THE CANADIAN LABOUR MOVEMENT
1812 - 1902

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THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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Senator Eugene Forsey was born in Newfoundland and received his early education in Ottawa. After obtaining his Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees at McGill University, he attended Balliol College, Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar (1926-29). Returning to McGill as a Lecturer in the Department of Economics and Political Science, he completed his Doctor of Philosophy degree for McGill. After one year's research supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, he became Director of Research for the Canadian Congress of Labour in 1942, remaining in that position for the C.C.L. and the Canadian Labour Congress until 1966. During that period Dr. Forsey served as President of the Canadian Political Science Association (1961) and the Skelton-Clark Fellow in Political Science at Queen's University (1962). In 1966 he accepted appointment as the Director of the C.L.C.'s Special Project, a history of Canadian trade unionism. In addition to his history of organized labour in Canada, which is soon to be published, Senator Forsey has written The Royal Power of Dissolution of Parliament in the British Commonwealth (1943, reissued in revised paperback edition, 1968), and dozens of articles, a selection of which is reprinted in his Freedom and Order (1974). In 1970 Eugene Forsey capped a long career of political activity and public service—stretching from unsuccessful candidacies on behalf of the C.C.F. in the 1940s to membership on the first Board of Broadcast Governors (1958-62)—by accepting appointment to the Canadian Senate. Senator Forsey lives in Ottawa, where, in addition to performing his Senatorial duties, he is working on a history of Cabinet government in Canada.
The Early Unions

Canadian Labour History goes back at least 160 years: to the unions of skilled workers in Saint John, N.B., during the War of 1812. Halifax had a Tailors' Society in 1815, and by 1816 Nova Scotian unions were numerous and strong enough to rouse the Legislature to pass a ferociously antiunion Act, which specifically mentions "Combinations" of "great numbers" of "Journeymen and Workmen" in "Halifax and other parts of the Province," trying to regulate wages, shorten hours and establish the closed shop.

Quebec City had a short-lived Printers' Union in 1827, and a second from 1836 till 1844. Montreal seems to have had a Printers' Union in 1833 and 1836, Shoemakers' and Tailors' Unions from 1830 till at least 1834, a Carpenters' Union in 1833-34, and Bakers' and City Firemen's Unions in 1834. Hamilton had Shoemakers and Foundry Workers' Unions between 1827 and 1842, and a Printers' Union in 1833. York (Toronto) had a Bricklayers', Plasterers' and Masons' Society in 1831, a Typographical Society from 1832 till 1837, and a Carpenters', Bricklayers' and Masons' organization in 1833. Yarmouth, N.S., had a Carpenters' Union from 1834 till at least 1851.

From the late 1830s till the mid-1850s, the chief centre of union activity was probably Saint John, N.B. Labour was scarce, trade was brisk, the employers had plenty of money (as late as 1875, well past their heyday, they raised a strikebreaking fund of $108,500 in five days). The result was more, bigger, stronger and more highly respected unions than in any other part of British North America. No great civic occasion was complete without a "Trades' Procession." For the laying of the corner-stone of the Mechanics' Institute, in May, 1840, ten unions marched, 1,200 strong: Blacksmiths, Carpenters, Tailors, Painters, Bakers, Cordwainers (shoemakers), Cabinet Makers, Founders, Hammermen and Horlogers; "a most glorious and heart-stirring effect," says the newspaper account. In July, an even larger procession welcomed the new Governor General.

A third procession, in 1853, was more splendid still. It included the Mayors and Corporations of Saint John and Fredericton, the Police Magistrates, the High Sheriff, and the Directors of the European and North American Railway, with most of the unions near the head of the parade: the House Carpenters, Shipwrights (with sixteen floats from sixteen shipyards), Blacksmiths and Founders (700 men, with
a steam engine). Painters, Masons and Stone Cutters (with a brickyard). Bakers, Printers (with a press, and a printers' devil, "horn, hoof and all," turning off copies of an original song in praise of modern technology and the printers' craft), Cordwainers (250, with a float of King and Queen Crispin), Tailors (with a float of Adam and Eve in the Garden), Millers, Riggers and Sailmakers (with a ship, and riggers at work on it), Cabinet Makers, and Millmen (1,100 strong). The Labourers' Benevolent Association (longshoremen), founded in 1849, does not appear, perhaps because it had temporarily gone out of existence. A few years later, it was not only flourishing, with some 1,400 to 1,600 members, but ruling the harbour with what the merchants considered a rod of iron; every vessel had to be loaded and unloaded by union members, and wages compared favourably with those of skilled trades in Toronto.

