

**“Farmworkers Zindabad!”:  
Community Unionism and the Canadian Farmworkers’  
Union, 1978-1986**

by  
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## **Abstract**

At a meeting of the Farmworkers' Organizing Committee (FWOC) on 6 April 1980, the FWOC officially became the Canadian Farmworkers' Union (CFU) with the goal of providing better legal protection, immigration services, and overall improved safety standards for South Asian farm workers in the Lower Mainland. The CFU was unable to reach financial autonomy on their own and with a perpetual shortage of dues and heavy reliance on outside support, the CFU affiliated with the larger Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) in 1981. The CFU's community unionism was unique and suited for their members' needs but complicated their relationship with the CLC's vision of a labour movement dominated by business unionism. This thesis demonstrates the CFU's importance to Canadian labour historiography and provides valuable lessons for those who want to organize in an increasingly neo-liberal dominant society.

**Keywords:** Canadian Farmworkers' Union (CFU); Labour Organizing; Community Unionism; Farm Workers, British Columbia; Canada

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# Table of Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| Approval .....  | ii        |
| Ethics Statement.....   | iii       |
| Abstract.....   | iv        |
| Acknowledgements .....  | v         |
| Table of Contents .....   | vi        |
| List of Acronyms.....   | vii       |
| <b>Introduction: “We weren’t a traditional trade union...” .....</b>  | <b>1</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1: The CFU pieces together a union.....</b>                | <b>17</b> |
| <b>Chapter 2: A Clash of Unionisms. ....</b>                          | <b>40</b> |
| <b>Conclusion.....</b>  | <b>56</b> |
| <b>References .....</b>   | <b>60</b> |
| <b>Appendix A. Interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018 .....</b> | <b>69</b> |

## List of Acronyms

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| BCFED  | BC Federation of Labour  |
| BCGEU  | BC Government Employees Union                                      |
| BCOFR  | BC Organization to Fight Racism                                    |
| BCTF   | BC Teachers Federation   |
| CAIMAW | Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers |
| CCU    | Confederation of Canadian Unions                                   |
| CFU    | Canadian Farmworkers' Union  |
| CLC    | Canadian Labour Congress   |
| CPC-ML | Communist Party of Canada – Marxist-Leninist                       |
| CUPE   | Canadian Union of Public Employees                                 |
| FARSHA | Farm and Ranch Safety and Health Association                       |
| FWOC   | Farmworkers' Organizing Committee                                  |
| GFAWU  | General Farm and Allied Workers Union                              |
| IPANA  | Indian Peoples Association of North America                        |
| IWA    | International Woodworkers of America                               |
| LARA   | Labour Advocacy and Research Association                           |
| LRB    | Labour Relations Board   |
| SAWP   | Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program                               |
| SFU    | Simon Fraser University  |
| SORWUC | Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada               |
| TFW    | Temporary Foreign Worker   |
| UAW    | United Auto Workers  |
| UBC    | University of British Columbia                                     |
| UFCW   | United Food and Commercial Workers                                 |
| UFCWU  | United Food and Commercial Workers Union                           |
| UFW    | United Farm Workers of America                                     |

## **Introduction: “We weren’t a traditional trade union...”**

On 17 January 2018, Unifor national president Jerry Dias wrote a letter to Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) president Hassan Yussuff confirming Unifor’s decision to leave the CLC, the largest labour body in Canada. In his letter, Dias cited two reasons for Unifor’s departure. First was the CLC’s alleged inability to follow Article 4 of its constitution that “allows for a democratic process for workers to change unions.” Second, and more importantly, Unifor claimed the CLC was not upholding Article 26 that guaranteed autonomy for Canadian affiliates of US-based unions. Dias wrote: “Unifor [was] routinely vilified by others for our principled position on these issues and our attempts to raise them [were] met with accusations and assertions that are without merit.”<sup>1</sup>

Commentators such as Larry Savage predicted that this split between Unifor and the CLC would have major consequences on current campaigns such as universal pharmacare and minimum-wage increases. This split also opens the door for union raiding by either organization with potential counter raids. Ultimately, Savage outlines a fundamental difference in philosophy between Unifor, which claims to push for a democratic and nationalist agenda, and the CLC, which enforces a business unionism to maintain the labour peace at all costs, as one of the reasons behind the split.<sup>2</sup>

In some ways, this controversy echoed events in the 1980s. At the first national convention of the Canadian Farmworkers’ Union (CFU) in New Westminster, BC in April 1981, CFU delegates were debating on whether to join with the CLC, the dominant labour body in Canada, the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), a labour organization with a democratic, nationalist, and progressive agenda, or to remain independent like the United Farmworkers’ of America led by Cesar Chavez.<sup>3</sup> All

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Jerry Dias to Hassan Yussuff, 17 January 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Savage, “Making Sense of the Unifor-CLC Split” *Briarpatch*, 18 January 2018. <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/blog/view/making-sense-of-the-uniforclc-split>.

<sup>3</sup> The Council of Canadian Unions (changed to Confederation in 1973) was founded in 1969 by Madeleine Parent and Kent Rowley in response to American domination of Canadian unions. Among its

delegates agreed that the CLC had the ability to fund union activities and could help the CFU become part of the larger Canadian labour movement, but some delegates considered the CLC to be “too conservative” and “out of touch with the worker.”<sup>4</sup> Sarwan Boal, Secretary-Treasurer for the CFU, described his union as not “a traditional trade union – we were a social movement as well.”<sup>5</sup> The CFU decided to postpone its decision until the next national convention scheduled for April 1982. However, because of the CFU’s dire financial situation, and despite the CFU’s ideological similarities to the CCU, the CFU affiliated with the CLC and the BC Federation of Labour (BC Fed) instead in September 1981.<sup>6</sup>

The CFU labelling itself as a social movement highlights a missing piece in Canadian labour history. The Unifor split and the CFU deliberations are not isolated events, but consequences of almost fifty years of infighting at the organizational level between major labour organizations and highlight a recurring problem within the labour movement: namely, how to build and maintain a unified labour movement within Canada when there are disagreements about the role of unions within and beyond the workplace. With a perpetual shortage of dues and heavy reliance on outside support, the CFU affiliated with the larger CLC and the BC Fed. However, the CFU’s model of community unionism was drastically different from the structure of unions within the CLC and BC Fed.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the CFU aimed to improve labour legislation for farm workers, fight

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chief aims is an independent Canadian labour movement, organizing the unorganized, and “to promote the study, defense, and development of the economic, social and moral interests of all workers.” CCU Website: <http://www.ccu-csc.ca/about/> (Accessed: 22 October 2018). There are no comprehensive studies about the CCU itself, but the organization makes superficial appearances in both Craig Heron and Bryan Palmer’s work. Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 318, 344, and 410, and Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 2012), 135.

<sup>4</sup> I use the phrase “Canadian labour movement” to describe the institutions, organizations, and unions that officially represent workers. Minutes recorded by Charan Gill during First National Convention, 5. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 15 File 7.

<sup>5</sup> Murray Bush and the Canadian Farmworkers’ Union, *Zindabad! B.C. farmworkers’ fight for rights* (Surrey, BC: Canadian Farmworkers’ Union, 1995), chapter 9, <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/chap9.htm> (Accessed: 1 March 2018). “Zindabad” roughly translates to “long live.” Bruce McLean, “Berry Pickers mount protest at Langley farm” *The Province* 29 June 1980, pg. A4.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Mike Kramer to BC Fed affiliates, 21 January 1982, SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 4.

<sup>7</sup> James O’Connor in the 1960s suggested that contemporary trade and craft union models were becoming irrelevant and suggested a progressive “community union” that would work to protect workers

racism, and improve the lives of South Asian immigrants to Canada.<sup>8</sup> I argue that the CFU's model of community unionism was unique and suited for their members' needs but complicated the relationship between the CFU and the CLC, and its vision of a labour movement dominated by business unionism. The CFU thought it had entered a cordial relationship with the CLC, while the CLC viewed the CFU as an entity that needed to be controlled and constrained. Becoming a member of the larger Canadian trade union movement had unexpected costs to the CFU's goals and ambitions.

