Racialization and Work

Jennifer Kelly and Dan Cui

The other day I received a communication from a party at Aurora, Nebr., who said he was colored and wanted to go to Canada. He is a laboring man, and while he says he is a good worker, etc. I was under the impression from your circular, that you did not wish Negroes going into Canada and for that matter wrote him. To-day he comes back with a letter stating he is in communication with officials in Canada, of whom he mentions J. Bruce Walker at Winnipeg and says that they urge him to come. The man may be a good worker and may make a good settler, but from our experience in the states, I judged the Canadian Officials were not desirous of having Colored people enter Canada and as such interpreted your circular of above date.1

This letter — written in 1910 by W.V. Bennett, a Canadian immigration agent working in the United States, to the Canadian superintendent of immigration — illustrates well the intertwining of race and labor in Canadian immigration policies and the so-called settlement of Alberta. Throughout its history, the Canadian state has decided, often using the category of race, which groups of people it wanted to bring to Canada and for what purposes. While equating “whiteness” with intelligence, honesty, and civilization, the government subscribed to stereotypes of “non-white” groups, characterizing all members of a group as the same rather than considering them as individuals. Like other categories based only on what the eye perceives, however, ideas of “whiteness” evolved over time, with some groups being considered more white than others. For example, until the late 1800s, the Canadian government viewed certain Europeans, particularly Slavs and southern Europeans, as genetically inferior people. Efforts to recruit families and individuals with these backgrounds began only in the 1890s because there were too few “preferred” immigrants available from Britain, France, and Germany. Although the state always regarded them as more white than non-Europeans, it took several generations for Slavs and southern Europeans to be accepted fully as white.
Non-Europeans, who were usually darker than people of European descent, continued to be viewed by the state as the least desirable immigrants. After World War II, in particular, the view of the Canadian Immigration Department was that the world was divided between Europeans and non-Europeans, the latter being inferior to the former and only acceptable for Canadian residence and citizenship under special circumstances. Prime Minister Mackenzie King made the government’s position clear in the House of Commons in 1947: “Large-scale immigration from the orient would change the fundamental composition of the Canadian population,” he warned, and he assured the House that government policy would prevent such immigration. The notion that people’s skin colour or other physical attributes set them apart from other existing or potential citizens is part of the process of racialization, which uses the concept of race to make judgments about people’s intrinsic worth on the basis of their outward appearance.

Hence, during the early twentieth century, when there was a need for immigrant workers — especially farmers — in western Canada, the Canadian government racialized certain people as non-white and therefore unfit for Canadian citizenship. Those few non-white workers who were allowed into Alberta and Canada before the 1960s were often officially regarded as temporary migrants, expendable and returnable to elsewhere once the economic need for their labour ended. This issue of expendability has been an aspect of immigration policy since at least the nineteenth century and underlies today’s temporary foreign workers scheme (discussed below). Further, non-white workers, including Aboriginal groups, were often marginalized and corralled into specific segments of the Alberta labour market; they were regarded as only able to work effectively under supervision and in certain types of jobs. The overall effect of this marginalization and the racialized response to particular groups of workers has been that they are then vulnerable to being deported or sacked and are thus likely to be more acquiescent to the demands of employers and the state.

This systemic racialization of workers, immigration policies, and, ultimately citizenship, persisted until the 1967 Immigration Regulation introduced the “point system” — a change agreed to mainly because of the decline of preferred traditional immigrants from northern Europe. This chapter uses archival records and oral history interviews undertaken by the Alberta Labour History Institute and other organizations to trace the various discourses that have been used to racialize working people in Alberta from 1900 to the present.
COLONIAL RELATIONS, WORK, AND ABORIGINAL GROUPS, 1900–45

As chapter 1 suggests, Canada’s Aboriginal peoples were the first group of Albertans to face racialization by the Canadian state. The pre-Confederation relationship of Europeans with Aboriginal peoples based on the fur trade gave way after 1867 to “national” policies in which the Canadian state viewed the Aboriginal peoples’ control of the land, acceptable during the fur trade period, as contrary to the interests of capital. A nation was to be developed through the promotion of a national railway system and the opening up of the West to a stable agricultural class, who would produce wheat and other agricultural products for exchange on world markets. Such measures were intended to maintain and stabilize industrial capitalism in central Canada. As sociologists Harley Dickinson and Terry Wotherspoon note, “Indians were commonly regarded as impediments to economic development and nation-building processes, at least insofar as they occupied territories regarded as vital to national expansion.”

So the state sought to train and resocialize Aboriginal youth in residential and industrial schools with a view to changing traditional work habits and ways of engaging with the land. It used education in its attempt to replace the Aboriginal kin-based economies with capitalist economic structures in which Aboriginals would provide a source of cheap labour. Education professor Brian Titley describes the Red Deer Industrial School of late-nineteenth-century Alberta, for instance, as a place where work took precedence over the academic program: “The boys were kept busy working on the farm putting in crops of oats, potatoes, turnips, carrots, and other vegetables. . . . Eight boys were receiving instruction in carpentry. . . . The girls were learning to cook and make clothes and other tasks of a domestic nature.”

Education thus played a critical role in the reproduction of entrenched class, power, and gendered meanings of specific types of work. Canadian social structures and “common sense” understandings of nation, citizenship, and labour were consequently stabilized.

