

**Some background on Canada's early labour history (From Desmond Morton's
Working People: An Illustrated History of the Canadian Labour Movement [5th
Edition] and *Labour in Canada*)**

Most immigrants who came to Canada during the 19th century came from Europe; their decision to immigrate was based on the belief that Canada offered better economic prospects and an easier life (Morton 1982, 22). These workers immigrated to Canada with the hope that they would earn enough as labourers to become independent farmers or business owners (22). In that period, however, the rights of workers were severely limited. There were no benefits or holiday pay, and so workers were forced to turn to private organizations or their local community for help with medical expenses or to cover the cost of funerals (23). Working conditions in factories, mines, and in other industries were usually extremely dangerous; as Desmond Morton writes, until 1887, there were no government laws requiring standards for "safe working conditions" (23).

The first unions were formed for the purpose of protecting workers who had fallen ill or had lost their jobs (Morton 1982, 23). Most of the early unions were short-lived. The legal and economic foundations that are necessary for the survival of a union were not yet in place, such as the legal right of employees to form a union and to strike under certain conditions, or the system of membership dues that provides the financial basis for the union. In some cases, however, workers managed to become powerful enough to dictate the terms of their employment to their employers. These situations did not last long, as Canada's legal system worked alongside employers to restrict the rights and powers of workers (24).

The industrial revolution had an enormous impact on workers, as machinery replaced skilled craftsmen in many different areas (Morton 2007, 12). Workers tried to resist the mechanization of their work; for example, tailors fought to prevent companies from installing sewing machines (13). Although they were initially successful, their efforts in the end were to no avail.

By the mid-19th century, Canadian workers fell under the influence of the “new-model” union movement that was developing in the United States and Britain. This movement, which focused entirely on skilled workers, spread into Canada by the 1860s through the establishment of “craft unions” (Morton 1982, 26). These unions brought together workers who shared common skills; for example, there were independent unions for printers, tailors, and shoemakers. It was not until 1872, however, that unions in Canada were recognized as legal, when the Canadian Parliament passed the Trade Unions Act (26).

In 1868, a new labour movement began in the United States in direct competition with “new-model unionism”. It was called The Holy and Noble Order of the Knights of Labor, and it sought to bring together within one organization both trained and untrained workers. For a short period in the United States, the Knights and the craft unions had an intense rivalry. Eventually, craft unionism in the United States triumphed, with the creation of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886, led by Sam Gompers (Morton 1982, 29-30). In Canada, however, in that same year the two movements united to form the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC). This coalition lasted until 1956, when the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) was established (31).

The TLC worked to improve the lives of ordinary “working people” by calling for shorter workdays and improved conditions within factories. But the TLC also tried to protect its workers by calling for greater restrictions on immigration; in the process, it displayed its obvious racism, when it opposed all Asian immigration (Morton 1982, 31-32). By the end of the 19th century, the American Federation of Labor had also made inroads into Canada, and for most of the 20th century, Canadian labour joined forces with unions based in the United States (35).

The first decades of the 20th century saw increased labour discontent in Canada. In general terms, workers with the most dangerous jobs, such as mining, became increasingly impatient with the moderation of the craft unionism supported by the American Federation of Labor and its chapters in Canada (Morton 1982, 41). Some workers, particularly those in Western Canada, fell under the influence of the socialist philosophy of the Industrial Workers of the World, which called for all workers to unite “in a great general strike” in order to defeat capitalism (45).

Finally, in 1919, this labour discontent boiled over in the massive Winnipeg General Strike, one of the most significant strikes in Canadian history. As many as 30,000 workers, the majority of whom did not belong to a union, walked off their jobs in solidarity with Winnipeg’s metal workers’ union. Feelings ran high against the strikers, however, with many people fearing that a revolution similar to what was then taking place in Russia might actually happen in Canada. After days of bloodshed, the strike ended in defeat for the striking workers. In the same year, several other strikes in Canadian cities also ended in defeat for the strikers (Morton 1982, 48-51).