Reformist labour bureaucrats would become central to establishing and maintaining the business unionism apparatus as a defining feature of the CLC and its affiliates. Business unionism, according to historians such as Craig Heron, is a method of unionism that emerged in the late 1890s and is dominated by labour bureaucrats that "featured higher dues, more full-time officials and organizers, greater centralization of power over strike funds and benefit plans, and stricter lines of demarcation around the crafts." The higher dues enabled labour organizations greater resources to expand that in turn meant an increased need for full-time staff to manage these resources. Unions began to hire what Heron identifies as "business agents" to keep tabs on local labour agreements, but soon enough these agents became part of an entrenched labour bureaucracy. Heron notes that these business agents "began to develop a concern with protecting the union organization, its assets, its procedures, and its contractual obligations, as well as their own status and salaries." Crucially, not considered were the concerns and desires of rank-and-file members.<sup>9</sup>

Bureaucracy, simply put, is the rule of others by office holders. This system has three key points relevant to the CLC in the late 1970s. First, and most importantly, bureaucracy takes the decision-making process from the rank-and-file and places it in the hands of the business agents Heron identifies. Second, contrary to democratic principles, decisions are

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inside and outside of the workplace. James O'Connor, "Towards a Theory of Community Unions" *Studies on the Left* 4 no.2 (Spring 1964), 145.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term "South Asian" because it is a broad term that can include people from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India even though my research focusses on primarily India. "Indo-Canadian" is too narrow and does not account for other places where migrants originally may be from.

<sup>9</sup> Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 32.

made quickly by “experts” and not the membership. Finally, labour bureaucracy encourages reformism, or a tendency to work within established structures to “get things done.” Labour bureaucrats lost their revolutionary rabble-rousing present in the membership in favour of capitalist-friendly, reformist dialogue they felt would result in friendlier terms with the boss.<sup>10</sup>

Business agents, as elected officials who make careers in the labour movement, would become an integral part of the CLC’s organizational structure after its inception. The CLC itself was not created until 1956 as a merger between the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), mostly industrial unions, and the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (TLC) comprised of craft unions. The CLC’s mandate is to lobby on behalf of labour at the federal level, the effectiveness of which is rather questionable because labour falls within provincial jurisdiction, provide education programs, and to settle jurisdictional disputes between unions. As with any other labour organization, it is sustained by the dues paid by affiliates, so a withdrawal of affiliates based on an unpopular decision the CLC makes means a loss of revenue. Therefore, the CLC maintains this delicate balancing act by trying to appeal to as many affiliates as possible.<sup>11</sup>

The CLC considers itself the representative body of labour in Canada, and there are no disputes about its size. However, the CLC is exactly that: a weak and compromising body with no real power to compel affiliated unions to abide by congress rules and representative of the unions that choose to affiliate with it. Since its inception in 1956 to the CFU’s decision to affiliate in 1981, the CLC had over twenty-five years of loyalty from some unions through dues and solidarity. It should be understood, then, that the CLC was set up to maintain the status quo that had governed the labour peace since PC 1003 was signed in 1944 and had no interest in giving up comfortable jobs and pensions for a handful unorganized workers. Tellingly, the new BC Fed affiliated with the CLC and joined the state in purging avowedly left unions from the labour movement during

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<sup>10</sup> For an extensive discussion on the development of bureaucracy and its development within the labour movement, see Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Gordon Hak, *The Left in British Columbia: A History of Struggle* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2013), 117-118.

the Cold War,, paving the way for officially endorsing the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1957.<sup>12</sup> In 1961, the CLC and the CCF worked together to create the federal New Democratic Party (NDP), the political arm of labour in Canada.<sup>13</sup> Despite the CLC's involvement in forming this political party, they did not affiliate with the NDP as a whole, instead letting individual unions make that decision.<sup>14</sup> Between the old left unions of the late 1950s and early 1960s that came with the CCL and TLC merger and the New Left unions, which I will discuss below, that organized between the late 1960s and 1970s, the CLC was stuck in a balancing act of compromise between long-time CLC supporters and unions emerging from the increasingly radical New Left.

One feature of the CLC's business union model is its role as mediator in jurisdictional disputes, such as the assigning of a member union to a specific industry. For example, while the Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), a grassroots socialist-feminist union formed in Vancouver, members were striking at Bimini restaurant in November 1977, Local 40 of the Hotel, Restaurant, Culinary Workers, and Bartenders' Union, an affiliate of the BCFED and CLC, applied to the BC Labour Relations Board (LRB) for certification at the restaurant with scabbing employees. After one week of intense pressure and support from the labour movement, Local 40 withdrew the certification application at Bimini but not without warning from federation secretary-treasurer Len Guy that "a union which has enjoyed historic jurisdiction over bartending will continue to fight to maintain that jurisdiction should further inroads be attempted in the future." As Julia Smith notes, "had Local 40 not raided Bimini in the midst of a strike or had the raid not received so much media attention and support from other members of the labour movement, it is unlikely the federation would have taken SORWUC's side." The CFU would encounter similar

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<sup>12</sup> Hak, *The Left*, 118. This was not the first time the BC Fed purged communists from its membership, having done so in 1948. For more on this episode, see Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia labour movement* (Vancouver: BC Labour Heritage Centre Society, 2018), 131-132.

<sup>13</sup> Mickleburgh, *On the Line*, 149.

<sup>14</sup> Hak, *The Left*, 123.

jurisdiction challenges from the CLC in its expansion into Ontario which I explore in chapter two.<sup>15</sup>

The CFU was indeed philosophically different than the CLC. CFU members from the South Asian community desired English language training, help with immigration, and legal services, issues that established labour was not willing to put resources into. To achieve this, the CFU would launch a public relations campaign on many fronts. Boycotts would draw attention to specific farms with poor working conditions, speeches and movies would underscore the primitive living conditions farm workers faced when they lived on the farm, and consistent lobbying would attract the attention of lawmakers in BC's legislature.

These needs and campaigns were distant from the CLC's position on the role of a union. The CLC was committed to "business unionism" that focused primarily on workplace concerns such as wages, benefits, overtime, and pensions within the limits of industrial legality and regulation imposed after WWII. Funds directed to the CFU for organizing workers in BC from the CLC would instead be used by the CFU to try and maintain programs like ESL education, office space to offer immigration help, and maintaining strikes that could last several months. Thus, the CLC was considered "too conservative" by members of the CFU. An internal report from CFU outlined the "political philosophies of the CFU reps are similar to the [CCU] which [was] a cause for concern for BC Fed affiliates."<sup>16</sup> The CCU was a smaller, rival organization to the CLC established in 1969 that aimed to create "a democratic, independent Canadian labour movement free of the influence of American-based international unions."<sup>17</sup> Against the backdrop of increasing nationalism in response to escalating American involvement in Vietnam, the CCU encouraged a strictly Canadian labour movement strengthened by rank and file democracy.<sup>18</sup> While the CCU did not grow to the same size as the CLC, the goals

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<sup>15</sup> Julia Smith, "An 'Entirely Different' Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972-1986" *Labour / le travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 46-49.

<sup>16</sup> CFU Report – Draft #2, 1983", 85. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 18, File 12.

<sup>17</sup> Confederation of Canadian Unions, "Our Proud History." Accessed 28 June 2018: <http://www.ccu-csc.ca/about/>.

<sup>18</sup> Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 134-135.

of the CFU certainly fit more with the progressive agenda of the CCU than the business unionism of the CLC.

The CFU emerged in the aftermath of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. Heron characterizes the New Left as a “new brand of politics ... based on a set of ideas and strategies that put much less faith in electoral politics than in ‘participatory democracy.’”<sup>19</sup> This “participatory democracy” meant public demonstrations, marches, and other forms of what Heron terms as “extraparliamentary confrontation.”<sup>20</sup> Even though demonstrations were not new forms of protest, the issues and concerns of the New Left that were reminiscent of the Industrial Workers of the World from the early twentieth century marked differently than their old left counterparts. While the entrenched labour bureaucracy and capital elites celebrated mass-production and the role of technology in a growing consumerist society, the New Left grew from a counterculture that identified this progress as the origin of society’s woes.<sup>21</sup> The same mass-production that old leftists celebrated as increasing production efficiency was seen by the New Left as the source of environmental degradation. Further, the New Left sought for renewed militancy and radicalism within the labour movement. This counterculture was particularly appealing to young workers and activists who were disenchanted by the bureaucratic ways of the old left.

The New Left manifested in many forms. Indigenous resistance to white settler colonialism manifested in the Red Power movement across Canada and the United States.<sup>22</sup> In BC specifically, one component was the environmental movement that led to

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<sup>19</sup> Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Hak, *The Left*, 137.