Many of the early unions were short-lived. But the Montreal Stone Cutters (1844), the St. John's, N.F., Shipwrights (1851), the St. John's Seal Skinners (1855), and the Quebec Ship Labourers (1857) lasted till well into the present century; the St. John's Mechanics' Society (1827) transformed itself (1897-98) into a local central organization, and outlasted the century; and the Toronto Typographical Union (1844) and the Saint John Ship Labourers are still flourishing, though now as locals of international unions.

The International Unions

With the advent of international unions, the centre of gravity of Canadian unionism shifted to central Canada. Till 1853, all the unions were purely local. In that year, the British Amalgamated Society of Engineers organized its first Canadian branch, in Montreal. (It ultimately spread east to Sorel and west to Vancouver.) In 1858, the Journeymen Shoemakers of the United States and Canada had locals in Toronto and Hamilton, but they soon disappeared. The real beginnings of international unionism in Canada date from 1859. The Moulders, organized in that year, had from the beginning five Canadian locals (Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, London and Brantford, probably all pre-existing bodies which rushed to join the international). The Locomotive Engineers and the Typographical Union arrived in 1865, the Cigar Makers probably in 1867, the Knights of St. Crispin (shoemakers) in 1867 or 1868, the Coopers in (or soon after) 1870, the British Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners in 1871 (at London, whence it spread east to Montreal and west to Victoria), the Machinists and Blacksmiths in 1871, the Locomotive Firemen in 1876. The Toronto Bricklayers, in 1872, tried to join the American National Union, but the American locals jibbed, and the international did not get established in Canada till 1881.
Of these international unions, in the 1870s, the most important were the Moulders, Locomotive Engineers, Typos., Cigar Makers, Crispins, and Coopers. The Moulders, by the end of the decade, had organized 18 locals, from Halifax to St. Catharines, though ten of these were gone by September, 1879. The Locomotive Engineers organized nine divisions (all in Ontario and Quebec), and won a major strike against the Grand Trunk in 1876-77. The Typos. organized eleven locals, of which six survived in 1880. The Cigar Makers organized five locals, of which three survived the decade. The Crispins, for a time the most powerful union on the continent, organized 27 lodges: one in Nova Scotia, two in New Brunswick, five in Quebec, the rest in Ontario; but by the end of the decade they had nearly all disappeared. The Coopers, founded in 1870, had, by October 1871, fourteen locals in Canada, and more may have been added later; but by 1880 they were probably all gone. In that year, there seem to have been only some 53 locals of international unions in Canada, divided among thirteen organizations, including the Lake Seamen, the Railway Conductors (St. Thomas, 1880), and the Flint Glass Workers (Hamilton, 1879). British immigrants brought the two British unions with them; the American internationals were often invited by Canadian local unions which wanted to be part of something bigger and stronger, and whose members wanted to be able to move freely to the United States when jobs were scarce in Canada.

It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that the internationals, in the 1860s and 1870s, carried all before them. They made little impression in the Maritimes, and relatively little in Quebec; and throughout the country workers continued to form purely local or provincial unions. The Nova Scotia coal miners formed the Provincial Workmen's Association (PWA) in 1879; Ontario had provincial unions of shoemakers and cigar makers before the internationals arrived; and there were local unions in some 28 occupations, from shipyard and port workers to construction and service trades, and from St. John's to Victoria.

For many years the various unions, even in the same city or town, seldom had any formal relations with each other. Montreal had a "Trades Union" made up of delegates from particular unions in 1834. Hamilton had a "Trades Assembly" or "Trades Union" from 1863 till 1875. Montreal had its "Grand Association" and Toronto its "Trades Union" in 1867; but both seem to have been shortlived. The Toronto Trades Assembly, however, formed in 1871, lasted till 1878. By the end of 1872, it included 14 of the city's 21 unions, and a year later 15 out of 25. Ottawa formed a "Trades Council" in 1872, which seems to have lasted till 1876, and St. Catharines had one in 1875.
The Toronto Assembly was not only the largest but the most influential of these local central organizations. It was responsible for starting the first national central body; till that was established, it served almost as a national centre itself; and it was always the backbone of the national organization. It might almost be said to have taken the world for its parish, and counted nothing human alien to it. It took a leading part in the Nine Hours Movement. It agitated for better legislation on a variety of subjects. It undertook workers' education through lectures and a library. It carried on correspondence with labour organizations in other parts of Canada, in Britain and the United States, even with Karl Marx' First International. It started a labour paper. It encouraged co-operatives. It organized unions, mediated industrial disputes, organized boycotts. It made representations to governments on immigration and on prison labour.

