS AND NEW MOVEMENTS
Labour took some time to respond to new voices in new struggles. For example, unions were bystanders in the battle between a gay Christian college instructor fired for his sexual orientation and the weight of the government’s bigotry. In the 1990s, Delwin Vriend
became a symbol for the new face of justice and equity in Alberta. His victory through the courts took seven years and resulted in sexual orientation being enshrined in the Charter of Rights.

Labour’s difficulty in embracing new political activists continued when Prime Minister Jean Chrétien announced in 2002 that the G8 Summit would be held in Kananaskis. Issues of global power and globalization had exploded onto the public consciousness in 1999 with the so-called “Battle in Seattle,” where sixty thousand protesters disrupted a meeting of the World Trade Organization. That confrontation marked the maturation of a new movement of youthful political activists questioning the validity of global capitalism. The 1999 protests spawned large-scale activism at all key global political meetings.

As the Kananaskis meetings approached, the Alberta Federation of Labour and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union attempted to form a working coalition with local activists to organize protests. Two challenges emerged. First, the summit took place in a mountain resort ninety minutes west of Calgary, complicating both access and logistics. Second, the coalition struggled to mesh labour’s traditional, institutional approach to organizing with the brash, impatient energy of the anti-globalization activists, which bogged down organizing efforts. The eventual protests, held in Calgary, were smaller and less confrontational than those elsewhere, drawing attention to the relative weakness of both labour and the anti-globalization movement in Alberta.

However, some union activists took on the G8. Canadian Union of Postal Workers member Cindy McCallum-Miller recalled:

The postal workers had collected a whole bunch of letters from citizens of Calgary to the leaders of the G8 to say why we didn’t want the kinds of programs that they were going to try and put in place. . . . Postal workers were going to break through the barricades and we were going to go and deliver those letters to the G8 leaders. My proudest moment was the fact that [Jean-Claude Parrot] and I were the first two that were to cross the police lines.

As the 2000s rolled along, the polarity of oil prosperity and deplorable working conditions became glaring. Three groups of vulnerable workers drew the attention of the labour movement: farm workers, adolescent workers, and temporary foreign workers.

Farm Workers

Agricultural work has long been exploitative. Hard physical labour, small economic margins, and a “family first” mindset combine to create low pay, excessive hours, and little attention to safety. The plight of farm workers received renewed attention in the early 2000s, sparked by two factors. First, in the 1990s, the United Food and Commercial Workers in Ontario and British Columbia launched an ambitious drive, modelled on the United Farm Workers in California, to organize farm workers and overturn laws prohibiting farm worker unionization. Their legal battles drew national headlines as the Supreme Court overturned the prohibition in 2001. Second, the murder of Terry Rash, a farm worker near Taber, on 20 August 1999, sparked public outrage in the province.

There were about twelve thousand farm workers in Alberta earning less than ten dollars per hour.
on average and working highly sporadic, demanding work schedules. Unlike Ontario and British Columbia, where most farm workers were migrant workers, most Alberta farm workers were resident Albertans. Farm workers were exempt from most employment protections, including Workers’ Compensation Board coverage, Occupational Health and Safety regulations, and working-hour limits.

A small advocacy group for farm workers, Farm Workers Union of Alberta, formed in the early 2000s to raise awareness of farm worker issues. However, the group’s decision to not actively organize limited its potential gains and it faded away. In 2005, the Alberta Federation of Labour launched “End the Drought,” a short-lived campaign to pressure the Alberta government to extend basic employment standards to farm workers. This initiative also soon fizzled.

The momentum against farm worker protection was significant. As labour relations professor Bob Barnett explains, “Agricultural workers have historically had no meaningful access to provincial policy making and also lack powerful allies who might assist them in seeking statutory inclusion.” Labour’s half-hearted adoption of the issue was insufficient to overcome historical barriers.

Temporary Foreign Workers

In the mid-2000s, the tar sands boom led to significant shifts in the labour-market balance. Employers in many industries complained of difficulty attracting and retaining workers. The government agreed, decrying a “labour shortage” and calling for immediate action. The labour movement was skeptical. “Apparently we are to believe,” responded the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL), “that when minimum wage employers can’t find people who want to work at unpleasant jobs for miserable wages, it’s a crisis.”