<sup>22</sup> For an in depth look at Red Power in Canada during the 1960s, see Bryan Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 367-410. For more recent scholarship in Canada, see Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). In the United States, Red Power also went by the name of the American Indian Movement (AIM). More information about AIM can be found in Kent Blansett, *Journey to Freedom: Richard Oakes, Alcatraz, and the Red Power Movement* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2018). For a short survey on the New Left in the United States, see Van Gosse, *The Movements of the New Left, 1950-1975: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005).

the creation of Greenpeace in Vancouver in 1972.<sup>23</sup> Another was the student movement at SFU during the late 1960s and early 1970s that wanted to bring the university “into the service of the surrounding community.”<sup>24</sup> This student enthusiasm provided the necessary support required to establish the CFU student support committees at SFU and UBC during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, the women’s movement played a prominent role in the New Left movement with the creation of the SFU women’s caucus in 1968.<sup>25</sup> New Left counterculture “emphasized spirituality, peace, freedom, decentralization, local control, coexistence with nature, gender and racial equality, flexible, fluid living arrangements, and harmony,” contrary to the traditional values of the old left.<sup>26</sup>

Within the labour movement, the New Left also demonstrated, through numerous union raids, a distrust with American-based unions. According to Rod Mickleburgh, “raids were plentiful in BC in the 1960s and 1970s, most of them clashes between American-based unions and independent Canadian unions seeking to supplant them.”<sup>27</sup> The main culprits, the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers (CASAW), Independent Canadian Transit Union (ICTU), and CAIMAW ended up being founding unions of the CCU in 1969.<sup>28</sup> This movement targeted American-based internationals based on the New Left’s belief that Canadian locals of international unions were more bureaucratic, less militant, and less radical. In turn, Canadian based unions free from

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<sup>23</sup> Hak, *The Left*, 136-137. Greenpeace was heavily influenced by their American founders. For a Canadian example, please see Pollution Probe that started in Toronto in 1969. <https://www.pollutionprobe.org/about/>.

<sup>24</sup> Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth: 1960s Labour Unrest, Young Workers, and New Leftists in English Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 107. See also Hugh Johnston, *Radical Campus: Making Simon Fraser University* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> The SFU Women’s Caucus (formed 1968), later the Vancouver Women’s Caucus (formed 1969), Working Women’s Workshop (formed 1970), and finally SORWUC (formed 1972) were products of New Left activism at BC universities. The socialist-feminist organization was, like the CFU, disenchanted with the Canadian labour movement and its lack of effort in organizing unorganized workers. Julia Smith, “Organizing the Unorganized: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers’ Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972-1986,” (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007), 19-21.

<sup>26</sup> Hak, *The Left*, 137.

<sup>27</sup> Mickleburgh, *On the Line*, 152.

<sup>28</sup> Mickleburgh, *On the Line*, 153.

American influence, so the logic went, would allow workers to pursue a more progressive agenda, free from labour bureaucracy and right-wing union members.

The CFU then, should be considered a late product of New Left activism. Many CFU organizers would have been exposed to this counterculture in the Lower Mainland, especially those like Harinder Mahil, Charan Gill, and Raj Chouhan who had connections to university campuses and other unions during the 1970s. Focusing on social issues was the cornerstone to the New Left, and community unionism was one method of simultaneously combating racism and labour exploitation in a formal union, issues that were not important to the old left and labour bureaucracy. As made evident in the affiliation debates at the CFU's first national convention, the organizers were distrusting of labour bureaucracies and wanted a more progressive union model.

To date, the CFU is rarely discussed in Canadian labour history except as a first, failed attempt to organize farm workers in BC. The CFU appears as an "honourable mention" in academic work instead of the primary focus of historical study. Even though the CFU has not received much scholarly attention, union officers and organizers left hundreds of critical, self-reflective documents on the union's organizing activities.<sup>29</sup> Officers also published works to help maintain the farm workers' cause.<sup>30</sup> These internal documents and formal publications provide a valuable selection of material to understand the main reasons behind farm worker organizing and the organization itself in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Despite the lack of attention by historians, the CFU exemplifies a central debate within Canadian labour historiography: the perceived conflict between race and class as categories of analysis. Scholars such as Vic Satzewich argue that migrant workers are critical to the growth of Canadian capitalism since 1945, especially in Southern Ontario.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The largest of these documents is titled, "CFU Report – Draft #2, 1983" can be found at the SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 18, File 12. The document is an unpublished account of the history of the CFU's activities, both locally and nationally, from 1978-1983.

<sup>30</sup> See Gurcharn S. Basran, Charan Gill, and Brain D. MacLean, *Farmworkers and Their Children* (Vancouver: Collective Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Vic Satzewich, *Racism and the Incorporation of Foreign Labour: Farm Labour Migration to Canada Since 1945* (Routledge: London and New York, 1991), 2.

Due to the necessity of migrant labour and the state control over the immigration process, the Canadian state could act like a filter for migration and artificially create labour pools based on need.<sup>32</sup> For Satzewich and scholars like him, race is indeed an abstract category that has concrete consequences for migrant workers.

However, historians such as Bryan Palmer, along with more recent scholarship of writers such as David Roediger and Asad Haider, instead argue that race struggles are extensions of class struggles.<sup>33</sup> Palmer contends that workers “have been divided and fragmented by the structures that oppress and exploit them ... which have often privileged local, race, skill, or gender over and against class.”<sup>34</sup> And while Palmer acknowledges that these differences do exist, he notes that historians “should at least occasionally stop and consider the extent to which capital and the state ... saw the working class as a dangerously coherent whole.”<sup>35</sup> This thesis will work along Palmer’s reasoning, suggesting that while racism was indeed one reason behind the CFU’s organizing and one should not discount the impact that it had on the lives of those who experienced systemic racism, to have race overshadow class would merely isolate the struggles further rather than understand their root cause: capital.

Recent scholarship on farm workers and their relation to the state focuses on the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP) that brings in temporary foreign workers (TFWs) from Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean for a few months during harvest

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<sup>32</sup> Mae Ngai advances this argument by suggesting that illegal immigrants in the United States were simultaneously “welcome and unwelcome” members of society; that illegal immigrants are both a necessity to fill a labour pool of undesirable jobs but excluded from society because the state determined they entered illegally. It is important to note that the South Asian immigrants that came to Canada that were part of the CFU were legal immigrants, but they filled undesirable farm labour positions in Canada. Mai Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Roediger clarifies his position stating that his “quarrel has been with activists and labor history scholars whose ‘class first’ claims reduce social divisions so profoundly as to miss both the gravity of race-based inequality and the reality that much social motion responds to that inequality not because of manipulation by ‘middle-class’ activists, but because of a history of struggles and a present shaped by old and new incarnations of white supremacy.” Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, 19-21 and David Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism* (New York: Verso, 2017), 6. See also David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991) and Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* (New York: Verso, 2018).

<sup>34</sup> Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Palmer, *Working Class Experience*, 19.

season.<sup>36</sup> Leigh Binford suggests that a “dual frame of reference” drawn from Robin Cohen’s “exterior” and “interior conditioning” produce farm labourers that are unable to compare their wages in Canada to what they would have earned in Mexico.<sup>37</sup> Since the wages are much higher in Canada compared to Mexico, workers are desperate to please their employers who hold tremendous power over workers’ status in Canada. Further, because programs like SAWP recruit workers from specific countries, these ethnic groups form the majority at their respective workplaces. These programs have become fundamental in providing a temporary labour force that legally cannot enter the immigration process. I will show that this social construction of a community, although in different legal standing than TFWs, united by common immigrant and worker experience, were key to the CFU’s initial organizing.

Historians such as Heather Jensen have also tried to tackle the legal roadblocks that farm workers have faced when organizing. Jensen traces the debates in the provincial legislature around farm workers in British Columbia from 1937 to 1975.<sup>38</sup> While she is focused on the debates about where farm workers fit in the overall legal framework of the provincial labour code, Jensen provides only a couple of paragraphs to the reasons behind the CFU’s decline in the mid-1980s. She suggests that “the introduction of mandatory secret ballot votes for all certification applications in 1984, a series of decertifications, activist burnout, and the Canadian Labour Congress’s discontinuation of funding for the CFU,” all contributed to the decline in organizing.<sup>39</sup> While this assertion is true, Jensen does not go into further detail about any of these reasons and pivots her focus on to more recent attempts by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) to organizing farm workers.

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<sup>36</sup> See Leigh Binford *Tomorrow We’re All Going to the Harvest: Temporary Foreign Worker Programs and Neoliberal Political Economy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013) and Naomi Calnitsky, “Harvest Histories: A Social History of Mexican Farm Workers in Canada since 1974” (PhD diss., Carleton University, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Leigh Binford, “From Fields of Power to Fields of Sweat: the dual process of constructing temporary migrant labour in Mexico and Canada” in *Third World Quarterly* 30 no.3 (March 2009): 505.

