The Bell. In 1929, delegates to the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada meetings in Saint John were reminded that labour had deep roots in New Brunswick history. In 1849, the Saint John longshoremen, organized as the Labourers’ Benevolent Association, petitioned the city to place a bell on the waterfront to enforce the ten-hour day. Eighty years later it was celebrated as “the bell which had first rung out the message of hope for the workers and marked the beginning of the struggle for the shorter work day.” Source: Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia.
“Makers of History”

When you enter the crowded conference room, your credentials are examined by one of the sentinels at the door. Are you a delegate? A guest? An observer? Everyone is here with a mandate, and the men and women in attendance are seated at tables according to the constituencies they represent. The walls are decorated with banners, and the tables are covered with reports and resolutions. At the front, the president is addressing the meeting, speaking in both English and French, and translations are flowing from a booth at the back of the hall. There are some comments and questions from the floor microphones, followed by a vote. Then everyone is standing, and they are singing. Not everybody knows the verses, but they do know the chorus of this anthem that is almost as old as their own organization: “Solidarity forever, Solidarity forever, Solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong.”
When the chanting and clapping are over and everyone is again seated, the agenda continues, and for the next several days the big hotel ballroom is transformed into a chamber of discussion for what is in effect a provincial parliament of labour.

The meetings of this assembly have been taking place for a full century now, a longer record of continuity than in almost any other province in Canada. The New Brunswick Federation of Labour is far from the largest provincial federation in Canada, but it is one of the oldest and has shown the power of persistence — what the poet Fred Cogswell has called the “stubborn strength” — that is one of the features of the provincial identity. The affiliated membership has never exceeded 50,000 people, and not all labour organizations have been participants, but in a relatively small province whose total population is little more than 750,000 people, the Federation of Labour has had a long and influential presence. These kinds of “union centrals,” as they are called in industrial relations terminology, are labour organizations that have no direct control over their affiliates and do not represent them in matters such as collective bargaining. Instead, they speak for the more general interests that union members have in common with one another, and their power depends on their ability to inspire solidarity around these causes. When we look back over the past century, the history of this organization is filled with examples of working people taking up their responsibilities as members of their unions and as citizens of the province. The mission of the Federation of Labour has been to assist the unions in raising the status and strengthening the rights of all workers in the province. In addition to the ambitions and achievements, there have been disappointments and divisions, but the long history of the Federation reminds us that the search for a greater measure of social justice is a significant theme in the history of the province.

In beginning the story of the Federation of Labour in 1913, we also need to remember that organized labour has deep roots in New Brunswick history. Social inequalities and the exploitation of labour are as old as the earliest staple trades in the region, but the emergence of trade unions as a
form of resistance can be traced back to the early nineteenth century. Unions existed for about a century before the founding of the Federation of Labour. They were established in towns and cities by small local groups of workers and often called themselves “benevolent associations”; they demanded better wages, hours, and conditions for members and provided benefits for their families in cases of illness, injury, and death. Eugene Forsey has pointed out that before Confederation, New Brunswick was one of the birthplaces of the union movement in British North America, and he often singled out the example of the Saint John longshoremen, whose history began in the struggle for the ten-hour day in 1849, making them today one of the oldest continuously existing unions in Canada. Local unions such as these also went on to link up with regional, national, or international organizations in the same trade or industry, as the longshoremen did when they joined the International Longshoremen’s Association in 1911; this helped them to achieve higher standards and, when necessary, receive assistance and support from the larger bodies. In the case of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees, the organization was founded at Moncton in 1908 as a regional body before going on to expand across the country and become one of the most important unions in twentieth-century Canada; by the time of their centennial year, they had joined the Canadian Auto Workers. This pattern of accelerating solidarities was also visible at the community level when workers from varied occupations organized themselves into local trades and labour councils. By the 1890s, such bodies were marching in large numbers in Labour Day parades in Saint John and Moncton and making their presence felt within the social and political life of the province’s two largest cities. These workers in turn took the lead in establishing the Federation of Labour. In short, the construction of a provincial “house of labour” in 1913 was not the beginning of labour history in New Brunswick but the latest stage in a longer history of solidarities among workers of the province.¹

A historical perspective also reminds us of the importance of all workers in building the provincial economy. “True history is the record of the workers,” wrote the carpenter, poet, and socialist agitator Wilfrid Gribble in “Makers
of History,” around the time he took up residence in Saint John and the Federation of Labour was coming into existence:

True history is the record
Of the workers. It was they
Who wrote its page in every age,
They’re writing it today.²

New Brunswick workers laboured in the woods, on the rivers, in the fisheries, and on the farms; they prepared fish, potatoes, apples, and other foods for market; they toiled in sawmills, shipyards, and pulp and paper mills; they worked hard rock and coal mines; they manufactured boots and shoes, boilers and machines, textiles and clothing, windows and furniture; they opened roads and trails, raised towers, and built dams and bridges; they loaded deals of lumber and shipped freight and cargo; they operated trains, buses, trucks, and taxis; they sweated in laundries and restaurants, hotels, and kitchens; they ran stores, offices, and telephone exchanges; they cleaned floors, served meals, and guided visitors; they fought fires, generated power, delivered mail, and cleared snow; they cared for the young, educated the students, assisted the seniors, and protected our health.

The list is as endless as the occupations in the province, but when we read about labour history, we also need to think about the economic relationships that define the world of work. In the eighteenth century, Adam Smith originally defined the working class as “those who live by wages,” setting this category aside from the unpaid labour of slaves and servants and the apparent independence of many artisans and small producers. Over the next two centuries, however, paid employment became the most common way of making a living. The industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the waves of economic transformation that followed drew large numbers of people out of independent production and household economies and brought them into the labour market as earners of wages and salaries. As such, they became dependent on the decisions of employers who were not necessarily
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or even primarily committed to the welfare of the individual worker or the
community. Workers who depended for their living on daily or weekly wages
had much less bargaining power than their employers in determining how to
distribute the risks and rewards of economic life. In 1898, a New Brunswick
professor of political economy and moral philosophy, John Davidson, made
a notable observation about the contemporary Labour Question, as it was
called in the late nineteenth century: “Labor, in spite of sentimental objections
is undoubtedly a commodity which is bought and sold,” he reasoned. How-
ever, he went on to explain, this was not an ordinary economic proposition
because labour was a unique commodity and market conditions could never
be a sufficient guide to its value: “Labor differs from most, if not all, other
commodities in retaining, even under modern industrial conditions, its sub-
jective value to the seller. We cannot separate the labor and the laborer. It is
labor that is bought and sold but, with the labor, goes the laborer. Therefore
instead of a great simplification we have a great complication.”

Every chapter in history has its own complications. To take one example,
in the 1880s a famous investigation documented some of the worst effects
of industrial capitalism in Canada. The Royal Commission on the Relations
of Labor and Capital held hearings in the four original provinces of the
Confederation, including New Brunswick, and their findings documented
the conditions of the time. Among other things, the commissioners recom-
mended the payment of wages regularly, and in cash; they also called for an
end to fines and beatings, the prohibition of convict labour and child labour,
the inspection of workplaces for safety and sanitation, the payment of comp-
ensation for workplace injuries, and more attention to literacy and training.
They even recommended a statutory Labour Day holiday, the only one of
their recommendations that was actually implemented by the federal govern-
ment at the time, enacted by Parliament in 1894. It is also important to note
their comments on the value of labour organizations. The commissioners
concluded that the unions were a positive force that promoted social progress
and encouraged self-respect and good citizenship among their members. Most
of all, they explained, the unions were there to correct the unequal power of
workers and their employers within the existing economic system: “Labour organizations are necessary in order to enable workingmen to deal on equal terms with their employers.”

When the claim is made that the working class today has disappeared and has been replaced by a universal middle class, it is worth remembering that most citizens continue to earn their living in the form of paid employment and are thus associated with the classic definition of the working class. There are great differences in incomes and security and bargaining power among workers, but those who are organized in unions are best able to defend their interests. The improved conditions they achieve in wages, hours, benefits, pensions, and other forms of security are often described as “the union advantage.” While their critics argue that unions have created a “two-tier” economic system that favours some workers to the detriment of others, the unions argue that all workers should be entitled to higher standards and that unions generally succeed in “levelling-up” the prevailing conditions in society. Certainly, the ability to overcome differences and to share the influence of their power with other citizens is one of the attractive legacies of the union movement in New Brunswick. To take another historical example, the long campaign against child labour was led by an alliance of labour unions, social reformers, and early feminists. None of these groups was strong enough to achieve this reform alone, but their success came from working together. Despite objections that their demands would make too many New Brunswick businesses unprofitable, the provincial government in 1905 finally enacted a law to limit the employment of children less than fourteen years of age. This reform was soon followed by the school attendance laws, another advance in the social progress in the province.