In 2002, the Liberal federal government changed the rules to its niche-oriented temporary foreign worker (TFW) program. The program had existed for decades as a small program facilitating the temporary employment of scientists, university professors, engineers, and other high-skilled occupations. When the Liberals expanded its scope to include building trades, retail clerks, cooks, labourers, and gas station attendants, few additional safeguards were added to protect the more vulnerable low-skilled workers. In 2007, the Harper government increased the number of workers and eligible occupations further, which profoundly shifted Canada’s immigration policy to resemble entrenched European migrant worker programs. Alberta employers were quick to take advantage of the expanded program. In 1998, only a few hundred TFWs lived in Alberta. By 2004, the number had grown to 13,236, and by 2009, to 65,748. Alberta had the highest proportion of TFWs in the country — 1.8 percent of its population. Most were low-skilled workers from developing nations.

Reports of exploitation soon emerged. Employers took advantage of TFWs’ vulnerable legal status and the shortcomings in government enforcement. The AFL hired Edmonton lawyer Yessy Byl in 2007 to act as a TFW advocate providing case assistance to TFWs in need and offering education and policy advocacy. Within the first six months, Byl received more than 1,400 inquiries, handled 123 individual cases, and made dozens of representations on behalf of TFWs. She found widespread abuse and exploitation
by employers and employment brokers and neglect by both levels of government. Brokers illegally charged fees to TFWS, and employers failed to pay overtime, paid lower than promised wages, and often charged exorbitant rents for employer-supplied accommodation. Sixty percent of those employers with TFWS who were inspected had breached either the Employment Standards Code or the Occupational Health and Safety Act, yet few penalties were ever assessed. Few TFWS were granted permanent residency.

Employers unwilling to share the boom’s prosperity used the TFW program to construct a new vulnerable labour pool as an end-run around the higher wages demanded by Canadian workers. Though TFWS were trumpeted as a short-term solution to labour shortages, their influx continued even after the 2008 economic crisis arrived since employers still wanted expendable workers.

Adolescent Workers

The search for new workers during the tar sands boom also targeted adolescents. Employment of twelve- to fourteen-year-olds had been restricted to a few occupations, such as newspaper delivery. An employer wanting young workers outside those occupations needed special approval from the director of Employment Standards. During the 1990s, applications grew more common, and in 2004, more than 550 permits were granted to restaurant owners.

In June 2005, without public notification and at the request of the restaurant industry, the government allowed restaurant employers to hire twelve- and thirteen-year-olds without informing the government. The AFL raised the alarm about potential impacts. Although political pressure forced the government to amend the new policy slightly, requiring employers to submit a checklist for each adolescent they hired, research conducted by the AFL the following year found that most employers were failing to submit the forms. In 2007, the government relaxed the rules even further, permitting adolescents to work in kitchens of bars, but this time, public backlash forced a reversal. By 2008, however, as many as eleven thousand nine- to eleven-year-olds and forty thousand twelve- to fourteen-year-olds were employed in Alberta. Much like TFWS, the loosening of rules around adolescent workers allowed low-wage industries to tap a labour pool of more vulnerable workers and thereby keep wages low.

NEW CANADIANS WIN AT LAKESIDE

The remaking of Alberta workplaces is best symbolized by the 2005 strike at the Lakeside Packing plant in Brooks, a town of thirteen thousand on the Trans-Canada Highway that had for generations represented the rural cowboy spirit. Its largest employer, Lakeside Packers, was a leader in the transformation of the meat-packing industry, driving down wages and shedding its union in 1984. Union-organizing efforts through the 1990s met with failure due to aggressive and at times illegal tactics by the employer.

By the early 2000s, an influx of new workers — at first from Newfoundland and other provinces, and later from Sudan, Somalia, Cambodia, the Philippines, and other developing nations — changed the face of Lakeside and Brooks by creating a diverse, divided workforce. Working conditions were deplorable. “They
value the cows, not the workers,” said Peter Jany, a Sudanese worker. “When you get injured, cut yourself or whatever, they fire you.”76

In 2004, a wildcat protest by mostly Sudanese workers sparked a renewed interest in the union. United Food and Commercial Workers organizer Archie Duckworth remembers being invited.