*The Canadian Labor Union*

The national central body, the Canadian Labor Union, was organized in 1873. By that time, there must have been fully 100 unions in the country, but the first convention had delegates from only 14, all in Ontario (though the Montreal and Quebec Typos. sent letters of approval). Successive conventions dealt with labour political action, immigration, prison labour, the legal position of unions, apprenticeship, child labour, a lien law, hours of labour, organizing the unorganized, a labour newspaper, extension of the franchise, the tariff, "arbitration and conciliation", and co-operatives.

Economic conditions of the middle and later 1870s were fatal to both national and central bodies, though many of the local unions, especially the branches of internationals, survived.

Meanwhile, the infant movement had won a resounding and decisive legislative victory in the Toronto printers' strike of 1872, part of the Nine Hours Movement. Most of the Toronto master-printers, headed by George Brown, of the *Globe*, were fiercely anti-union. They had 14 leading members of the Typos' committee arrested on a charge of seditious conspiracy. In spite of a contrary decision in 1854, labour had assumed that unions were lawful. It now found they were not. British Acts freeing them from their Common Law disabilities did not extend to Canada, and neither Dominion nor province had legislated. So Ontario unions in 1872 were in the same legal position as British unions in 1791. They promptly set to work to get Canadian legislation to match the British. Sir John A. Macdonald, delighted at the opportunity to "dish" Brown and the Liberals with two pieces of unimpeachably Gladstonian legislation,
lost no time in passing through the Dominion Parliament a Trade Unions Act and a Criminal Law Amendment Act modelled on the British Acts of the previous year. This was the first big piece of successful political action by Canadian unions. The prosecution was dropped, and the strike was won.

With the adoption of the National Policy (1879) and the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1881-85), Canadian industry began to expand and the unions with it. The 1880s saw not only the organization of a host of purely local unions, most of them short-lived, but a large expansion of the Nova Scotia PWA, and, above all, the growth of the surviving international unions and the entry of 15 new ones: Bricklayers, Plasterers, Boilermakers, Railroad Trainmen, Iron and Steel Workers, Bakers, Painters, Railway Telegraphers, Hatters, Printing Pressmen (a secession from the Typos.), Tailors, Stonecutters, Plumbers, Boot and Shoe Workers, Machinists. By 1890, the international unions had about 240 locals in 60 places, against 53 in 19 places a decade earlier. Ontario, with 146 locals in 35 centres, dominated the scene; the Maritimes contained less than ten percent of the international locals, Quebec less than thirteen. The railway running trades (Engineers, Firemen, Conductors and Trainmen) were responsible for nearly half the gains. By 1890, they had 104 locals, eight times as many as in 1880. The building trades had grown from one international union, with five locals, to eight, with 55, and had spread from Ontario east to Nova Scotia and west to British Columbia.

Great numbers of local unions continued to be organized in the 1880s; probably not far short of 200, in over 60 occupations and some 20 places. Newfoundland, in particular, added to its unions Typos. (1883) and Moulders (1886), both of which lasted till well after 1902. The Vancouver Island coal miners organized the Vancouver Island Miners' and Mine Laborers' Protective Association, with three locals. There was also a short-lived Ontario Bakers' Union; and the PWA spread from the mainland to Cape Breton, and (briefly) into the glass and iron industries, and added 22 lodges to its previous four, though some fell by the wayside.

The Knights of Labor

But the most spectacular feature of the 1880s was the growth of the Knights of Labor. This "Noble and Holy Order", founded in the United States in 1869, had Local and District Assemblies in that country, and in Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. It entered Canada in 1875 at Hamilton. But by
1880, this Assembly was moribund, and the real history of the Knights in this country begins in 1881, again in Hamilton. By 1902, the Order had organized some 400 Local Assemblies in every part of what is now Canada except Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan. Many of them were short-lived, and few survived the turn of the century, but in 1887 there must have been close to 200.

What is more, the Knights were mainly responsible for the organization of the unskilled, men and women (of which there had previously been very little), and of small town workers. Nor did they neglect the skilled: their first big effort was the organizing of 30 Local Assemblies of telegraphers, from Winnipeg to North Sydney, as part of their “National Trade District 45, United Telegraphers of North America.” The Knights, in principle, disapproved of strikes; but in 1883, N.T.D. 45 conducted the one genuinely international strike in North American history, against the big telegraph companies on both sides of the border. On July 19, 18,000 or so operators, 1,200 of them in Canada, “rose from their keys as one man.” The demands were identical in the two countries (except that the Canadians already had Sunday overtime, and the Americans wanted it): eight hours' day work, seven night; wage increases averaging over 27 percent across the board, plus substantial extra increases for the low paid; equal pay for men and women. The strike failed, and the Telegraphers’ Assemblies disappeared. But the Knights went on to organize almost every conceivable craft, from carpenters to watch-case makers, from stonemasons to musicians. They also organized a large number of “mixed” Assemblies, which took in all occupations, skilled and unskilled, and were specially adapted to the needs of small towns where there were not enough workers of any one occupation to make a sizeable trade union. The cities and larger towns had their share of Local Assemblies (in 1886, Montreal had at least 30, Hamilton 19, Toronto 50, and in 1888 Quebec City had at least 13), but there were also single Assemblies, usually “mixed,” in dozens of small places.