As well, title to and use of most traditional Aboriginal land as private property was ensured through treaty arrangements that resulted in the separation of First Peoples onto reserves. Despite First Nations being separated from mainstream society and given a marginalized status, their contribution to the Canadian economy was noteworthy. In 1911, a Department of Indian Affairs report stated “that Indians had begun to make a significant contribution to economic activity in the form of wage labour, agricultural work, and other industrial pursuits.” Further, “Indian participation in various economic activities generated substantial revenues: more than $1.54 million in wages, $1.0 million in agriculture and beef production, $0.82 million in hunting and trapping, $0.69 million in fishing and $0.85 in other industries.” Aboriginals’ wages varied considerably, with the average annual wages in Alberta, the Northwest Territories, and Prince Edward Island being less than $5.00 per capita compared to $22.00 in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Ontario. Recast as cheap, largely unskilled labour, Aboriginal peoples became an underclass within Alberta for whom racial stereotyping made social advancement rare. Linked to their poverty were the social effects of poor health and low educational achievement, which also worked against economic independence.
Aboriginals’ residential school experiences and dislocation from their lands severely limited traditional ways of engaging with the land, and other work opportunities became increasingly scarce as time passed. While they did find work in the early period of capitalism (trapping, cutting wood, casual work in construction, and work on railroads and forestry), later changes in how production was organized decreased work opportunities. For example, although Aboriginal groups initially engaged in paid work and ran small enterprises in the North, white private entrepreneurs from elsewhere in the country, assisted directly or indirectly by state policy, eventually replaced them, leaving them few alternative forms of work. As a result, Aboriginal groups, who generally had fewer years of education than most Canadians, often faced high unemployment rates. Historian Joan Sangster notes that during the interwar years, “white trappers continued to expand their catchment areas, infringing on traditional Native trapping grounds; moreover, as seasonal/casual work in the North was decasualized, with whites filling jobs previously done by Native men in construction, rail, and forestry, Native families became more dependent on trapping in a time of declining fur prices.”

**Linking Race, Labour, and Immigration**

Into this mixture of colonial relations with Aboriginal groups came immigrants — not just those from the preferred groups of northern Europeans but also non-whites. Attempts by African-Canadians from the United States to settle in Alberta as farmers became the catalyst for discussions as to who was an ideal Canadian and what the results of “race mixing” might mean for a future workforce and society. The Canadian parliamentary discussions concerning immigration to the western provinces made it clear that immigrants from China and the Indian subcontinent were as unwelcome as African immigrants. Chinese workers who arrived in Alberta in the 1880s were greeted with hostility by the local media. The *Calgary Herald* stated in 1884, “We do not want Chinamen in Canada. It is desirable that this country shall not be peopled by any servile race.” Chinese immigrants were wanted only when there was a shortage of cheap and willing labour. For example, in the early 1880s, Chinese were hired to build the most dangerous mountain passes of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Subsequently, the government imposed head taxes to discourage the workers who hadn’t died in these dangerous jobs from bringing their families to Canada. With limited educational opportunities and in the face of employer unwillingness to hire non-whites for white-collar jobs, Chinese Canadians were concentrated in a small number of occupations. Sociologist Peter S. Li notes that records of Chinese immigrants entering “Canada between 1885 and 1903 indicate that male labourers made up 73 percent; merchants and storekeepers, 5.7 percent; and cooks, farmers, laundymen, miners and others for the remaining.”

Such informal immigration restrictions gradually gave way to laws formally restricting the entry of unwanted racialized groups. Race was incorporated as a restrictive legal category in Section 38 (c) of the *Immigration Act* in 1910. Responding to perceived radicalism by particular European-origin groups during the war, this section of the act was amended in 1917 to include reference to nationality as well, thus
excluding “any nationality or race of immigrants of any specified class or occupation, by reason of any economic industrial or other condition temporarily existing in Canada or because such immigrants are deemed unsuitable.”

Changes to the act in 1910 were supplemented by a memorandum that indicated how understandings of race were linked to employment and which groups were preferred:

The policy of the Department at the present time [1910] is to encourage immigration of farmers, farm labourers, and female domestic servants from the United States, the British Isles, and certain Northern European countries, namely, France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland. . . . It is the policy of the Department to do all in its power to keep out of the country . . . those belonging to nationalities unlikely to assimilate and who consequently prevent the building up of a united nation of people of similar customs and ideals. 

The following year, a Government of Canada Order-in-Council explicitly pronounced the “Negro race” unsuitable “to the climate and requirements.”

Prominent Alberta-based local groups such as the Edmonton Board of Trade and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire also argued against the immigration of peoples of African descent. Despite such resistance from the authorities and some of the general population, black Americans did manage to come to northern Alberta early in the twentieth century. The descendant of one of these early pioneers was Willie Toles:

My father homesteaded. My granddad picked those homesteads for himself and his boys in 1909. In 1910 he came back and he built his house and worked on the Athabasca railroad before the bridge was here. He worked on the train before it got to Athabasca. Went back [to the US] and then came back in 1911 before the big immigration. One of his sons came in the cattle car.