In May of 2004, the Sudanese community had been negotiating with the company to create better working conditions. The company had apparently promised them this. When that failed, approximately a hundred people walked off the floor and insisted that they wanted to talk to the management to solve some of the issues . . . pay, injuries, and being treated with respect and dignity. . . . The employer at that time decided to turn around and fire the hundred people. Then the Sudanese community came and asked us to come back in and try to organize the plant. So that’s when I came back on the scene and we started our campaign.77

With a new alliance of African newcomers and former union supporters, the union shifted tactics. It produced campaign literature in eight languages, and made a concerted attempt to include all cultural groups. The certification succeeded with a razor-thin 51.4 percent, largely divided along newcomer–long-time Albertan lines.78 Lakeside, owned at the time by Arkansas-based giant Tyson Foods (sold in 2009 and renamed XL Foods), refused to negotiate, and the two sides marched towards a dispute. The strike began on 17 October 2005. The picket line was tense and violent. Nearly half the workers crossed the line, but in the early days of the strike, the union successfully halted production. Newfoundland ex-pat Ashley Grandy felt that such an ugly strike could only happen in Alberta. “Any other province in Canada, this would not happen. I believe B.C. and Quebec have anti-scab laws. If this was Newfoundland . . . nobody would get into that plant, absolutely nobody.”79

The strike’s turning point was a high-speed car chase involving four plant managers and union local president Doug O’Halloran. O’Halloran was permanently disabled after being run off the road. Two weeks later, a first agreement was settled. O’Halloran remembered the immediate aftermath of the chase:

After the accident, we had to be very careful, because the workers were so annoyed they were going to go burn the plant, literally. . . . The workers couldn’t believe that they would run their president off the road. . . . [But] believe it or not, there was a positiveness to it all. I think that the company had such a backlash of public opinion because of me being run off the road, it actually brought the strike to an end.80
In the years that followed, Lakeside remained divided and the union continued to meet with resistance. Duckworth, who serviced the local after the strike, said it took time for management to accept the union’s legitimacy. “When we first started out . . . they weren’t willing to give one inch in a collective agreement. They didn’t care about the workers; they cared about getting rid of us.”\(^8\)

Lakeside is one of the few organizing and strike victories for Alberta labour in the two decades beginning in 1990. It is noteworthy that African and Asian workers took a leadership role in standing up for their rights.
THE FALL OF MANUFACTURING

During the 1990s, the government ended attempts to diversify the Alberta economy. Experiments with loan guarantees and investment in burgeoning industries ended ingloriously in a heap of scandals and millions of dollars lost in the early 1990s. The Klein neo-liberals used the failures to discredit notions of active government. The political influence of the oil industry increased, leading to a shift in economic policy from encouragement of secondary processing of energy resources to more aggressive exploitation and exportation.

This shift stimulated rapid expansion of tar sands development, creating massive construction projects north of Fort McMurray. Tar sands production increased from 350,000 barrels daily in 1990 to 1.3 million barrels daily in 2008, with expectations of up to 5 million by 2030. The migration of capital and workers to the tar sands created a crisis in other sectors. Calls for a slowdown, a moratorium, and greater regulation of tar sands development went unheeded by the government.

For labour, the tar sands represented a dilemma. For construction unions, the boom meant thousands of well-paid industrial construction jobs, albeit tempered by employers’ increased use of temporary foreign workers, Christian Labour Association of Canada members, and non-union workers. However, unions in other sectors could not ignore the political, economic, social, and ecological consequences of the boom. The labour movement’s ambivalence is reflected in two AFL reports released in 2009. “Down the Pipeline” supported secondary processing of crude oil and gas while accepting ongoing tar sands development.

“Green Jobs,” by contrast, supported a move away from carbon-intensive industry. At the end of the 2000s, the labour movement remained ambivalent, wanting to align itself with the concerns of environmentalists but unwilling to question underlying assumptions about the industry’s growth.

Preoccupation with tar sands development and neoliberalism also led to the decline of manufacturing in Alberta. The 1997 closure of the Gainers plant symbolized Alberta’s shifting economy. Northeast Edmonton, historically the hub of the meat-packing industry, had a single, small independent packing plant left in 2010. Strip malls, casinos, and tracts of empty land replaced former plants. The 2007 closure of Edmonton’s Molson plant, where beer had been brewed uninterrupted since 1913, also marked the end of an era.