The Knights were largely responsible for organizing the first Winnipeg and Montreal Trades and Labor Councils, and for some years dominated the Montreal, Toronto and Quebec Councils, and the second national central labour body, the Trades and Labor Congress (TLC). They favoured co-operatives (and organized a good many), public ownership of utilities, and a variety of good causes. They remained a power in the Canadian Labour Movement long after they had dwindled to a mere shadow in the United States.
The Trades and Labor Councils

With the fresh burst of organizing activity came a revival of the central organizations, both local and national. Significantly, the new local central bodies almost invariably called themselves "Trades and Labor Councils": the "trades" were making room for the unskilled. The Toronto Council was formed in 1881, Hamilton and Halifax (1882), London (1884), Guelph (1885), Montreal, Oshawa, Brantford and St. Thomas (1886), Winnipeg (1887), St. Catharines (1888), Ottawa, Victoria, Peterborough, Vancouver and Quebec City (1889). The new national central body, known initially as the "Canadian Labor Congress", was set up in 1883 at a convention summoned by the Toronto Council, and for some years was, in fact, an almost wholly Ontario body. The first convention had no delegates from any other province. The second, in 1886, had one from Quebec. In 1887 and 1888, all were again from Ontario. From 1889 on, however, there was always a substantial delegation from Quebec. In 1890, the first British Columbia delegates appeared; in 1895 the first Manitoba; in 1897 the first New Brunswick; the first Prince Edward Island in 1900. But right down to the end of 1902, the Congress remained a predominantly Ontario and Quebec organization; not only because most of the unions and Knights of Labor Assemblies were in those provinces, but because the railway running trades almost invariably held aloof, and because unions and Assemblies were usually too hard up to send delegates more than a short distance from home.

From 1891 to 1897, the Canadian Labour Movement grew very little. The Knights of Labor, who by 1890 had already lost something like two-thirds of their 1886-87 strength, almost disappeared, except in Quebec. Fourteen new international unions came in: Pattern Makers, Railway Carmen, Horseshoers, Woodworkers, Bookbinders (a secession from the Typos.), Metal Polishers, Street Railway Employees, Upholsterers, United Garment Workers, Railway Switchmen, Barbers, Western Federation of Miners, Sheet Metal Workers, Steel and Copper Plate Printers, along with a new Boot and Shoe Workers' Union. But they added only about 30 locals, and the old internationals only about 50, of which the railway running trades contributed 40. The building trades actually had a net loss of five. By the end of 1897, the railway running trades and the building trades together still accounted for 60 per cent of the international locals in Ontario, over half in Quebec, over three-quarters in the Maritimes, 71 per cent in Manitoba, and 44 per cent in British Columbia. Sixty per cent of the international locals were still in Ontario, and about three-quarters in the two central provinces.
The decline of the Knights and the slow growth of the international unions was not compensated by any appreciable increase in purely local unions. A new regional union, the Industrial Brotherhood, organized about a dozen "Local Directories" in Western Ontario. The PWA organized seven new lodges, but by the end of 1897 six of these were gone. The Federated Association of Letter Carriers (1891) organized nine branches, from Halifax to Winnipeg. The United Brotherhood of Railroad Trackmen (1892), a purely Canadian body except for one local in Battle Creek, achieved considerable success before merging with the international at the turn of the century.

New Trades and Labor Councils were organized in Halifax (1891), Montreal (international unions, 1897), Brantford (1892 and 1897), Winnipeg (1890 and 1894), St. Catharines (1897), Ottawa ("Allied Trades and Labor Association", 1897), New Westminster (1890), Saint John (1890 and 1893), Windsor (1890 and 1894), Nanaimo (1891), Kingston (about 1894), and Rossland (1897).