Formation of Communities: Racialized, Segmented Labour Practices

Government policies and institutionalized racism more generally placed huge constraints on workers racialized as non-white. Those workers responded with a variety of strategies, sometimes aimed at mere survival but sometimes with the goal of broadening their work opportunities. Some Chinese workers became
self-employed and opened their own businesses such as laundries, restaurants, grocery stores, and garden markets. Others were hired by ranchers on a seasonal basis while still others worked as cooks, houseboys, and hotel workers. Most of these jobs were grueling and involved low wages and long workdays without any days off. An examination of laundry work, the most common job for early Chinese labourers in Alberta, provides us with important insights into the work practices and health issues faced by a racialized and exploited group, sometimes by employers of the same nationality. A Chinese laundryman who worked at William’s Laundry in Calgary for twenty years recalled his experiences and unfulfilled dream of a better life:

Since there was no hot water, I had to boil water in order to clean clothes. I scrubbed all the clothes with my bare hands. As a result, my hands had far too much contact with soap and washing soda. They always had blisters and bled. . . . Although I came to Canada in order to earn more money than I could have in China, I never made much money here.  

An *Edmonton Journal* article noted that in 1918, it was not uncommon for a Chinese laundryman to work sixteen hours per day seven days a week for about fifteen dollars a month — fifty cents per day.  

While workers of African descent, like Chinese workers, opened small businesses to gain employment and to provide service to the wider community during the early twentieth century, both groups became associated with and confined to specific types of work. For African-Canadian women in the cities, domestic work was at one time the most prevalent job, although
there were exceptions: in the early 1920s, Edmonton
newspapers carried reports such as that of black en-
trepreneurs like Mesdames Bell and Proctor opening
a dressmaking and fancywork store in downtown Ed-
monton. Men of African descent from the United States,
and later the Caribbean, became associated with work
as sleeping-car porters on railways such as the Edmon-
ton District and British Columbia (EDBC) railway and
the Northern Alberta Railway. As part of a small com-
unity, men like Edwin Clifton Anderson, who came
to Edmonton in 1919 from Mississippi and worked on
the EDBC railway, became important members of local
black churches such as the Emmanuel African Meth-
odist Episcopal. He and others were keen to engage
in what they viewed as racial uplift through forms of
adult education.\textsuperscript{18} The experiences of these workers
of African descent in Alberta were similar to those in
other provinces. In reference to Winnipeg sleeping-car
porters, Sarah Jane Mathieu points out that “though
often migrant workers, they affirmed their right to a
livelihood as well.”\textsuperscript{19} Dan, a porter during the late 1940s
and early 1950s, outlines what learning the job entailed
(J. and L.L. represent the interviewers):

D. [We learned] what we had to do, how to do it, how
to keep out of trouble and that sort of thing, how to
make beds, because at that time the porters made the
beds, sometimes we had to make twenty-four, counts
upwards and downwards, trained how to make the
beds and how to make them the same way, and how
to greet people. . . .

L.L. Before you started as a porter, did you know any-
thing about the work, about the conditions of a porter,
what the job conditions were all about?

D. Not really, not really, but you learned when you
start working.

L.L. So there were never any negative connotations
about being a porter as far as you remember or
anything like that?

D. Not at all, basically I was trained [that] if you do
anything, you do it right. I guess that’s how I still do
things.

J. You talked of greetings. You had to greet people,
could you give an example of how you were supposed
to greet people?

D. Everything was “Ma’am” and “Sir” and you had to help
the ladies if they wished to, you didn’t take it all, but you
offered to do it, you take their arm, that sort of thing.\textsuperscript{20}

While traditional historians regard the railroad as
a defining moment of building Canadian geographic
nationalism and capitalism from “sea to sea to sea,” the
railway can also be viewed as an early embodiment of
the contribution of racialized minorities to the building
of Canada. Chinese labour laid the tracks and African-
Canadian labour provided the porter service needed to
enable the construction of leisure and profitability for
the railway owners. Some early South Asian pioneers
were also linked to the railway: while there would be
no large South Asian communities in Alberta before
the 1950s, some of those few (mainly Sikhs) who did
make it to Alberta during the early twentieth century
were employed on railroads in roadbed clearing and
track-laying.\textsuperscript{21}

A split-labour market in which they were confined
to the low-paying section of work tasks thus affected
most racialized workers. Unions during this period tended to acquiesce to the dominant racist ideas about non-white workers and often saw them as a threat to working conditions and pay, as well as to moral authority. A motion recorded in the Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Convention of District 18, United Mine Workers of Alberta, February 1912, argues that “Orientals should be debarred from employment in restaurants; and that it be a criminal offense for an Oriental to employ white girls in any capacity.”

The experiences of non-white workers, who were not regarded as full Canadians, were influenced by stereotypes based on simplistic understandings of race as linked to biology, personality, and work habits. While African-Canadian men were pigeon-holed into service jobs such as sleeping-car porters or “shoeshine boys,” Chinese-Canadian men became associated with stereotypically feminine labour such as laundry work and cooking. According to cultural studies professor Lily Cho, 50 percent of Chinese immigrants worked in restaurants in 1921, and this increased to an astonishing high of 70 percent by 1931. Reinforcing these racial stereotypes was some of the popular literature that appeared during this period of heightened social exclusion, an example being a book by popular author and women’s activist Emily Murphy. Murphy’s The Black Candle blamed and demonized Chinese immigrants for creating opium dens and blacks for luring white women away from home and hearth, reinforcing arguments for social exclusion and segregation of non-white workers.

At least in part as a result of the dissemination of these notions, many Chinese, blacks, and Indigenous people faced exclusion from public social areas such as restaurants and hotels. In the 1920s, in both Calgary and Edmonton, local community members brought forward petitions urging Edmonton City Council to ban blacks from swimming in local pools. In the Edmonton Bulletin, a letter and article appeared discussing segregated bathing and an appeal to the City Council. Commissioner Yorath, the city manager at that time, stated that he personally thought that a white man and a black man shouldn’t enter a pool at the same time. This idea of social exclusion was extended to attempts at maintaining social distance through preventing those racialized as non-white from working in public service jobs such as shop workers and bus drivers.