<sup>38</sup> Heather Jensen, “A History of Legal Exclusion: Labour Relations Laws and British Columbia’s Agricultural Workers, 1937-1975,” *Labour / Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 67-95.

<sup>39</sup>Jensen, “Legal Exclusion,” 92.

Most published scholarship has granted the CFU barely more than a paragraph in major works, but a few graduate theses have examined the CFU in greater detail.<sup>40</sup> Sidhu Binning, Carol Jhappan, and Tyler Blackman all have approached the CFU as a “social movement” responding to the various forms of exploitation and hazardous work that I will outline in Chapter 1.<sup>41</sup> These three authors differ in their approaches, however. Binning, a sociologist, outlines the CFU’s impact as a social movement and, while critical of the sustainability of the union, suggests that the CFU’s limited success should not overshadow the union as a “rallying point for the larger [issues] than for immediate trade union gains.”<sup>42</sup> Jhappan, a political scientist, understands the CFU in a similar way to Binning, arguing that the “few victories the Union has achieved have been more in the nature of placebos than of fundamental changes in the structure of social and economic relations.”<sup>43</sup> She too, suspects the union’s success to be limited, but unlike Binning she reasons the BC government made changes to the labour code in 1980 to pre-empt “the CFU’s case for further mobilization.”<sup>44</sup> Finally Blackman, a geographer, approaches the CFU’s organizing strategy from a geographic perspective, tracing the union’s organizing strategy as a social movement across a given space.<sup>45</sup>

Even though all three perspectives are important to understanding the CFU as both a trade union and a social movement, they do not cover the response from the Canadian labour movement to the CFU’s organizing strategy, a gap which my thesis will

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<sup>40</sup> Some works, such as Shirley A. Macdonald and Bob Barnetson’s edited volume *Farm Workers in Western Canada: Injustices and Activism* mention the CFU once throughout their entire volume in an interview with Darlene Dunlop, a Farmworkers’ Union of Alberta (FUA) organizer. Shirley A. Macdonald and Bob Barnetson, eds. *Farm Workers in Western Canada: Injustices and Activism* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016), 42.

<sup>41</sup> Sidhu Binning, “The Canadian Farmworkers Union: A Case Study in Social Movements,” (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1982), 4, Carol R. Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation: East Indians and the Rise of the Canadian Farmworkers Union in BC,” (MA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983), 3-4, Tyler A. Blackman, “The Canadian Farmworkers Union: Social Movements and Labour Arrangements,” (BA Hons. Thesis, University of the Fraser Valley, 2016), 12.

<sup>42</sup> Binning “The Canadian Farmworkers Union,” 4.

<sup>43</sup> Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation,” 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation,” 4. These changes “provided coverage for maternity protection, payment of wages and juvenile employment.” Labour contractors were also required to be licensed. Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation,” 33.

<sup>45</sup> Blackman, “The Canadian Farmworkers Union,” 13.

fill. Although institutional racism, legal understandings, and the CFU's dual identity as a social movement and trade union are important to the CFU's story, I wish to move the discussion towards an examination of organizational history because that aspect of the CFU's history has not been explored. That is not to say that the CFU's goals and ambitions were independent from the needs of the ethnic community farm workers came from, because it is clear this community was and continues to be shaped by government policies and institutionalized racism. Rather, I wish to focus on an organizational history because the larger Canadian labour movement, in the face growing neoliberalist policies in the 1980s, had a choice between trying to maintain the labour peace or responding to neoliberalism with innovative new ways to organizing. At the expense of unorganized workers, the labour movement chose to keep their business unionism and in this case study I show what those interactions looked like and how this limited vision of unionism shut down potential alternatives.

Examining the CFU also opens discussion about an alternative form of organizing, community unionism. Community unionism was first described by James O'Connor in his two-part contribution to *Studies on the Left*. O'Connor critiques the traditional trade union models that, according to him, became irrelevant in the 1960s.<sup>46</sup> Using unemployment as an example, O'Connor claims that labour leaders were too focused on the impacts of unemployment in the workplace, namely the loss of jobs, instead of the impacts that unemployment had on the community.<sup>47</sup> Thus, trade unions typically focus on the cause of the problem, jobs, but do little to alleviate the effects, poverty. The solution, according to O'Connor, was to form groups that could fight for workers in the workplace and in the community. "Community unions clearly will be the appropriate mode of working class organization," O'Connor wrote, and these "community unions will not be handicapped by an opportunistic, leaden labor bureaucracy nor by a high degree of social mobility."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The earliest recorded example of community unionism appeared in a *New York Times* article "Community-Minded Unionism" on page 26, 19 May 1962.

<sup>47</sup> O'Connor, "Community Unions," 145.

<sup>48</sup> O'Connor, "Community Unions," 146-147. O'Connor concludes his thoughts on social mobility stating that "the slums, ghettos, and mill towns take on a permanent character in the eyes of working

Saul Alinsky also wrote extensively on the practical implications of community unions but approached community unionism from a different angle than O'Connor. Alinsky argues that the best way to create change is to modify the union structure to create the pre-conditions for radical change.<sup>49</sup> To do so, Alinsky argues, the organizer must be or become an accepted member of the community before organizing can begin.<sup>50</sup> Once a link between community groups and the organizer is established, the common grievances that unite people are identified and action can be taken to resolve these issues, usually by forming a community coalition or union.<sup>51</sup> Alinsky views community members as full of ideas but without a clear strategy to implement desired change. "One of the great problems in the beginning of an organization" Alinsky writes, is that "often, the people do not know what they want."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, it is up to the organizer to provide community members with the tools they need to organize and sustain themselves.

This "rank-and-file vs. organizer driven community union" debate became a popular topic in the early 1990s resulting from a decade-long attack on labour by neoliberal policies in the West. Most commonly discussed by sociologists, community unionism was portrayed as a last-ditch attempt to revive an increasingly distraught and weakened labour movement. Most scholars have progressed towards O'Connor's thought that community unionism should be a rank-and-file driven initiative rather than a model to be determined by an outside organizer. Since the mid-2000s, scholars replace the phrase "community unionism" with "union revitalization."<sup>53</sup>

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people," but does not address this point further. However, some clues can be found in his subsequent contribution to community unions that tries to bridge the gap between what he terms the "residential group" and workers in the community. O'Connor argues that "the residential group is *inherently* bourgeois in orientation" and that this group "necessarily remains cramped, backward-looking, [and] a drag on the development of working class consciousness." O'Connor suggests that by forming a community union, workers and residents alike can and confront capital directly by eliminating the employer's "safety valve" that directs workers attention away from the root causes of their oppression. O'Connor, "Towards a Theory of Community Unions II." *Studies on the Left* 4 no.3 (Summer 1964): 100.

<sup>49</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971), xx.

<sup>50</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 101.

<sup>51</sup> A detailed explanation in this process can be found in the chapter "In the Beginning" in *Rules for Radicals*, 98-125.

<sup>52</sup> Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> For American scholarship, see Dan Clawson's *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2003), Kim Moody's *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International*

The CFU took both grassroots and organizer-driven approaches to organizing and so is a point of entry for historical discussion on the role of community unionism in the larger Canadian labour movement and how organizations with philosophical differences helped or hindered one another. Much like Julia Smith's examination of the Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), an "independent, grassroots, socialist feminist union dedicated to organizing unorganized workers", the CFU organized very differently than the major unions associated with the CLC.<sup>54</sup>

With these aims in mind, I focus on an organizational history because while a worker centered, "bottom-up" approach is valuable when emphasizing working conditions in the fields and the struggles of the rank and file members, rank and file members of the CFU were not privy to information in the countless letters and meetings organized for the liaisons of the CFU and the CLC. These matters were dealt with almost exclusively between the CFU's National Executive and the CLC's liaison committee. Therefore, an organizational history is much more valuable for investigating the CFU-CLC relationship than a "bottom-up" approach.

Using newspapers, internal documents, letters between the CFU and the CLC, the CFU's own educational film *Da Vela = A Time to Rise*, speeches from union officials, interviews, including one I conducted with former CFU president Raj Chouhan (see Appendix 1), my thesis will fill this historiographical gap in Canadian labour history.