The years 1898-1902 were a period of spectacular union growth. The tripling of the number of international locals was mainly the result of vigorous organizing activity by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Forty-seven new internationals came in, with some 350 locals; and the pre-1897 internationals added some 375-390 locals. Some of the new unions had only one local, some two or three; but the Trackmen had 109; the Hotel and Restaurant Workers 25; the Longshoremen over 20. The PWA, after staggering losses in 1898, grew to 33 lodges, and branched out into the railway industry. It had, by the end of 1902, more locals than any international union except the railway unions, the Carpenters and the Typos. By the end of 1902, there were also some 80 new purely local unions, two or three in Newfoundland, 15 in the Yukon.

The railway unions (including the telegraphers and the trackmen) had about 315 locals, of which the running trades accounted for 166, a gain of only 22. The building trades had risen from 55 to about 175; metal trades from 45 to about 150. The clothing trades and printing and publishing had about 60 locals each, woodworking and non-railway transport about 50 each.

The increase in the international locals was very unevenly distributed geographically. The biggest gain was in British Columbia: from 27 in 1897 to about 140 in 1902. On the Prairies, the number rose from 24 to at least 75; in the Maritimes, from 30 to almost 100; in Quebec, from 47 to almost 120; in Ontario, from about
The number of places with international locals also rose spectacularly: in British Columbia from 6 to 36; on the Prairies, from 4 to 22; in the Maritimes, from 11 to 29; in Quebec, from 9 to 22; in Ontario, from 33 to over 100. Ontario still had 59 per cent of the total number of locals. The West had increased its percentage from 16 to almost 21; the Maritimes and Quebec had dropped from 24 to just over 20. Toronto had over 100 international locals, Montreal about 65, Hamilton almost 50, London close to 40, Vancouver about 35, Victoria 22, Halifax 21, Saint John 17, and Quebec City about 14.

New Trades and Labor Councils were organized in Halifax and Guelph (1898), Revelstoke ("Assembly"), St. Hyacinthe and Kingston (1899), St. Thomas (1899 or 1900), Nelson, Berlin, Greenwood, Stratford, Brockville, Phoenix and Moncton (1900), Saint John (1901), Calgary (1901 or 1902), Peterborough, Moncton, Charlottetown, Kamloops, Dundas, Dawson City, Smith's Falls, Galt-Preston, Woodstock and Sarnia (1902).

The American Federation of Labor

Until 1896, there seems to have been no formal contact between the AFL and the TLC. But in that year the Congress felt obliged to complain to the AFL about the application of the American Contract Labor Act to Canadian workers, and the ensuing correspondence led to an exchange of fraternal delegates, in 1899. In that same year, the AFL began an organizing drive in both the United States and Canada, and before the year was out it had twelve Canadian volunteer organizers, usually drawn from affiliated unions. In 1900, Sam Gompers, AFL President, appointed a full-time General Organizer for Canada, John Flett, TLC Vice-President. Flett and his helpers organized locals for a host of international unions, ranging widely from meat cutters to longshoremen to theatrical stage employees. They also organized 86 AFL "Federal Labor Unions" in occupations and places where no international union was available, helped in the formation of Trades and Labor Councils, and frequently aided locals in their negotiations.

By the fall of 1902, there were well over 700 locals of AFL international unions, and over forty AFL Federal Unions, in Canada. So it is hardly surprising that at the September convention of the TLC the AFL unions were in a position to expel rival organizations and weld the mass of Canadian unionism firmly into the AFL international system. This they proceeded to do.
Till well after 1902, the Congress was, by modern standards, a very catch-as-catch-can affair. No international union was affiliated en bloc. The first national (or regional) union to affiliate as such was the Canadian Federation of Boot and Shoe Workers, in 1902. Individual locals and individual Trades and Labor Councils affiliated or dropped their affiliation year by year, as they saw fit. Even in 1902, there were only 204 affiliates of all kinds, though there existed about 1,000 international locals, some 35 Trades and Labor Councils, 46 or 47 AFL Federal Unions, and nearly 30 TLC Federal Unions, let alone national, regional or purely local unions and Knights of Labor Assemblies. It was only in 1902 that Congress revenue reached the dizzy height of $2,342.41 ($300 of it from the AFL), and the Executive took the epoch-making step of setting up a one-room office (in the Secretary-Treasurer’s house), with “two desks and a chair, a typewriting machine and supplies, a stenographer and a typewriter.”

But, small and ramshackle as it was, the Congress remained, till 1902, thoroughly inclusive, oecumenical. It took in every kind of labour organization: local, regional, national; union or Knights of Labor Assembly. But at the 1902 convention, the AFL intervened decisively to transform its character.

Comparing the numbers and resources of the AFL and TLC, one might wonder why the Federation had thought it worth while to spend so much time, money and energy on Canada, and, still more, why, by 1902, it felt it necessary to purge the Congress of what had by then become such feeble rivals of AFL unions.