Although much has changed in the structure and influence of the labour movement over the years, the place of unions within society has stood the test of time. As students of the nineteenth-century Labour Question understood, by strengthening the bargaining position of workers within society, the unions were taking on an ambition to achieve a more balanced, even a more just, distribution of the wealth produced in the economy by directing a larger
share of it to the working class. Although union membership in Canada as a whole has rarely exceeded more than one-third of the work force — and the same is true in New Brunswick — the unions have helped to set standards that improve conditions and raise incomes for all workers. Through organizations such as the Federation of Labour, the unions have defended the rights of workers in their places of employment and have also helped to lead the struggle for a more equitable distribution of the “social wage” in the form of public services that benefit all citizens.

In the writing of Canadian labour history, provincial stories are generally overlooked, and there have been few general histories of provincial labour movements or federations. Nonetheless, labour history in Canada is very much a provincial experience, in part for the simple constitutional reason that most Canadian workers have lived and worked under labour and employment regimes enacted and administered by the provinces. As a result, the various local, occupational, national, and international affiliations of union members have been supplemented by bonds of solidarity based on the political and spatial realities of the provincial communities within Canada. From this perspective, the emergence of provincial federations of labour was an additional expression of emerging solidarities within the twentieth-century labour movement in Canada. When the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada in 1910 encouraged member unions to create provincial federations, British Columbia (in 1910) and Alberta (in 1912) were the first to do so, and New Brunswick was the only other province to join them prior to the First World War. Not all provinces are the same, however, and in the fractious labour climate of the times, British Columbia’s federation did not survive its first decade and was not reorganized until 1944. In working to achieve recognition as the provincial voice of labour, the New Brunswick Federation may well have benefited from a greater sense of provincial solidarity as well as the moderate goals of the founders.

It is also the case that the Federation has grown unevenly and has often fallen short of its goal of attracting the majority of unions and union members in the province. In part this has been due to its constitutional status as
a subordinate body within the Trades and Labour Congress and later the Canadian Labour Congress, bodies that have discouraged or even precluded the affiliation of unions to which they objected. In the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, some rival unions, pursuing more nationalist and industrial forms of organization, even established a separate federation, known as the New Brunswick Council of Labour. The province’s workers have also been divided by the economic geography of New Brunswick — north against south, urban centres against rural regions, temporary workers against permanent employees. And the ideals of solidarity have been undermined by perceived hierarchies of status and stature based on differences of skill, language, ethnicity, and gender. Although the Federation elected an Acadian as president as early as 1919, fuller partnerships between French-speaking and English-speaking workers developed more slowly. There were similar challenges in the Federation’s ability to address the needs of women workers and of public employees, two major groups who entered the labour force in rapidly increasing numbers in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, in New Brunswick, as in other less powerful and less populous parts of Canada, the political economy of underdevelopment has cut deeply into the social, human, and environmental stability of the provincial economy. This has contributed to a constant concern about the ravaged resource base of the province, the unforgiving cycles of capitalist investment and disinvestment, the push and pull of labour markets from beyond the provincial borders, and the recurring fiscal crises of the provincial state. The unions on their own have not had the capacity to solve these questions, but the quest for social and economic democracy has nonetheless been a continual theme in the history of the Federation of Labour.

“Honour the Past. Build the Future.” Back in the hotel ballroom where the Federation of Labour is meeting, these are the announced watchwords for the convention. Looking around the tables, it is apparent that many delegates are wearing gold pins that celebrate the latest milestone in the Federation’s history. As the opening evening proceeds, there are tributes to veteran activists for their decades of work on behalf of the province’s workers, and two
more names are added to the Federation’s Honour Roll. One speaker quotes
the people’s historian Howard Zinn, saying that history can help us redis-
cover the times when working people have shown the ability to resist, to join
together, to make a difference, and to win changes. Even if the history of
work and workers is often overlooked in public discourse, the Federation has
a long tradition of taking pride in the historical significance of their organ-
ization. It was there in the 1920s and 1930s when commemorative badges
and souvenir booklets were being issued. It is there again today in resolutions
calling for more attention to labour history within the union movement and
within the schools.