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*Economy* (New York: Verso, 1997), Bruce Nissen's "The Effectiveness and Limits of Labor-Community Coalitions: Evidence from South Florida" *Labor Studies Journal* 29 no.1 (Spring 2004): 67-89, Vanessa Tait, *Poor Workers' Unions: Rebuilding labor from below* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2005), Jane McAlevey, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fight for the Labour Movement* (New York: Verso, 2014), or Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For Canadian scholarship, see Cynthia Cranford and Deena Ladd's "Community Unionism: Organising for Fair Employment in Canada" *Just Labour* 3 (Fall 2003): 46-59, Pradeep Kumar and Christopher Schenk, eds. *Paths to Union Renewal: Canadian Experiences* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), or Joseph Rose, "Union Organising and Union Revitalisation in Canada" in Gregor Call, ed. *Union Revitalisation in Advanced Economies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 175-190, or the most studied of the Canadian examples, Sam Gindin, *The Canadian Auto Workers: The Birth and Transformation of a Union* (Toronto: James Lormier & Company, 1995). For Australian scholarship, see Sandra Cockfield, Al Rainnie, Donna Buttigieg, and Marjorie Jerrard "Community Unionism and Union Renewal: Building linkages between Unions and Community in Victoria, Australia" *Labor Studies Journal* 34 no.4 (December 2009): 461-484, and Amanda Tattersall, *Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Smith, "Organizing the Unorganized," 3. See also Smith, "An 'Entirely Different' Kind of Union," 23-65.

Chapter 1 will focus on why the CFU needed to adhere to an alternative form of organizing due to the nature of their workforce and the institutional pressures they faced while organizing. Chapter 2 will then examine the unforeseen consequences that resulted from these choices, including the choice to affiliate with the CLC, when the CFU began to grow beyond the Lower Mainland. By exploring this relationship, I will demonstrate the extent to which the CLC would go to maintain the labour peace and “business unionism” during the rise of neoliberal policies in the 1980s. Further, I will also show that there were unions willing to try different strategies to organize the unorganized and grow the strength of the labour movement. For a brief period, the CFU represented a new model for unionizing but pressure from larger organizations complicated their ambitions. Its experiences are valuable in contextualizing the internal disputes, like that of Unifor and the CLC, in the Canadian labour movement today.

## Chapter 1: The CFU pieces together a union.

The geographic conditions leading to the formation of the FWOC, and later the CFU, are specific to British Columbia. Unlike the vast prairies of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and the developed multi-use farmland of Southern Ontario, British Columbia has only three distinct, and relatively small, areas suitable for any agricultural activity: the Fraser Valley or Lower Mainland, the Okanagan or Interior, and the Peace River region in the north east corner of the province. The Peace River region is mainly suited for ranching while the Okanagan is world famous for its wine and fruit production. The Fraser Valley, on the other hand, specializes in berry production because of its long, frost-free period characteristic of the Lower Mainland's climate. The rest of the province is dominated by mountains and forests that prove too difficult and costly to farm.<sup>55</sup>

With mountains restricting the amount of space available for agriculture, another key difference is the size of farms that operate in BC. Whereas farms east of the Rocky Mountains are generally larger because of the lack of physical barriers, aside from rivers, farms in BC have difficulty expanding due to a shortage of land. The average size of a farm in 1976 in BC was 311 acres, compared to 593 in Manitoba, 817 in Alberta, and 923 in Saskatchewan. This problem is further compounded by Metro Vancouver's constant expansion. Communities such as Surrey, Abbotsford, and Chilliwack, which were once small hamlets with barriers of agricultural land separating urban centres, were by the 1970s becoming part of a continuous urban and suburban development chain. This chain stretches from Stanley Park in Vancouver along the Trans-Canada highway all the way to Chilliwack, a distance of 100 kilometres.<sup>56</sup>

Farming in British Columbia was never an easy task, even with the exploitation of manual labour. Of the 20,012 farms in British Columbia in 1981, sixty-two percent of them were under seventy acres in size, just under half of a quarter section, the size of a 19<sup>th</sup> century homestead found on the prairies. Further, the damp, west coast climate is

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<sup>55</sup> Sadhu Binning, "The Canadian Farmworkers' Union: A Case Study in Social Movements" (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1986), 32.

<sup>56</sup> Binning, "Canadian Farmworkers' Union," 37.

drastically different from the hot, dry Canadian prairies. As such, berries, corn, and potatoes grow much better in the Lower Mainland than do wheat or canola. Farmers need the land to be as profitable as possible, so farmers chose berries as they were more profitable per acre than wheat.<sup>57</sup>

Along with berry farms that dot the Fraser Valley landscape, there were also small-scale greenhouse and nursery operations. These nurseries focus mainly on mushroom farming but unlike berry farms that are seasonal, nurseries operate all year round because they are indoors. This creates two separate labour needs for farmers. First, they need seasonal pickers to work in the berry fields between April and October. Second, they need year-round workers who work in greenhouses and receive a steady annual income. This distinction will become important later when I discuss the dues structure of the CFU.

Field crops such as berries, corn, and potatoes require either expensive mechanized harvesters or cheap labour to pick and process products. Human hands are well suited to picking small bush crops like berries, while machines destroyed about twenty-five percent of the crop they harvested. Those crops that did survive were only good for low cost processed products like canned fruit and jams. Since BC berry farmers were consistently in competition with California mega-growers over prices, manual labour was the preferred option.<sup>58</sup>

Farmers had a significant advantage over other sectors when it came to their labour force. Farm labourers had been excluded from the BC Labour Code, meaning they were not protected under the Minimum Wage Act or subject to any health and safety regulations.<sup>59</sup> In the words of Raj Chouhan, the CFU's first president, "they were not even deemed workers."<sup>60</sup> Under the guise of competition with California, farmers resisted

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<sup>57</sup> BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, *Agricultural Statistics Profile 1984* (Victoria: BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 1985), 95.

<sup>58</sup> Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 57.

<sup>59</sup> To read a more thorough account of the legal exclusion of BC farm workers, read Heather Jensen, "A History of Legal Exclusion: Labour Relations Laws and British Columbia's Agricultural Workers, 1937-1975," *Labour / le travail*, 17 (Spring 2014), 67-95.

<sup>60</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

including workers in the labour code to keep labour costs down. “It’s a free enterprise system” was the tag line for some, and many farmers saw no problem with children out in the field picking with their parents, claiming that “it’s a good job to learn how to work for someone else.”<sup>61</sup>

Farm work was, and still is today, a dangerous occupation. The CFU cited a Canada Safety Council report that stated agricultural work as the third most injury-prone industry, behind mining and forestry.<sup>62</sup> This was not only because of machinery, present even on berry farms for tasks other than picking fruit, but from the indiscriminate use of pesticide and herbicides. In some cases, farmers would spray their crops and within minutes send pickers out to work in the fields.<sup>63</sup> For example, in *Da Vela = A Time to Rise*, one scene shows a CFU organizer walking to the edge of a field calling out to an unprotected farmworker spraying a crop with an unknown pesticide. The conversation between the organizer and farmworker goes as follows:

Organizer: “What are your spraying?”

Farmworker: “I don’t know.”

O: “You don’t know?”

F: “I didn’t ask.”

The scene ends.<sup>64</sup>

A report by Calvin Sandborn from Farmworkers’ Legal Services demonstrated that between 1976 and 1980 there were sixty-four deaths in British Columbia farming alone, not including transportation accidents or “long-term occupational diseases.”<sup>65</sup> If a farm worker was injured or fell ill due to exposure to pesticides or herbicides, which statistics

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<sup>61</sup> Monro, et al. *A Time to Rise*.

<sup>62</sup> Andrea Maitland, “Farmworkers North: picking a fight for minimum wage,” *The Globe and Mail* 22 August 1981, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Andrea Maitland, “Farmworkers North: picking a fight for minimum wage,” *The Globe and Mail* 22 August 1981, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Monro, et al. *A Time to Rise*.

<sup>65</sup> Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation,” 50.

show clearly happened, workers' lack of protection under workers' compensation meant they could not receive benefits for time off due to workplace related accidents.

Workers' compensation was but one absent legal protection. Agricultural workers would not be included in the Labour Code until 1975, and even the act that was passed provided little protection for farm workers.<sup>66</sup> Inclusion in the Labour Code would come only after the provincial Select Standing Committee on Labour and Justice submitted a report the same year supporting the inclusion of agricultural workers for similar protections, such as a minimum wage and access to workers compensation, as other workers in the province.<sup>67</sup> The Committee found that agricultural workers had been excluded from nine separate work-related acts and to include them would be beneficial to farm workers with little impact on employers.<sup>68</sup> However, this did not mean that conditions immediately improved for farm workers. The report merely outlined possibilities for changes to farmworker legislation; it was up to farm workers to organize. Organizing would prove extremely difficult, as Chouhan points out, because the "majority of the workers in the field were from the South Asian community, elderly people, [and] in the summertime there would be young people going to work" before they returned to school in the fall.<sup>69</sup> Those South Asian immigrants who were of working age and arrived in Canada as farm labourers only stayed one or two seasons before moving on to other opportunities, so maintaining a consistent union membership would be a daunting task.