There were three reasons. First, American industry was spreading into Canada; if Canadian workers were left unorganized, American employers might take work across the line, where labour was cheap; and the purely Canadian unions, and the Congress itself, simply did not have the resources to do the organizing job. Second, the Canadian Labour Movement, between 1895 and 1902, was swept by all the winds of both American and British radicalism. Branches of De Leon’s Socialist Labor Party were springing up from Halifax to Vancouver, and the SLP was, briefly, admitted to the Congress. The Canadian Socialist League was trying to secure affiliation. Labour candidates were being elected to the House of Commons and the British Columbia Legislature. There were signs that the Liberal Party was trying to capture the Congress. All this was anathema to the AFL. Third, there was the threat of “dual” unions, rivals to AFL unions: the Western Federation of Miners, the Western Labor Union, the American Railway Union, the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees, the Congress President’s proposal for a Cana-
dian Federation of Canadian unions, the persistent influence of the Knights of Labor in Quebec. The question of who should charter Trades and Labor Councils was crucial, for the AFL looked to the Councils to enforce its jurisdictional decisions. If the Councils held charters from a hostile, or even indifferent, Congress, the AFL's decisions might be largely frustrated; and in 1902, only six Canadian Councils had AFL charters.

Weak as it was, therefore, a Congress which was ready to accept any kind of labour organization, which had leanings towards political action, and which had the power to charter both local unions and Councils, could at least make itself a considerable nuisance to the AFL, perhaps a dangerous threat.

By March, 1902, Gompers seems to have made up his mind that dual unionism anywhere in North America had to be stopped. The TLC Secretary-Treasurer was "invited" to the AFL Council meeting, where the AFL's determination seems to have been made very plain to him. In September, the Congress convention, well packed with AFL union delegates, amended the Constitution to make all organizations "dual" to AFL unions ineligible for affiliation, and, in Professor Babcock's words, "the triumph of the craft internationals... was sealed by the election of John A. Flett, the A.F. of L's salaried organizer, to the presidency." Delegates from the excluded organizations formed a rival, "National Trades and Labour Congress of Canada;" and henceforth the Canadian Labour Movement was to be "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distrest."

The Aims of the Labour Movement

So much for the history of the Canadian Labour Movement during its first ninety years. What were its aims, and what methods did it use to attain them?

The aims, then as now, may be summed up in Gompers' famous phrase, "more, more, more."

More of what?

First, more money: higher wages (or salaries), and the demands were not always modest. The Charlottetown Shoemakers, in 1874, threatened to strike for "a nearly 40 per cent increase." The Telegraphers, in 1883, wanted a minimum of 27 per cent.

Second, more leisure. Here, also, the demands were not always modest. The Saint John Caulkers seem actually to have won an eight-
hour day in 1866, and the Telegraphers, in 1883, tried to get an eight-hour day and a seven-hour night. The Congress repeatedly voted for the eight-hour day. But most of the unions, at the end of the century, were still doing well if they got nine hours. From 1890 on, also, the TLC was vigorously demanding "protection of the Lord's Day." But no one seems to have dreamt of paid statutory holidays or vacations.

Third, extra pay, higher rates, overtime, for work beyond normal hours.

Fourth, recognition of unions by employers as what we now call "collective bargaining agents," and protection against defaulting union officials (a very common species in the nineteenth century). In the struggle for union recognition, the unions had no help from the law. Where they were strong, they got recognition, and they kept it as long as they were strong. Where they were weak, they did not get it.

The skilled crafts tried for, and often got, a de facto closed shop. Other forms of union security seem to have been almost unheard of, though the PWA, by 1894, had got the check-off for most of its locals.

There was no legal provision for union recognition. There were often actually laws against it. The Nova Scotia Act of 1816 lasted till 1851. It annulled all "contracts, covenants and agreements" entered into by unions for obtaining an advance in wages, lessening or changing their usual hours of work, decreasing the quantity of work, preventing or hindering any person from employing anyone he chose, or affecting anyone in carrying on his business. Workers entering into such contracts, or combining for such objects, or enticing others to take employment or to leave their employment, or hindering employers from hiring men, or refusing to work with other employees, could be jailed for not more than three months or sent to a house of correction for not more than two. Further, the Act was not to be construed as preventing indictment, prosecution or punishment under the Common Law, for combination or conspiracy. The Province of Canada, in 1847, passed a law intended to take the stuffing out of the Quebec Seamen's Union, known to the employers as "the Crimps." It achieved some success: the Quebec Shipping Master, in 1852, rejoiced that it had cut down desertion and "sensibly reduced" the rate of wages. Against unions in general, employers in the province of Canada relied on the pre-1791 English Law. Macdonald's Trade Unions Act of 1872, though it afforded protection only to unions registered under it (and few ever did register), seems to have ended the more blatant persecution of Canadian unions, though the criminal law could still be used (and was) against peaceful picketing.
The struggle against defaulting officers took two forms: reporting the culprit to other locals of the same union (Canadian and American), and asking for incorporation, which a few unions actually got.