Racism, supported by institutions, had direct consequences for workers in terms of their ability both to locate remunerative work and to receive state support when that was not possible. A laundry worker recalled that during the Depression, many desperate Chinese labourers in Alberta committed suicide due to unemployment and starvation: “I only survived because of money sent to me by my brother in China.” Furthermore, during the Great Depression, unemployed Chinese labourers in Calgary received relief payments of only $1.12 per week compared to $2.50 for non-Chinese. The city justified this promotion of racism on the basis that the Chinese “had a low living standard to begin with” and that it was not a civic responsibility for Calgary’s City Council to support Chinese people. Reinforcing this negativity toward Chinese workers was the racist Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, not rescinded until 1947, which restricted entry to members of the diplomatic corps, children born in Canada, merchants, and university students. The act stipulated that every person of Chinese origin living in Canada was
required to register with federal officials within twelve months after the act came into effect; those leaving for more than two years would lose Canadian domicile. While the act was in force, only a handful of Chinese were allowed to enter the country.

World War II brought changes for Japanese workers, who were declared enemy aliens and were relocated from many of the coastal areas of British Columbia to become cheap labour for white farmers in the beet fields of Alberta. One evacuee remembered the process:
We had to go to Vancouver and then register in Hastings Park. We were called enemy agents, which I could never understand. We were all registered there, and waited for the time to be evacuated out from the coastal area.

We had an option there. If we knew somebody in the agricultural area of Alberta or anywhere outside of BC, we had an option to put our name in and go there. So we went to Raymond, because I had a sister who was married in Raymond and living there for a number of years. In that way we were lucky to go somewhere that we knew someone, and a little support there too.

It was all sugar beets. We were all designated for beet labour. The wife and I, we went to one farm there that the quota was twenty-five acres that we had to handle. If you had a big family you’d probably get a hundred acres, and you’d get a percentage of that from the farmer, whatever they get.28

The beet fields of southern Alberta were also a worksite for many Aboriginal workers. From the 1950s, the Federal-Provincial Farm Labour Committee and Indian Affairs encouraged Aboriginal groups to work on Alberta’s beet farms. This was seasonal, casual labour. Joan Sangster notes: “Aboriginal workers were pushed into seasonal sugar-beet labour in the 1950s because the state saw them as particularly suited for migrant, seasonal, physical, low paid work; moreover bureaucrats knew the practices of kin-based labour — associated with fur and fish — could be incorporated into the regime of agricultural work.”29 These forms of seasonal employment continued to grow in the postwar period.

A SHIFT TOWARD HUMAN RIGHTS AND ORGANIZED LABOUR AFTER 1946

With the removal of the Continuous Passages Act in 1947 — an act that had prevented anyone from immigrating to Canada from countries that did not have direct passage to Canada (which excluded Asians and Africans from eligibility) — and the changing dynamics of independence for South Asian countries, immigration quotas for Asians and Africans were slightly increased. Still, 96 percent of immigrants from 1946 to 1962 came from Europe and the United States, and most of those who came from Asia and Africa were white.

In the postwar period, the attitudes of organized labour with regard to non-white workers gradually changed. Historian Ross Lambertson notes that “before the war, organized labour was usually governed by the same racist values as the majority of Canadians.”30 After the war, organized labour retained its traditional wariness of a large influx of immigrants: it feared the creation of a glut of workers, which would undermine wages and conditions. We can see this perspective clearly in the following “Immigration” resolution that was presented at the Alberta Federation of Labour convention on 17 November 1947, by the Electrical Workers Local B-1007, Edmonton:

WHEREAS The Dominion Government and some Provincial Governments have indicated that a policy of large scale immigration will be undertaken and many Displaced Persons will be accepted into this country, and

WHEREAS periodic periods of prosperity and full employment, and periods of depression and reduced employment have recurred time and time again in the past, and
WHEREAS in periods of reduced employment a surplus or glut of Labor may swamp the Labor market, and a situation of this nature will be further aggravated by additional immigrants and Displaced Persons, in the future; therefore be it

RESOLVED That the Dominion and Provincial Governments be charged with the responsibility of keeping these immigrants employed and a period of relative prosperity maintained.

But despite its reservations about immigration, organized labour, responding to the Nazis’ racism and attempted genocide, developed a split in its once-united insistence that some races should be preferred over others as immigrants. Joan Sangster suggests that “the more conservative Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) favoured economically selective immigration as well as the ‘exclusion of races that cannot be assimilated into Canadian life.’” In contrast, “the more liberal Canadian Congress of Labour (CCCL), whose ties to the CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) and campaigns against anti-Semitism had likely led to more enlightened views, spoke of the need for a deracialized policy.”

Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

While union responses to racism varied, it was not uncommon for unions to join with management to exclude workers deemed non-white. In 1943, the legendary African-American leader of the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), A. Philip Randolph, visited Canada to assist with organizing a Canadian section of the US-based Brotherhood. Present at the final signing of the agreement was P.T. Clay, who became president of the Calgary branch of the BSCP. The catalyst for this separate organization of workers was the racism that workers of African descent faced on the railway, not just from their employer, the Canadian Pacific Railway, but also from the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and Other Transport Workers, who negotiated a two-tiered union agreement with the railway company. Two groups were established for seniority purposes: Group I contained a variety of employees such as dining-car employees and sleeping-car conductors; Group II was exclusively for sleeping-car porters. Since an employee could advance only within his designated group, blacks were slotted forever as porters and could not be promoted to conductor. Despite this lack of mobility, however, the pay was regular and allowed for a degree of self-organization that was not always available through other avenues in the 1940s and 1950s. Unionization with the BSCP meant, as one sleeping-car porter remembered, that “in 1945 our standard of living was raised because we were getting more money; our children were able to at least finish high school and the odd one had a chance to attend one of the leading universities.” In general, though, in both the Canadian National Railway and the Canadian Pacific Railway, black men were isolated in the lowest paid and most physically strenuous service positions.

The concentration of sleeping-car porters in a racialized enclave and their resistance to racism in their workplace through organized labour provided the base for developing a political consciousness around broader human rights issues. In recognition of unions as being about more than just wage bargaining, A. Philip Randolph visited Calgary in the 1950s and encouraged the
development of a branch of the Alberta Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (AAACP). Hazel Proctor, whose father was a porter in Calgary, remembered the event:

I recall meeting the president of the porter’s union, Randolph I believe was his name, because my father was a porter. In fact, that was the first time I sang to someone other than with my dad. My dad said, “Okay, this man is here from the States, we’re going to do this song.” So dad played for me and I sang this song for Mr. Randolph. Yes. So that was quite something that he came to our city and met with us. It wasn’t AAACP at the time, but he met with the community, and all the porters were there.35

One of the main issues for the AAACP was discrimination in both employment and housing. Dick Bellamy, a former sleeping car porter who was active in the formation of the AAACP in the early 1950s, suggested, “The object of this organization shall be the betterment of colored people, to seek equality as Canadian citizens and the promotion of participation in all social and civic activities.”36

The 1950s and 1960s saw an increasing push from organizations such as the Jewish Labour League (Sid Blum) and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Arthur Blanchette) to promote fair employment practices, fair accommodation practices, and human rights across Canadian society and within organized labour.37 The Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) correspondence and convention minutes show that while some labour councils urged member unions to actively pressure Premier Manning’s government to adopt fair employment practices legislation, the government was slow to take anti-discrimination initiatives. In the 1950s and 1960s, resolutions (such as the one reproduced below) were consistently put forward, by the Calgary Labour Council, in particular, urging the executive of the AFL to press the Alberta government to adopt the *Fair Employment Practices Act* as the federal government and other provincial governments had done.

RESOLUTION NO. 61
Submitted by the Calgary Labour Council.

WHEREAS the Government of Canada and the Provincial Governments of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Manitoba have enacted legislation covering Fair Employment Practices, and

WHEREAS the Province of Alberta is increasing in population and wealth, and is fast becoming industrialized quite prominently, and

WHEREAS employment problems of a discriminatory nature will arise more sharply than ever before as a result of this growth,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Alberta Federation of Labour, more strongly than ever before, urge the Alberta Government to implement an Act covering Fair Employment Practices, similar to those put into effect by the Federal Government and other Provincial Governments, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Executive of the Federation petition or lobby each member of the Legislature at the next session, so that we may accomplish our aims in this direction.38
Organized Labour Begins to Challenge Racism and Discrimination

From the early 1950s, some groups who were the target of racial or religious discrimination recognized the need to work with more mainstream local groups such as the Council of Christian and Jews. The council, active in the 1960s, had a Brotherhood Week across the country. Local notables such as Grant MacEwan and Francis Winspear supported the Calgary section. Others such as Premier Manning sent messages of support for Brotherhood Week, and Alan White was a national executive member. Yet despite some of the elite members of Alberta society being associated with Brotherhood Week and the Council of Christians and Jews, Premier Manning’s Social Credit government was slow to pass legislation banning discrimination in the province. Manning, for religious and ideological reasons, opposed interference with the rights of owners, employers, and landlords, but the individual rights championed by human rights campaigners often conflicted with the rights of owners of capital.39 In the mid- to late 1950s and early 1960s, non-white workers and their supporters were able to use emerging human rights discourse to challenge barriers that maintained all-white occupations in public service and professional jobs. For example, in 1954, Violet King of Calgary became the first black woman in Canada to qualify as a lawyer. Subsequently, jobs such as bus driver and firefighter became possible for marginalized workers living in Edmonton and Calgary.

The provincial government began to respond to pressure for human rights legislation in 1966 by passing the Human Rights Act, which forbade anyone, directly or indirectly, to “deny to any person or class of persons the accommodation, services, or facilities available in any place to which the public is customarily admitted,” specifying the prohibited reasons for exclusion as “race, religious beliefs, colour, ancestry or place of origin.”40 The Alberta Human Rights Branch, established to enforce the legislation, began to receive a variety of complaints, with the dominant ones being discrimination against First Nations and Métis groups in the areas of housing and employment. Overall, the branch reported that the leading group with complaints from its inception in 1966 to spring, 1969, was “Canadian Native” with thirty-one, followed by “Negro” with eleven.41 The mood among Alberta politicians can be assessed by a document entitled “Minister’s Message,” which was put out by the Human Rights Branch, Department of Labour, in 1969. The tone of the document was slightly ambivalent:

In Western Canada we like to pride ourselves on the fact that people are readily accepted without prejudice or class distinction. By and large, this is true; but unfortunately, we have had situations from time to time in which people were denied employment, turned away from hotels or refused service in shops or eating places because of their skin colour, racial origin, or religious beliefs. So even though discrimination in these fields is not rampant, it was our belief that, in the interest of human dignity, it was necessary to have recourse in law for this type of abuse.42