South Asian immigrants became the primary source of farm labour in British Columbia after racist immigration barriers were eased. Immigration had been highly restricted during the first half of the twentieth century through policies such as the Continuous Passage Act of 1908. However, after the Second World War, pressure from South Asian groups to remove restrictions on immigration meant the number of South

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<sup>66</sup> Jensen, "A History of Legal Exclusion," 87.

<sup>67</sup> Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 32.

<sup>68</sup> Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 32.

<sup>69</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

Asians immigrating to Canada grew to 2,148 in 1951, with 1,937 heading to BC.<sup>70</sup> Most of the people who came during the 1950s and early 1960s were relatives of those already in Canada who were able to get sponsorship from said relatives.<sup>71</sup> Sponsorship made immigration much easier for individuals to travel through Canada's reluctant borders.

The nature of immigration also changed when Canada formally removed almost all national and ethnic barriers in 1962 and changed to the point system in 1967.<sup>72</sup> Between 1972 and 1982, there were approximately 85,000 people who migrated from India to Canada, dramatically increasing the size of the South Asian community.<sup>73</sup> South Asian immigrants needed financial and social support to establish themselves in Canada.

The social, ethnic, kin, and community relations would become the main source of assistance for South Asian immigrants. These informal knowledge networks would supply information on what jobs were available, where to find places to live, where local ethnic or religious institutions were, anything that would be required for new immigrants. Some immigrants were able to stay with friends or relatives until they could rent their own space, but finding a paying job was key to becoming independent. Since many immigrants did not have their credentials transfer from India to Canada, many had to take so-called unskilled jobs before becoming recertified.<sup>74</sup> For both men and women, there was a significant reduction in pay after the initial arrival.<sup>75</sup>

Women in particular saw employment restricted when arriving in Canada. However, while many women were able to find employment, these women were not

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<sup>70</sup> Norman Buchignani, et al, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1985), 105.

<sup>71</sup> Buchignani, et al, *Continuous Journey*, 107.

<sup>72</sup> Prospective immigrants score points based on the level of work and education they have. They can gain bonus points based on knowledge of French or English, a spouse's education, age, and any job offers. While this system theoretically eliminates ethnic barriers, it remains that immigrants from Europe have an easier time migrating to Canada than South Asians. Workpermit.com, "Points based immigration systems around the world." <https://workpermit.com/news/points-based-immigration-systems-around-world-20080306>.

<sup>73</sup> Buchignani, et al, *Continuous Journey*, 114-115.

<sup>74</sup> Skill is a socially constructed, highly subjective category because it is difficult to objectively measure. I use "low" and "no" skill as jobs that do not require formal education, professional training, or credentials, but I understand that most jobs labelled as "low" and "no" skilled jobs are often done by women and ethnic minorities.

<sup>75</sup> Buchignani, et al, *Continuous Journey*, 169-171.

provided the same employment opportunities as men because some women did not have any credentials at all. As a result, women ended up in low-paying, “unskilled” work such as domestic labour and agricultural work. Many of these women would end up in the fields that the FWOC and CFU were trying to organize.<sup>76</sup>

These conditions and factors coalesced on BC farms in the mid-1970s and Raj Chouhan, Charan Gill, and Harinder Mahill recognized the need to form the FWOC and CFU. Chouhan immigrated from Punjab, India to BC in 1973 and took a job at a berry picking farm. On his first day, Chouhan objected to a labour contractor yelling at an elderly woman in the field and he was promptly fired on the spot. Since the contractor was also responsible for the transportation of workers between the farms and their homes, Chouhan was also left without a ride home.<sup>77</sup> He noted the deplorable working conditions on the farm that had “no running water, no toilets, no nothing.” After asking one of the workers why this was, he was met with silence. Chouhan recalled that “later on I found out he was the son of the farmer. That didn’t put me in a positive light.” He would find work with another contractor shortly afterwards on a turkey farm collecting eggs but was met with the same result when he raised questions.<sup>78</sup>

Three main issues directly affected farm workers and their ability to resist. First, the contractor system meant a middleman interceded between the farm owner and the workers. The contractor was responsible for transporting, maintaining discipline, and paying the work force. The farmer would not pay the workers directly; the farmer would pay the contractor instead, and in many cases the contractor would retain the money until the end of the season.<sup>79</sup>

Furthermore, in many instances the contractor was also responsible for worker transportation between the field and farm workers’ homes. Since labour contractors were trying to maximize profits, the vehicles they used to transport workers predictably

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<sup>76</sup> Buchignani, et al, *Continuous Journey*, 151.

<sup>77</sup> E.M. Colbert, *The Canadian Farmworkers’ Union: Accomplishments, Strengths, problems and possibilities of an organisation of wage-earning rural workers* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1988), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>79</sup> Monro, et al. *A Time to Rise*.

violated many road safety standards. As Chouhan remembers, his first contractor “came to pick me up in an Econoline van which had no seats in it, there were people sitting on the floor which was quite a shock [laughs] no seat belts, no nothing.”<sup>80</sup> Many workers have been killed during accidents and as recently as 7 March 2007 three farm workers died in a roll-over accident while riding in an overcrowded vehicle.<sup>81</sup>

Second, once workers arrived on the farm, there were unsafe working conditions and health hazards. One tragedy has been told and retold as an oral tradition and in official publications and has become a foundational story of the CFU:

On July 16 1980, little Sukhdeep Madhar lay sleeping in a cow stall converted into sleeping quarters when, unknown to her parents working in the fields close by, she rolled off her cot. The seven-month-old baby drowned in a bucket of drinking water before being discovered. Ruling the tragedy as an accidental death, Dr. Bill Macarthur, Coroner, said that working conditions on the farm were like those found in Nazi concentration camps.<sup>82</sup>

The death of Sukhdeep Madhar is usually followed with the story of four young boys playing by a pond chasing a tire while their parents worked nearby. The youngest jumped into the six-foot deep pond after the tire but struggled to stay afloat. His nine-year old brother jumped in to help but he too could not swim. Their ten-year old friend also tried to save the two boys but also struggled to swim. The story concludes: “the fourth lad, the

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<sup>80</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018. On a personal note, I see these vans pass carrying workers passing my neighbourhood in Surrey, BC on a regular basis in the summertime over forty years after Chouhan’s experience. Most vans are converted Translink, the Metro Vancouver transit authority, community shuttles that appear in “less than optimal” condition and it is not unusual to see one pulled over at a Commercial Vehicle Safety Enforcement (CVSE) inspection stop.

<sup>81</sup> Three women – Sarabjit Kaur Sidhu, Sukhwinder Kaur Punia, and Amarjit Kaur Bal – were killed when their van carrying seventeen people rolled over a median on Highway 1 between Abbotsford and Chilliwack. The driver, Harwinderpal Kaur Gill, was found to not have the proper Class 4 commercial license required for driving and the van was carrying two more people than permitted. Gill was fined \$2,000 and prohibited from driving for one year. “Driver fined \$2,000 in fatal Abbotsford van crash” *CBC News*, 18 December 2008, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/driver-fined-2-000-in-fatal-abbotsford-van-crash-1.704818>.

<sup>82</sup> Gurcharn S. Basran, et al. *Farmworkers and Their Children* (Vancouver: Collective Press, 1995), 1.

only swimmer of the three, tried unsuccessfully to rescue them. All three of them drowned.”<sup>83</sup>

While out in the field, workers found that many farms did not have running water or washroom facilities.<sup>84</sup> Other farms did not have places to sit in the shade on hot days for children who had to attend work with their parents or workers themselves on their breaks.<sup>85</sup> In addition to unsafe working conditions in the field, workers who did not have enough money for housing would live in converted barn stalls on the farm where they worked. These stalls would often have simple hay and straw as flooring with small cots for sleeping. Some did not have running water, heating, or washroom facilities. The FWOC, and later the CFU, wanted to provide proper housing for workers who lived on farms and safe transportation for those who lived away from the fields.