We hear that message clearly when we listen to interviews that union
members have recorded for the provincial archives. “The thing I find funny
about labour is they don’t record their history,” says John Daly, who was
a waterfront worker in Saint John for thirty-six years and held many local
union offices. “They just take it for granted that this is the job they’re sup-
posed to do.” Barb Fairley, who started at a shoe factory in Fredericton
when she was a teenager and worked there for almost thirty years, including
fifteen years as president of her local, says: “They teach History every day
in school. I mean, why can’t they include some of the labour history of the
province or even as a country?” Stella Cormier, who left school at thirteen
and later worked in the fish plants, says that history can teach workers their
rights: “Above all, it’s knowing your rights. You must know your rights. If
you go to work and don’t know your rights, they can make you do anything
they want.” Similarly, Béatrice Boudreau, who started work at the age of
eighteen in an office in Moncton, putting in 54 hours a week for $20 in pay,
reminds us that history is about change: “The most important thing to know
is how things have improved, no doubt slowly but at certain times very sud-
denly. Sometimes it takes a shock. You have to understand the improvements
that are due, almost entirely, to the union movement.” And Yvon Godin, a
New Democratic Party MP for many years now, remembers how little he
knew about unions when he went into the mines at nineteen years of age;
he worries that young workers today know just as little about their history:
“Look at where we are today, but how did we get here? It’s not their fault, but too often I see young people who come into the labour market and see all these things in place and think that all this is normal, that it was always there. They don’t know how it came to be.”

This book cannot capture the full sweep of labour history in New Brunswick. There is much more to be done, and this book attempts to tell the history of only one working-class organization and its place in provincial history. Even then it is not a full chronicle but a narrative of the main stages in its development and of the events in provincial history that have been important to the Federation. There is attention to many episodes of workers in action in their own workplaces and communities, but there is also an inevitable focus on the life of the institution itself, including the tensions between leaders and members, and between moderates and militants. Social historians have studied many aspects of the working-class experience in Canada in recent years, and one of their findings has been that people experience their own history in ways that are shaped by the multiple rhythms of individual lives and social, cultural, and economic opportunity. As a result, there is never a single shared identity within the working-class population, however desirable that might seem to labour leaders. In showing us the daily lives of working-class families and their struggles for security and fulfillment, social historians have documented the complexities of household, workplace, and community and revealed the hidden sources of resilience and resistance that are often embedded in those sites of experience. At the same time, there is also much to be said for a critique articulated some years ago by Howard Kimeldorf in a debate on “Why we need a new old labor history.” The substance of that discussion was that the “new” labour history has not only deepened the portrayal of workers’ history but has also offered opportunities to strengthen explorations of classic questions, including issues of structure and mobilization, solidarities and exclusions, and representation and negotiation that determine the conditions of working-class effectiveness. As Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have noted more recently, labour organizations and other social movements have contributed enormously to public discourse and have interacted with
the political system to shape public policy, understanding politics as “a space of possibility” conditioned as much by human activism as by the structural forces people encounter. Historical research and writing clearly have a part to play in this process. Readers may be reassured to know that this is not a book of social or historical theory, but these questions remain underlying concerns as we explore the history of a workers’ institution that is also part of a larger social movement.

This book had its origins in the requests of union organizations and activists for presentations, workshops, resources, and other assistance in introducing members to their own history. In 2004, the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, together with several other labour organizations and heritage institutions, agreed to participate in a Community-University Research Alliance organized by researchers from the two provincial universities, the Université de Moncton and the University of New Brunswick. This partnership between labour organizations and public institutions was successful in securing research funds from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a team project entitled “Re-Connecting with the History of Labour in New Brunswick: Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Issues.” Several major tasks were undertaken in the years that followed, and one of these has been the preparation of this history. The Federation set an excellent example for unions in the province by depositing records at the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, and the Federation and its affiliates have offered encouragement and cooperation in other ways as well, for which the research team and the author are very grateful. The book is, however, an independent work of academic research and public history that offers a sympathetic but not uncritical account of the Federation’s long history. Its purpose is to help establish a better understanding of the place of workers and their organizations in provincial society. In doing so, it also sheds light on the history of the province over the past century and the persistence of traditions of labour activism and social democracy that are too easily overlooked in New Brunswick history.
The first meetings of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, in September 1913 and January 1914, took place at the old Oddfellows Hall in Saint John, at the corner of Union and Hazen Streets. Several local unions had their headquarters in this building, and the surrounding streets were used to marshal some of the early Labour Day parades. Source: New Brunswick Museum, x11314.