By 1967, Calgary and Edmonton were experiencing huge growth and were drawing far more immigrants than Manitoba and Saskatchewan combined. Active
during this period was the Alberta Human Rights Association (AHRA), a lobby group that had links to the AFL and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) through the activism of trade unionists such as Frank Bodie. These contacts eventually produced a more formal association between the AHRA, on the one hand, and the AFL and CLC, on the other: in 1968, for example, the AFL donated secretarial services for free to the AHRA. Even though much had already been achieved by labour in the area of human rights, a CLC memo sent to all affiliates in 1967 warned that “while its Standing Committee on Human Rights worked indefatigably in marshalling the strength of the labour movement and other elements in society to secure appropriate legislation, there was much left to be done.”

Education was regarded as a strong antidote to racism, and several high-profile leaders in the national human rights field were invited to Edmonton and Calgary to make educational presentations on how to further the cause. The AFL invited both Alan Burovoy, secretary of the Jewish Labour League, and George McCurdy of the federal Fair Employment Practices Branch, Department of Labour, to Edmonton during the 1960s. McCurdy, who had strong union ties, had been a member and former education and research director of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America for twelve years.

**Professional Immigrants and Credentials**

Immigration and labour policies affected the size and formation of non-white communities — for example, the descendants of the few African-Canadians allowed to migrate in the early 1900s remained the main group of such workers in Alberta until 1956, when the federal cabinet relaxed Section 61 of the 1952 *Immigration Act* and enabled female labour from the Caribbean to serve in Canadian homes. Many of these domestic workers were educated and skilled women who seized the opportunity to come to Canada even if it meant a few years in low-economic-status work:

"In those days, it was difficult to get into Canada. The only way you could get into Canada is what they used to call a domestic servant, and later on they called it the homecare givers and home keepers. So they had that program open. And what they were doing in those days, even though it sounded like a low type of activity in Canada, but they were taking all of the best-educated people from [the island] and sending them on that scheme. I tried to come on my own. I was not able to, so I decided, “Okay, if this is the only way I can enter Canada, I will.” And I did come up on that scheme."
The immigration law restrictions against non-whites were relaxed first in 1962 and then more fully in 1967, and the government implemented a new system of evaluation based on “points,” which assessed all immigrants on the same skills and training-related criteria. Many workers from countries in Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, previously deemed unsuitable, began to emigrate to Canada.

Traditionally, it has been assumed that early 1960s immigrants from the Caribbean, and other non-traditional sources of labour, were destitute. In fact, because of the strict entry rules for non-white workers, many had trade skills and others were professionals. For example, workers were allowed into Alberta if they could contribute to decreasing the teacher shortage in northern Alberta or if they had skills and knowledge garnered in the Trinidadian oil industry. One skilled recruit from Trinidad recalls his early days in Fort McMurray:

That was the first plant they had built extracting the oil from the oil sand. It was one of the first plants. I’d never worked in a plant like that before, so this was something new. They used big bucket wheels to dig the sand. They put it in a big drum and hot water to help dilute or extract the first set of oil, then it goes into other stages before they can get it to refine. . . . In Trinidad, we have refineries and I’d worked there before. But the weather, this was a big problem. The weather, I didn’t know what it was like.47

Many new immigrants, while able to get jobs in their field of work, were nonetheless encouraged or required to undertake additional upgrading at colleges or universities. In the case of teachers from the Caribbean who came to rural areas of Alberta to work, many found that their low salaries on the pay grid meant that upgrading was necessary to increase earnings and opportunities. One professional worker who emigrated from a Caribbean island in the early 1960s recalls her first experiences with immigration authorities on arrival in Canada and their assumptions about inferior educational systems in the Global South. They told her that she would need to retake a grade 12 English course. “I told them, ‘English Grade 12? . . . But I’ve spoken English my whole life.’ I may have had a West Indian accent at that time, ‘but my English is better than your English.’” 48

As the shortage of teachers disappeared in the 1970s and teaching became a better-paid occupation requiring specialized university training, new immigrants faced a tougher process relative to that experienced by Jamaican immigrants in the mid-1960s. Many had to return to university, but earning a living while one acquired the necessary credentials was a struggle. Teacher Norma Ellis explained why she finally decided to take that route:

They said that I had to go into university. Previous years it was different. I wasn’t able to teach. I started university in September 1970 for a two-year graduate diploma, and I graduated and then started teaching in 1973.

They were scared of blacks. I remember calling one lady about babysitting. She didn’t know about how her daughter would feel about a black person babysitting. After a while, I gave up on finding a job outside of teaching.49
ECONOMIC BOOM AND BUST: AN INCREASE IN NON-WHITE WORKERS IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

From the OPEC increases in oil prices in 1973 to the precipitous drop in international oil prices in 1982, Alberta enjoyed a period of stunning economic growth. Immigrants who came to Alberta between 1975 and 1980 benefited from this boom, whereas those who came after 1981 were faced with an economic recession. \(^5\)

In 1976, Calgary and Edmonton each took in almost 50 percent more immigrants than Winnipeg. Many of these new immigrants, unlike the early-twentieth-century groups, were non-white workers from the Global South. The census in 1971 recorded the presence of only 7,900 Asians in Calgary, a modest number compared to 225,000 British people, 110,000 western Europeans, and 32,000 eastern Europeans.