The third issue was the exclusion of farm workers from labour legislation. After the findings of the provincial committee’s report of 1975, the FWOC promoted legislative changes to the provincial labour code that would include farm workers under the Minimum Wage Act, Unemployment Insurance, and give them fair representation at the Workers Compensation Board. Without minimum wage protection, many farmers paid their workers on a piece-rate system instead of an hourly wage. The argument from the farmers was that the piece-work wage was self-motivating and pushed the workers to pick more. They also argued that this system was better because workers did not need to be supervised, meaning farmers could do more “productive work.” Farmers insisted that farming was a “free-market” enterprise and piecework was “in the best interest of all parties.”<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, piecework meant that during peak season workers could earn much higher than the \$3.00 per hour minimum wage, but this was heavily dependent on weather and lasted only for the relatively short time for harvest, three to four weeks at most. During

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<sup>83</sup> Basran, et al. *Farmworkers*, 1.

<sup>84</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>85</sup> The cover photo for Basran, et al.’s *Farmworkers and Their Children* is captioned “Two-year old child asleep in a field shows need for daycare for women farmworkers.” The unnamed child sits under a makeshift tent made of berry flats for shade.

<sup>86</sup> Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation,” 56.

the few months outside of peak season, farm workers could not pick at a rate high enough to equal minimum wage. Also, as Karl Marx points out, piece-work is highly dependent on the labourer's "capacity to work." Since many of the workers were older men and women, or were women combining child care with work in the field, their capacity to work was not as high as stronger young men without dependents. Those men often worked for one season and then moved on to other, higher paying, jobs such as work in sawmills.<sup>87</sup>

Clearly something needed to be done, and traditional trade unions had shown no interest or ability to fight all the issues facing farm workers. After five years of information gathering by Chouhan and Dr. Hari Sharma, a professor of sociology at SFU who was involved with the Indian People's Association of North America (IPANA), the movement towards the CFU began in spring 1978.<sup>88</sup> Chouhan, then with the IWA, Mahill, and Gill had been working with members of the Labour Advocacy and Research Association (LARA) that was funded by the BC Law Foundation,<sup>89</sup> whose mission is to promote understandings of the law,<sup>90</sup> and the Law Union, whose network of lawyers, students, and activists used the law "as a tool for social change."<sup>91</sup> These groups would offer free legal counselling to reclaim unpaid wages for farm workers. At a meeting held by the Farmworkers' Legal Information Service in April 1978, representatives reported that many people present had voted to join a union. Three weeks later, representatives stated in a letter to BC president of the IWA, Gerry Stoney, that "80-90 people – all those that attended – again voted unanimously to join a union."<sup>92</sup> Since many farm workers had

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<sup>87</sup> Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*. Introduced by Ernest Mandel; Translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics. 1990), 692.

<sup>88</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Colbert, *Farmworkers'*, 1.

<sup>90</sup> The Law Foundation of British Columbia, "Mandate, Mission and Strategic Priorities." <http://www.bclawunion.org/using-the-law-as-a-tool-for-social-change/>

Accessed 27 March 2019.

<sup>91</sup> The Law Union of British Columbia, "About the Law Union." <http://www.bclawunion.org/using-the-law-as-a-tool-for-social-change/>

Accessed 27 March 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Farmworkers Legal Information Service to Gerry Stoney, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1978. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 3.

relatives who worked in the IWA, “they decided at this meeting to try and find someone who could tell them more about unions” and Stoney’s name was suggested.<sup>93</sup>

A formal union was not organized right away, but in February 1979 a committee, the Farmworkers’ Organizing Committee, was created. The committee started out very small with thirty volunteers each donating five dollars per month to cover expenses. Ironically, while Gill and Mahill had previous union experience, Gill with the BC Association of Social Workers and Mahill as a full-time official of the IWA, Chouhan had none but would end up becoming the leading figure in the farm worker movement.<sup>94</sup> While it did not have the same legal rights as a union, such as the right to bargain collectively on behalf of workers, it was still an association that intended to reach out to farm workers and improve their lives. They held meetings with the BC Law Union about farm workers labour and immigration rights and more generally to raise awareness about unionization.<sup>95</sup>

Some farm workers were hesitant to join the committee. Gill identified a “colonial mentality” through comments made from farm workers. Since the contractors who provided work to farm workers shared familial and cultural ties with those same workers, some traced back to Punjab, many farm workers did not want to stand up to the contractors. Fears of losing jobs and housing were very real and such losses could put their immigration to Canada in jeopardy. Contractors who came from the same community as the workers could manipulate workers into believing contractors were on the same side as farm workers<sup>96</sup> and because of this, Gill notes that “in spite of our efforts, individual interests [of workers] sometimes invalidated collective interests [of their class]” because some oppressed farm workers were also aspiring contractors.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Letter from Farmworkers Legal Information Service to Gerry Stoney, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1978. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 3.

<sup>94</sup> Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation,” 71.

<sup>95</sup> Charan Gill, “The Birth of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee”, 1980, 9. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 17 File 17.

<sup>96</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Charan Gill, “The Birth of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee”, 1980, 9. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 17 File 17.

Simply getting information to farm workers was difficult. Because many of the workers could not read or write in English, and some were illiterate in their own languages, they were often dependent on information from the farmer and the contractor. Contractors could intentionally mislead, omit certain information, or outright lie to their workers about their legal rights. This delayed organizing efforts. To counter this information block, organizers would try to go to local temples on the weekends, where many workers went to pray. However, the labour contractors also had control over the temple executives so organizers were often refused the right to speak. Frustrated, the FWOC developed a two-part strategy. First, they would have “kitchen meetings” where the FWOC would contact one worker for a meeting in their home, and that worker would contact neighbours and friends, “that way [they would] not [be] afraid to be seen by labour contractor or in the temple or in a public place.” Second, since many families used the temples for social events, the FWOC would ask the family members to invite the FWOC as to circumvent the temple executives because organizers of social events had the “absolute right to invite anyone they want.” These strategies helped the FWOC and CFU reach out to potential members and give valuable information.<sup>98</sup>

Despite the obstacles faced by the FWOC to reach farmworkers and attempts by labour contractors and farmers alike to stop their organizing efforts, the committee was still called upon by farm workers who needed help. The first test for the FWOC was a dispute between Mukhiter Singh and the contractor that he had hired to provide a labour force. On 17 July 1979, workers contacted the FWOC to help set up a picket line after they discovered that Mukhiter was withholding \$100,000 owed for six weeks of labour because Mukhiter was unsatisfied with the pickers’ work. The FWOC immediately sent out “several dozen Committee members” and “joined two hundred workers on the picket lines.” After a tense standoff, Mukhiter offered to pay \$40,000 in wages, but the farm workers did not budge. After roughly two hours of negotiations with Chouhan, Mukhiter paid the workers \$80,000 and the dispute was settled. This was the first major victory for the FWOC.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>99</sup> Jhappan, “Resistance to Exploitation,” 77.

After a year of existing as a committee, Chouhan, Gill, and Mahill harnessed their new confidence and took the final steps to becoming a legal union. On 6 April 1980, the FWOC held a meeting in New Westminster at the Carpenters Hall and officially formed the CFU. The organizing committee “unanimously passed a resolution demanding that the B.C. government immediately enact legislation to protect farm workers.”<sup>100</sup>

As outlined in the CFU’s constitution, the union was versatile and attempted to accomplish multiple objectives. First, the CFU included language that indicated the possibility of expanding the CFU across Canada. Section 4(b) of the constitution states that “application for membership may be made to the National Union or to a Local Union. Membership in a local union is deemed also membership in the National Union.”<sup>101</sup> While the expansion sentiment was not echoed in Section 2 – Objectives, establishing a National Union with a framework for local unions at the very beginning indicates that the CFU did not want to remain isolated in the Lower Mainland.

Second, there were two levels of membership, a “member” and an “associate member.” A “member” was someone who was able to pay five dollars per week of work to a maximum of forty dollars per year whereas an “associate member” was a worker who paid an initiation fee of five dollars plus a flat fee of twenty dollars for the year. According to section 4(h), an associate member has “all rights [of a member] except the right to vote and except the right to hold office subject to exceptions contained within the constitution.”<sup>102</sup> The only other right that associate members did not have was the right to be a delegate at national conventions.<sup>103</sup>

These two dues structures were designed for the two different kinds of workers the CFU would try to organize, seasonal and year-round workers. Year-round workers under contract would be able to afford the member benefits of voting and holding office

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<sup>100</sup> Raj Chouhan “Canadian Farmworkers’ Public Meeting – Speech by CFU President Raj Chouhan” May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1980. SFU Special Collections <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/islandora/object/cfu:4046> (accessed March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018). “Picketing by pickers nets back wages” *The Vancouver Sun* 18 July 1979, B14.