The fifty-year-old Celanese petrochemical plant in Edmonton was shut down in 2007, while the Edmonton GWG jeans factory (GWG was then owned by Levi Strauss & Co.) closed in 2004, each representing the collapse of their industries. Workers’ lives were altered forever — in the first industry, mostly older male workers; in the second, female newcomers. The GWG announcement shocked Kim Ngo and her co-workers: “When we heard the announcement that they were going to close, everybody cried. I cried. At night time I said, ‘Is it a dream? I hope it is a dream.’ We did not want to lose it. Some of us even think, ‘Could we reduce the wage so that we all can stay?’” The productive, profitable plant fell victim to Levi Strauss’s decision to move all production off-shore. Edmonton Mayor Bill Smith called the closure “almost inevitable in the global economy,” an analysis that ignored forty years of corporate decisions.
Most laid-off workers struggled to find comparable employment, even with the assistance of job centres and training funds. Bill Climie, a lab technician at Celenese, is an example:

The majority of resumes nowadays go through one or two companies; they get fed through a computer, scanned in, and key words are flipped out, and you get spit out. Because my resume has no dates on it anymore, because my university degree is thirty years old . . . my resume never makes it to a person, I’m guessing. Even these small and medium companies that could use my training and my expertise, they can’t afford to hire HR people to review a thousand resumes, so they go through these companies. So my resume still doesn’t make it onto their desk.87

Alberta entered the new century with a dramatically changed economy and workforce. Gone were the blue overalls of factory workers, replaced by the white shirts of nurses, teachers, and oil executives. As laid-off worker Sam Cholak noted: “We can’t all be in the service industry. You have to make something here to be viable. Services only go so far and that’s it . . . You have to have manufacturing; you have to take your raw resources and make something with it, right here.” 88 The Alberta government disagreed, repealing requirements for energy upgrading and forging ahead with an export-oriented economy.

THE END OF KLEIN AND BEYOND

The Klein era ended on 31 March 2006, when PC Party members handed Ralph Klein his first political defeat in a leadership review. While Ed Stelmach’s surprise leadership victory in December 2006 changed the personality of the premiership, the immediate post-Klein period was one of continuity. Stelmach continued most Klein policies, including rapid tar sands development. Little changed for Alberta workers. The March 2008 election gave a large majority to the PCs. Its aftermath signalled that the “new normal” of the Klein era would continue.

In earlier elections, Alberta’s unions had adopted traditional campaign strategies: providing money and campaign workers to specific parties — in general the AFL-affiliated unions to the NDP and the building trades predominantly to the Liberals — and encouraging members to vote for the desired party. But labour approached the 2008 election differently. Attempting to replicate successful campaigns in Ontario and Saskatchewan in which labour ran its own issue campaigns parallel to the party campaigns, the Building Trades Council, the United Nurses of Alberta, the Health Sciences Association of Alberta, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, and the Alberta Federation of Labour partnered to create Albertans for Change, a $2.3 million advertising campaign designed to encourage anti-Conservative voting.89 Seven television ads attacked Stelmach, claiming he had “no plan.” Public reaction to the Albertans for Change campaign was, however, negative.

The strategic change by the AFL highlighted the shifting power base within labour toward the non-partisan health care unions and away from the traditional NDP-supporting private sector unions, a shift that continued in the election’s aftermath when the AFL Executive Council debated a proposal to lead an effort...
to persuade the Liberals, Greens, and NDP to co-operate in the next election. The AFL proposal paralleled efforts of a cluster of groups, fueled by discouraging election results, to push the two main opposition parties to co-operate in some fashion. The AFL’s dalliance with cross-partisan support raised significant tensions with the Alberta NDP and the Canadian Labour Congress.

**A New Round of Cuts, or Not**

Alberta was shaken harder by the 2008 country-wide economic crisis than any other province. Eighty thousand jobs were lost in ten months, and labour shortages turned into surpluses with cascading consequences. The province’s budget faced the spectre of renewed deficits. This led to rhetoric of budget cuts and the need for public sector workers to “share the pain” once again. Through 2009 and 2010, however, overall spending increased but at a slower rate. Still, financial challenges emerged in advanced education, health care, and education. The economic crisis hit Albertans unevenly: some barely noticed the shift in economic fortunes, and the wealth gap widened.