The growing non-white cultural communities formed ethnically and regionally based organizations that attempted to create better working conditions and expand employment opportunities for their members. Many immigrant workers at the time were young and had skills and training in either a profession or a trade. Of the 5,900 immigrants who came to Calgary in 1976, almost 30 percent were in their twenties, and another 18 percent were in their thirties. Because many of these workers were highly educated and skilled, their expectations were high, and it was a shock for many that they were only able to get work that underutilized their skills and education. Many found no work at all since employers wrote off their work experiences in their home countries and demanded Canadian experience before hiring.

During 1979 and 1980, about seventy-five hundred Southeast Asian refugees entered Alberta. The total number of Southeast Asian immigrants subsequently rose owing to the sponsoring of family and relatives both by these new arrivals and by those who had come earlier. By mid-1984, Alberta was home to an estimated fifteen thousand Southeast Asian immigrants, 92 percent from Vietnam. One study found that during the 1970s and 1980s immigrants from the Global South experienced the highest unemployment rates and the slowest economic integration of all immigrants to Canada. So, for example, three years after their arrival, at least one-third of Vietnamese newcomers were not employed in their intended occupations. Interestingly, the obstacles cited by workers were language and non-recognition of credentials. While some experienced occupational mobility, many underwent downward mobility reinforced by the post-oil-boom recession. \(^5\)

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, black and Asian employees consistently earned lower average wages than their white counterparts, even when figures were adjusted for education, gender, age, region, and industrial sector. Also, although these decades saw no rigid occupational segregation, there was a tendency toward ethnic concentration in certain sectors in Canada that often disadvantaged some non-white groups. For example, figures from the 1980s showed that blacks were overrepresented in the service sector by about 40 percent and in manual labour by about 30 percent, and underrepresented in management by more than 60 percent. In 1981, groups previously categorized as non-white were transformed yet again under another label: visible minority. \(^5\)
THE 1990s TO TODAY: FROM KLEIN CUTBACKS TO STELMACH STAGNATION

This term, visible minority, came into prominence through its use in the federal Employment Equity Act and in census data. All the same, the old stereotypes about newcomer workers persisted within worksites in the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century. Many mainstream workers regarded those racialized as non-white as lacking in trade union acumen and as uncommitted to trade union principles. However, during that period, workers whose heritage lay in Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa began to prove that they were just as concerned about trade unionism and workers’ rights as their so-called white colleagues. Two significant examples marked the involvement of racialized groups: the 1995 Calgary laundry workers strike and the 2005 Lakeside meat-packers strike in Brooks, both of which are discussed in detail in chapter 7.

The laundry workers included a number of women from Asia and the Caribbean who were instrumental in calling for a strike to protest their working conditions at a Calgary Hospital and the contracting out of their work to K-Bro Linens, a private company. The 2005 meat-packers strike involved workers — many of whom were recent immigrants of Sudanese heritage — whose poor working conditions led to support for unionization and an eventual strike. The plant had tried to unionize on previous occasions but to no avail. One woman working at Lakeside Packers explained her decision to support the union:

Yeah, people would ask me, why are you with the union? I’m like, they’re going to help us change this plant, because that plant needed change desperately. The people of the community didn’t understand that. Like I said before, they weren’t in the working conditions we were in, people getting things said to them that shouldn’t be getting said to them, and just the whole way the plant was run and the way we were getting treated. The people of the community didn’t understand it and they didn’t see it, so it didn’t mean nothing to them.

Another worker at Lakeside Packers described the health and safety issues in the plant:

I call my community. . . . This is killing us. Some people their hand claw like this from the hook. Some people get damage in their backs, shoulder, leg, everything. But the company wouldn’t accept. We told them, you have to slow the speed down, because the big problem is the speed. They say business is business, and I say okay. So job condition is bad. They treat us like garbage. While we are the production, they don’t keep us happy.

For other workers, both racialization and discontent with general working conditions were at play at Lakeside Packers. One of the male workers noted:

At that time . . . one black guy, Sudanese from Africa, has a problem with that white guy. This white guy sprayed hot water 180 degrees in this guy’s chest. They didn’t fire the white guy who sprayed the hot water; they fired the black guy. So the following morning . . . we were telling our friends, “Today we’re not going to work until the company find a solution.
to it, or they also fire the white guy." The news go around. . . . [When they arrived] they hung around outside. When we were coming from home, we join them. At that time we were over two hundred people outside. Only a few in kill floor, they only had about four black guys working on the kill floor that day.57

Work conditions have also been an issue for Aboriginal workers. The comments of one long-time worker in Fort McMurray illustrate how racism can come to shape worksites and how unionization has, at times, helped with countering this racism: "We [used to] get the dirtiest job. That's the management part. That [situation] the union has fixed over at Suncor. That's changed now."58 But while workers at that site experienced positive change, work experiences for Aboriginal employees continue to be problematic. In 2009, the unemployment rate among Aboriginal people aged fifteen and over rose to 13.9 percent from 10.4 percent the previous year. At the same time, the unemployment rate for non-Aboriginals rose to just over 8 percent in 2009 from 6 percent in 2008. Employment rates among Aboriginals dropped 3.2 percentage points from 2008 to 2009 to 57 percent. For non-Aboriginals, they dropped less than 2 percentage points to about 62 percent. In particular, there was a 30 percent employment decline for Natives in manufacturing, compared to just 8 percent among non-Native manufacturing workers. A similar decline was noted in construction, with a 16 percent drop for Native workers compared to 5 percent for non-Natives. Myron Sparklingeyes, acting executive director of the Oteenow Employment and Training Society, suggests that the reason for the growing unemployment may well be the fact that "Aboriginal people are the last hired and first fired. It’s an unfortunate reality."59 Sparklingeyes' comments bring to light the continuing vulnerability of Aboriginals in Alberta’s economy, which has been consistently subject to a boom-and-bust cycle.