Social security was hardly dreamt of, though the TLC asked for employers’ liability legislation as early as 1883, and declared for “Government Life Insurance” in 1887 and 1888, and “state insurance” in 1895. The early unions did, of course, try to make some provision for income maintenance. But they did it themselves, by setting up their own systems for sickness, unemployment and death benefits, pensions and strike pay. What the Webbs were to call “the Method of Mutual Insurance” was as characteristic of Canadian unions as of British and American.

Canadian Labour had, however, many wider aims: temperance, manhood suffrage and the ballot in the earlier years; the initiative and referendum, proportional representation and the Single Tax towards the end of the period; compulsory arbitration of disputes, off an on, throughout. The ballot was achieved in the 1870s, and the franchise was widened enough to take the edge off the demand for manhood suffrage. Temperance got a good deal of support in the 1880s, and the TLC’s 1890 convention defeated a prohibition resolution by only 30 to 23. A similar resolution in 1898 was tabled. Compulsory arbitration the Congress repeatedly endorsed (though with occasional lapses in favour of voluntary). It went into the Congress’ “Platform of principles” in 1898, and was taken out only in 1902, when an actual bill for compulsory arbitration on the railways caused the delegates to recoil in horror!

Demands for abolition of the Senate were a hardy perennial from 1886 on, and from 1886 to 1890 the Congress suffered fits of Jacksonian democracy, calling for the election of a whole string of government officials, including, at times, the Governor General and Lieutenant-Governors (though one resolution demanded outright aboliton of this last office.)

The Movement also had an avid interest in education, of its own members and generally. It promoted lectures; from 1887 on, the Congress was demanding free schools, free school books, and, from 1890, compulsory education in all provinces. It opposed manual training, but favoured technical education. It was chilly towards public support of universities.

The Congress repeatedly demanded Factory and Workshop Acts, Dominion and provincial. It denounced monopoly and demanded
curbs on it. It called for union wage rates on public works. It demanded monetary reform, revocation of bank charters and establishment of a "National Bank." It called for public ownership of public utilities. It ardently supported the co-operative movement.

The Methods of the Labour Movement

So much for the aims. What of the methods?

First and foremost, collective bargaining and strikes. Collective bargaining, of course, then as now, often won satisfactory agreements, without strikes. But any notion that strikes, or at any rate, big strikes, were virtually unknown in nineteenth-century Canada would be simply ludicrous. The York Typographical Society, in 1836, had a bitter strike against the Toronto master printers, including William Lyon Mackenzie, in which the great revolutionary, the champion of the "mechanics," let fly with everything he had against the union, which lost. The Halifax, Saint John and Toronto Typos, had a succession of strikes; indeed, the Toronto local was in a state of almost chronic warfare with the Globe and the Telegram. The Moulders, from 1859 to 1895, had 54 strikes and 18 lockouts (one lasted 14 months). The Cigar Makers (then a large and important union) had 41 strikes and two lockouts between 1883 and 1902. The United Carpenters, from 1881 to 1902, had at least a dozen strikes, of which one cost $5,300. The Bricklayers had some 14 strikes, of which one cost them over $11,500. The Tailors, 1889 to 1902, had 27 strikes, which cost them over $7,000. The Machinists' Kingston Locomotive strike lasted three-years-and-a-half (1902-1905). The Western Federation of Miners had three ferocious strikes in British Columbia between 1889 and 1902. The Trackmen struck the CPR in 1901 for two-months-and-a-half. The London Street Railway strike of 1899 lasted 18 months and led to the TLC's first nation-wide appeal for strike funds. The Toronto Street Railway strike of 1902 was officially described as "three days of industrial war." The PWA, despite its dislike of strikes had a round dozen, in one of which the employers got troops brought in (something which was to become a pattern in Canadian industrial disputes for many years).

The second method the Movement used was, as already noted, mutual insurance.

Third, pressure for legislation to relieve unions of their disabilities, and for legislative and administrative action to control the labour market, by restricting immigration generally; by totally prohibiting Oriental immigration (or imposing prohibitive head-taxes);
by prohibiting child labour and the competition of prison labour; by protecting and organizing female labour; by controlling or prohibiting alien contract labour.