Unions responded by forming Join Together Alberta, a coalition of labour and community groups. But in a pattern similar to that of 1994, concessionary collective agreements were signed without disruption as unions accepted the belt-tightening rhetoric. While union fears of a new round of Kleinesque cuts had not materialized in 2010, patterns established during the 1990s replayed themselves. Efforts to mobilize activism against cuts were sporadic, and unions accepted the assumptions of financial difficulty presented by employers.

**Health Care Reform Redux**

The economic crisis was used to shake up the health care system once again and promote private health care experiments. In 2009, the Regional Health Authorities were eliminated and a province-wide “superboard” was created, leading to chaos in the system. The health minister used the crisis to place health care privatization back on the table. Long waiting lists, emergency room queues, and staffing shortages returned. The government acted on many fronts at once, moving to close Alberta Hospital, the province’s largest mental health hospital; reduce seniors’ health benefits; and close long-term care beds. Public outcry, however, focused by Friends of Medicare, led to a retreat from most of the announced cutbacks, though rhetoric of adding more “market” conditions to health care continued.

**The Rise of a New Political Force**

By 2010, a new political party was posing a potentially serious challenge to the Tories. The Wildrose Alliance Party (WAP) was formed out of an amalgamation of small, right-wing fringe parties in early 2008. A protest party of ideological conservatives, it had little impact on the 2008 election. However, marginally increased royalty rates angered the oilpatch, leading to an influx of donations from angry oil executives to the WAP, if only to pressure the governing Conservatives to rescind energy royalty increases. The election as leader in fall 2009 of former *Calgary Herald* lockout journalist Danielle Smith sparked a quick rise for the party, which had already won a Calgary by-election that fall. The party’s popularity forced the government to backtrack on the new royalty regime.
For labour, the rise of WAP was a matter of concern. At its 2010 policy convention, the party passed resolutions restricting the right of teachers to strike and loosely advocating right-to-work legislation. The party also supported unbridled tar sands development and more aggressive health care privatization.

While most observers argued that the rise of WAP marked a long-awaited shift in Alberta politics, another view is possible. The preliminary success of WAP can be seen as another marker of the new normal. By selling his revolution on neo-liberal rhetoric and principles, Ralph Klein lifted the expectations of those Albertans who wholeheartedly accepted that ideology. His government, through its words as much as its actions, also legitimized a perspective of radical free-market politics. When the realities of governing dampened the Conservatives’ ideological fervour, emboldened true believers felt the confidence to strike up their own political movement. The rise of WAP is significant not because of the party itself, but because it may represent the culmination of forces unleashed by Klein.

The most recent era in Alberta labour history began with a revolution and ended with the entrenchment of a new normal. Labour was unprepared for the onslaught that came at them in the 1990s, unable to muster sufficient response to the series of cuts and rollbacks. Internal divisions and insecurity handcuffed working Albertans and allowed neo-liberalism to advance further than in other provinces. By acquiescing to key assumptions about the nature of the problem, unions unintentionally signed a deal re-establishing the boundaries of political debate and labour relations in the province. That new normal is characterized by a defensive, divided labour movement hesitant to use its potential strength of solidarity and, in contrast, confident employers and conservative politicians advancing their agenda unscathed.

But during this era, workers still rose to protect justice, jobs, and their values. Although these struggles often ended in defeat, the growth of new voices and new faces among Alberta workers was heartening. Those most likely to raise their fists in the 1990s and 2000s were new to the labour movement and often new to Canada. Whether at Lakeside Packers, at Palace Casino, or in union halls, workers challenged parts of the new normal, rising up to say that justice should not be denied. Furthermore, unions learned from these workers and tried to understand their lived experience. The labour movement responded to the evolving working class. The new voices will become established voices in the next era of Alberta labour history and may find ways to shred the new normal.
FIG 9-1 These women mechanics worked at #2 Air Observers School in Edmonton in 1943. Provincial Archives of Alberta, BI 529-2.