Although a royal commission appointed by the Canadian government looked into the causes of workers' unrest and made many recommendations, Canadian workers would wait for several more decades for the legal right to strike, to organize, and to negotiate with their employers (Morton 1982, 53). But the labour movement faced its own internal problems, as well, for the various groups that represented workers from different parts of Canada had very different political and ideological views. For instance, Catholic workers from Quebec formed their own unions independent of other Canadian or international unions, while significant numbers of Canadian workers joined the Communist party and supported the Russian Revolution. And while some labour groups favoured an independent national Canadian union, there were others who believed that Canadian workers would be stronger if they affiliated themselves with the international union movement (56-58).

Despite these divisions, the Canadian labour movement made important advances during the twentieth century. In 1948, P.C. 1003 was passed by Parliament. According to Desmond Morton, P.C. 1003 "is the most important labour law in Canadian history," giving workers the legal right to choose if they want to be unionized or not. It also prevents a union from striking before the expiration of its contract and gives the government the authority to try to mediate a dispute "without a strike or a lockout" (Morton 1982, 69-70). In the same period the "Rand Formula" was also created, forcing employers to deduct dues from "all members of the bargaining unit," including those who do not belong to the union (70, 93). Morton explains that the combination of P.C. 1003 and the Rand Formula "gave Canadian unions a strength they had never had before" (70).

In 1953, the two main union organizations in the United States– the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) – merged. As had been the pattern throughout Canada’s labour history, events south of the border had a great influence within Canada, as well. In 1956, the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC) and the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL) merged to form the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) (Morton 1982, 76). To this day, the CLC remains the central umbrella trade union organization in Canada to which a majority of Canada’s union workers are affiliated.

Despite all the gains that Canadian workers have made over the last 100 years in areas such as wages, benefits, and job security, it is important to realize that the history of labour in Canada also includes the story of many non-unionized, immigrant, or non-resident workers, as well as workers from minority populations who have suffered from racial discrimination that prevented them from having certain jobs or belonging to particular unions. From Canada’s earliest days of settlement and industrialization, many of these workers toiled in jobs across Canada without reaping any of the benefits outlined above, or only gaining the right to form their own unions after considerable struggle.

Canadian Railroad Workers

The rapid expansion of railways throughout North America from the middle of the 19th century led to an urgent need for cheap and abundant sources of labour. As white railroad workers became more assertive and began to unionize, railway employers began to recruit cheaper and less assertive workers from Asia. In Western Canada, the mountainous stretches of the privately owned Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) were built

by Chinese labourers, who experienced enormous “hardship, injury, and death” as a result of their efforts (Morton 2007, 54). White workers saw Chinese and other Asian workers as a direct threat to their own livelihood and job security, and widespread racism against Asians spread throughout Western Canada (54).

By the end of the 19th century, railway companies had also begun to recruit Black workers from Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean to work as sleeping car porters. At this time, there were few other employment opportunities available to these men, and so many of them took these positions, despite low wages and very poor working conditions (PSAC Website). In addition, African-Canadian employees of the Canadian National Railway (CNR) were prevented from joining the railroad union, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees (CBRE), for the union explicitly stated in its constitution that only whites could be members (PSAC Website).

Black porters for the CNR fought for their right to be unionized, and in 1918 they succeeded in forming the Order of Sleeping Car Porters (OSCP). Eventually, they gained “full status” in the CBRE, which also agreed to remove “the ‘whites-only’ clause from its constitution” (PSAC Website). In the 1940s, Black porters for the CPR also succeeded in forming a union, establishing chapters of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) in Canada. Over time, the BSCP succeeded in eliminating “many of the discriminatory policies in immigration and labour laws and paved the way for human rights legislation in Canada” (PSAC Website).

Works Cited

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Suggested Further Reading and Viewing

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