In more recent times, one of the most significant initiatives undertaken by non-white workers was the formation of the Workers of Colour caucus at national and provincial levels. Both the Canadian Labour Congress and the Alberta Federation of Labour have been instrumental in encouraging this initiative although not all union officers recognize the importance of providing a space for the caucus to meet on their own. There is still resistance to groups caucusing outside of main union meetings. Having joined with Aboriginal workers, the group is known formally as Workers of Colour and Aboriginal Workers Committee (WCAWC). According to a committee report, these two traditionally marginalized groups have joined together because "of expediency and the need for support on the issues that are common to both groups. . . . This has helped . . . address some of the problems that would otherwise be fragmented."60 Some caucus members chafe at the restrictions that the union movement places on their activities, in particular discouraging them from involving workers who are not yet represented by a union. One member suggested that if the committee could recruit workers of colour and Aboriginal workers directly, union activity among marginalized workers might increase.61 Despite these restrictions, however, the WCAWC in Edmonton has begun to broaden its base by recognizing common issues of concern with gay workers.62
The difficulty, common in the 1960s, of getting Canadian employers to recognize foreign credentials has continued to be a significant issue for immigrant workers in Alberta. Visible-minority professional immigrants face persistent devaluation and rejection of their credentials. For some, that leads to lower incomes than earned by those doing similar work but who gained their credentials in North America or western Europe. For others, particularly those whose credentials are rejected altogether, it often means a shift from prior professional and managerial jobs to “occupations in sales, services, processing, and manufacturing.” Even the right-wing C.D. Howe Institute’s Backgrounder Report on Immigrants’ Declining Earnings—Reasons and Remedies suggests that the incomes of recent immigrants are declining when compared to immigrants who came in the 1970s.

When the oil, mineral, and construction industries were booming during the early years of the twentieth century, these industries pushed the government to import migrant workers from abroad to temporarily fill the economic needs in Alberta. Recognition of credentials was not a problem because of the need for workers. An article published in the Edmonton Journal in 2006 notes, by contrast:

It is ironic that right now, the booming West is once again relying on Asian workers to build its core infrastructure and fill its service jobs. Alberta is bringing in hundreds of temporary workers from countries such as China, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, not just to build oil sands processing plants but to work in restaurants or take care of children and seniors. In the circumstances, there’s never been a better time to remember the injustices of the past and avoid any need for future contrition.

From 2002 to 2008, the number of temporary foreign workers (TFWs) present in Canada, most of them in clerical or manual work, increased from 100,000 to 250,000. This increase happened in tandem with new policies that restricted the time those workers could stay in Canada. Workers were limited to a stay of only four years, after which they would be banned from re-entering Canada for the next six years. These restrictions certainly made it harder for temporary workers to gain residency or skilled employment through experience, thus creating a disposable workforce.

In 2009, when the recession struck and jobs were no longer plentiful, the Alberta government refused to renew contracts for TFWs who had not yet hit the four-year wall. In July 2010, Alberta Labour Minister Thomas Lukaszuk commented regarding the TFW scheme, “In my opinion, it was a program that had fulfilled its mandate, [by] suddenly providing a large number of workers.” Lukaszuk has since broken ranks with Conservative colleagues to argue for more immigration rather than continuing with the TFW program. Among all provinces and territories, Alberta experienced the biggest boost in TFWs — from 13,236 in 2004 to 65,748 in 2009. Gil McGowan, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour, is critical of the TFW program: “This is a program that is so dysfunctional it probably has to be scrapped entirely. . . . What essentially we have done is create a European style guest-worker program. . . . We think both the federal and provincial government ought to go back to the drawing board.” These comments are a far cry from
those of many early-twentieth-century trade union leaders who sided with employers in order to maintain pay and working conditions that privileged so-called white workers. However, the basic issue of the role of migrant labour in Canada has not been resolved: if someone is good enough to work in Canada, why are they not good enough to become citizens of the country if they so choose?

Both Canada’s policies toward Aboriginal peoples and its immigration policy have been, from the country’s early years, based on the economic needs of elites and on their perceptions of who is an ideal citizen. These preferred citizens and workers, favoured through policy, were ideally not only white, but of British origin and Protestant. At times, the early- to mid-twentieth-century policies revealed a tension between the economic needs of the state and capital, as identified during times of labour shortage, and the social desire of individuals to maintain an all-white policy. Alberta’s dominant social classes — including commercial factions such as the Board of Trade and farm and labour organizations, and even its cultural feminist elite — were at the forefront of racist incitements contrived to discourage those deemed unsuitable from settling on the Canadian Prairies. While such views on immigration and work were pervasive and complex, they occurred through an active process. As historian Sarah Carter points out, “the mainly British-Canadian elite that dominated business, politics, education, women’s organizations and other realms worked to ensure that a sense of Britishness, combined with whiteness, became equated with Canadianness.” The legacy of this production of a racialized ideology is the understanding that the history of non-white labour is tied to encouraging the immigration of a specific type of worker. While there have been changes in the attitudes of workers and organized labour in relation to non-whites, today’s scenario is also strangely familiar.