Fourth, the union label. From 1886 on, this played a large and steadily increasing part in Labour's efforts to steer the consuming public towards union-made goods.

The final method was independent Labour political action: a recurrent theme of the Canadian Labour Movement for over a hundred years; never dominant, often muted, never silenced; and a theme which has, increasingly, differentiated Canadian Labour from American.

It was the first subject discussed at the first convention of the first national central organization, the Canadian Labor Union, in 1873. William Joyce moved, and James Levesley seconded, a motion "that it is essential to the recognition and establishment of the just and equitable rights of the workingmen of this country that they should have their own representatives in the Dominion Parliament, ... that a workingmen's platform should be put before the industrial classes ..., and that the President do appoint a committee to draw up such a platform." Joyce said union organization was not enough. "Unions were scattered, weak and disconnected ... They must drill their army to fight manfully at the great battle-ground—the polls." Then "Lockouts, strikes, etc., with their concurrent evils, would happily be a thing of the past ... He went heart and soul for the workingman's ticket knowing neither Reformer nor Conservative."

The resolution was sent to the committee on legislation, and seems to have died there. But a similar motion was moved at the 1886 convention of the TLC, where the second strongly advocated "the formation of a third party on a Labor platform." The resolution went to a committee which reported favourably, though limiting the proposal to nominate Labour candidates by a cautious "where practicable." The convention adopted this, with a further addition, that where Labour candidates were not nominated, all labour organizations should support the candidate who promised to vote for "most of the planks" of the Congress' platform. In 1892, the Congress resolved to "take into consideration the advisability of forming a labor party." In 1893, the executive co-operated with the Patrons of Industry and the Dominion Grange (both farmers' organizations), District Assembly 125 of the Knights of Labor (Toronto), the Toronto Trades and Labor Council, and the Social Problems Conference, to produce a political platform which smacked rather of the farm than of the factory. In 1895, the Congress approved "fostering and encouraging the spirit of
independent political action on the part of the toiling class," and pro-
phesied "that the day is not far distant when organized Labor will go
to the polls in one compact body in support of men from its own ranks."
In 1897, it urged nomination of Labour candidates "where a possibility
exists of securing their election." In 1899, it authorized a referendum
of affiliates on independent political action. The results were in-
conclusive. Of the 2,932 members polled, 1,424 voted "yes," and
only 167 "no;" but 1,341 did not vote at all. None the less, the 1900
convention voted that the result justified "such steps as may be
deemed advisable to further the progress of such action;" but no
action followed.

How much did all this amount to in practice?

In 1874, Daniel O'Donoghue, First Vice-President of the
Canadian Labour Union, was indeed elected to the Ontario Legis-
lature, but he was soon, in effect, absorbed into the Liberal party.
From 1883 to 1902, the Knights of Labor, the PWA, the Toronto
Trades and Labor Council, the Montreal Central Trades and Labor
Council and a few local Labour Parties, put up occasional Labour
candidates in Hamilton, Toronto, Victoria, Nanaimo, the mining
districts of Nova Scotia, and Winnipeg. Two were elected to the Legis-
lature in Nova Scotia, one in British Columbia, and three to the House
of Commons (A.T. Lépine in Montreal in 1888, Ralph Smith in Van-
couver and A.W. Puttee in Winnipeg in 1900). But on the whole,
independent Labour political action down to 1902 was "big offers and
small blows": plenty of resolutions, a few local Labour Parties, a
candidate here and there; with most of the few Labour men elected
fading quietly into the Liberal or Conservative parties.

Conclusion

What emerges unmistakably, and surprisingly, from Canadian
Labour's first ninety years is the persistence of certain problems, of
attitudes towards them, of methods of dealing with them, of
arguments about them. What one finds, over and over again, is
startlingly contemporary: it is only necessary to change a few names,
dates, and absolute figures, and the tale might have come from yester-
day's newspaper. The unions were so often fighting for the same things
as now, wielding the same weapons, using the same arguments. So
were employers.

None the less, 1902 was a watershed. On one side lay the
spontaneity, the variety, the eccentric idealism, the haphazard organi-
zation and methods, the penury, the nationalism, the inclusiveness,
of the nineteenth century; on the other, the system, the discipline, the ordered jurisdictions, the "businesslike" approach, the big unions, the full-time officials, the large funds, the continentalism, of the twentieth.
Suggested Readings


Kennedy, Douglas R., The Knights of Labor in Canada, London, University of Western Ontario, 1956. (Useful, though very incomplete and not always accurate.)


Robin, Martin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930*, Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, 1968. (Not always accurate.)