<sup>101</sup> “Canadian Farmworkers’ Union National Constitution 1980 as presented and adopted at the Founding Convention,” 1980. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 15 File 7.

<sup>102</sup> “National Constitution,” 3.

<sup>103</sup> “National Constitution,” 11.

because employment was regular, even if wages were low. However, for seasonal workers an option to be an associate member was an attractive choice if finances permitted paying twenty-five dollars up front for the short growing season. This, of course, was counting on the contractor or farmer paying wages at regular intervals. However, unlike business unions, in the spring of 1980 the “collection of dues was not considered important” to the CFU.<sup>104</sup>

The CFU set out some objectives in its constitution that were very similar to the needs of a traditional trade union. Under Section 2, the CFU outlined seven objectives that the union wanted to pursue: (a) to improve working conditions for workers; (b) to bargain collectively; (c) to defend members from employers; (d) to encourage unionization; (e) to defend the right to strike; (f) to work with other unions in the agricultural industry; and (g), to promote legislation beneficial to members. However, the CFU devoted much of its resources to aims outside the traditional scope of a trade union.<sup>105</sup>

For starters, the CFU opened the Farmworkers Service Centre in New Westminster, BC. The centre was two offices connected by a doorway and was staffed by volunteers. Its main purpose was to be a physical location for “assistance with legal and social problems – immigration, family, etc”, the same services that the FWO and Law Union provided. While the centre was a popular idea among workers, there were logistical problems. Many farm workers, few of whom owned cars, found the location in New Westminster to be inconvenient to get to by bus or by walking. As a result, visitor numbers were low and valuable resources were being spent to keep the centre open. Finally, the report concludes that the centre, “was only in existence for three months as CFU could not afford the double rent (\$275) and let one of the offices go.”<sup>106</sup>

The second community-focused activity the CFU did was the English as a Second Language Crusade that began in October 1981. Many members of the CFU did not read or write English and some were illiterate altogether. The Crusade was to be used “as an

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<sup>104</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 14.

<sup>105</sup> “National Constitution,” 1.

<sup>106</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 19.

organizing tool to give the union access to members and potential members in order to raise their consciousness about the CFU” and to “broaden [their] support network.”<sup>107</sup> This was not raising class-consciousness in a revolutionary sense, but rather educating members on how the union worked and the benefits of being part of the CFU. While the ESL Crusade was attended by a few members, funding had run out by July 1983. The CFU managed to pass over the program to the Deol Agricultural Education Research Society.<sup>108</sup>

As these community projects were under way, the CFU was having some success as a trade union pursuing traditional objectives. Their most successful actions were against farmers and contractors withholding wages. For example, on 12 July 1980, there was a march and rally in Abbotsford on Clearbrook Road against the labour contract system. The CFU reported over 200 demonstrators, some from the CFU, others sympathetic to their cause, who walked along the road beside a farm where workers were picking in an adjacent field.<sup>109</sup> This scene was captured in documentary footage from *A Time to Rise* where protestors were chanting pro-union slogans, in both Punjabi and English, and encouraging the pickers in the field to drop their implements and join the protest. While the protestors are walking by, the workers appeared to be confused and hesitant to join the movement, but after some coaxing a few workers opened the gate and joined the demonstration. A woman worker had a large grin on her face as she joined the protest.<sup>110</sup>

Even though this is a heartwarming scene and an encouraging piece of footage to show farm workers who were undecided about the union, what the film does not show is that the next day, a farm worker who had joined the protest, Dritam Kaur, was fired from

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<sup>107</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 41.

<sup>108</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 45. The Deol Agricultural Education Research Society was set up in 1983 by the CFU in response to the death of nineteen-year-old farm worker Jarnail Singh Deol. Deol died of prolonged pesticide poisoning from the farm he was working on in October 1982 and the following coroner’s inquest ruled his death a “preventable homicide,” blaming it on “ignorance and a lack of government legislation.” The society’s mandate was to push for better health and safety regulations, specifically in relation to pesticide use. Bush, *Zindabad!* chapter 6. <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/chap6.htm>.

<sup>109</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 16.

<sup>110</sup> Monro, et al. *A Time to Rise*.

Sabalay's Farm for her participation. A report summed up the situation on a brief note ending positively with "four CFU reps confront the grower. She is reinstated."<sup>111</sup>

The CFU also had success with larger growers as well. On 18 July 1980, despite the grower's assertion that "if they don't like it, they can quit," Jensen's Mushroom Farms in Langley, BC became the first agricultural work site to be certified by the Labour Relations Board (LRB).<sup>112</sup> This did not mean the workers had a contract, but the LRB ruling meant that the union could negotiate on behalf of the workers. This was a first of its kind in British Columbia labour history. The first contract would come from a different farm, Bell Farms. The owner, Jack Bell, was relatively sympathetic to unions and did not offer any resistance to the workers. That LRB certification would come on 3 September 1980, and the first contract would be ratified on 18 November.<sup>113</sup>

Not all certifications were so straight-forward however. For example, in 1981 at Reid Collins Nurseries, members of the General Farm and Allied Workers' Union (GFAWU), a competitor to the CFU and part of the Communist Party of Canada - Marxist-Leninist (CPC-ML), had signed up workers, misrepresenting itself as the CFU. A disgruntled worker phoned the CFU and complained that the organizer signed them to a union and then disappeared without further contact. Once the deception was realized, workers revoked their membership with the GFAWU and began to campaign with CFU organizers. Those who tore up their membership cards to join the CFU were "physically threatened by the GFAWU." As I will show in the next chapter, this would not be the last time the CFU and CPC-ML crossed paths.<sup>114</sup>

Farmers also used the threat of mechanization to intimidate picketing workers back to work. One farmer, George Drediger, used the threat of mechanization against the CFU when workers were demonstrating on his farm, decreeing "it's the end of the berry business when we're finished... we're just going to mechanize crops and to hell with

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<sup>111</sup> "Draft Report #2," 16.

<sup>112</sup> Monro, et al. *A Time to Rise* and "Draft Report #2," 51.

<sup>113</sup> "Draft Report #2," 60.

<sup>114</sup> "Draft Report #2," 67-68.

them! They won't have jobs next year." Drediger Farms did not mechanize and signed a contract with a labour contractor rather than the certified union.<sup>115</sup>

While getting a certification was the first step, the process to a contract could be extremely drawn out. After nine months of negotiations at Jensen's Farms with little progress, the CFU voted to strike on 14 April 1981. Despite ten workers scabbing and extreme tension on the picket line, the line held strong until September 1981. On the first day of picketing, an altercation between Chouhan and some of Jensen's family members left Chouhan with a cut on his forehead, and each side pointed at the other as the instigator. Nonetheless, a CFU organizer at the picket line, Sandi Roy, describes in a police report that Annie Hall, Jensen's daughter, struck Chouhan in the head with keys, "causing him to bleed profusely." Immediately after, Murray Munroe, Jensen's son-in-law, "and at least three of the passengers of both trucks [that transported Jensen's family to the picket line] exited from the trucks and began running towards Mr. Chouhan and pushed him into a roadside ditch." No legal action was taken by either party.<sup>116</sup>

As the strike wore on, the CFU described "various forms of violence from name calling, to car pounding, to a physical scuffle, to telephone wires being cut, to trucks being chased at high speeds, to an attempt to burn down a trailer while a picketer was sleeping inside." The picket line was formally lifted in September 1981 but formal contract negotiations would not recommence until May 1982. On 30 July 1982, more than a year after the certification, a formal contract was signed.<sup>117</sup>

Maintaining a certification with a stubborn owner was also a difficult task. After the Jensen strike was over and a contract was signed, fourteen strikers returned to work. According to the CFU, the remaining workers evenly split on the issue of the union. In June 1983, the number of people who worked at Jensen's had increased to forty-seven, with a high turnover rate. This meant that many of those who supported the union had left and those who remained were now outnumbered in the workplace. Even more

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<sup>115</sup> Monro, et al. *A Time to Rise*.

<sup>116</sup> Police statement from Sandi Roy, 14 April 1981. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 26 File 7.

<sup>117</sup> "Draft Report #2," 51-52.

troublesome, Jensen began to hire his immediate family members as employees on the farm. These hires intimidated workers who were worried about being identified to the employer as pro-union. When shop stewards were elected, Jean Hall, whose relation to Annie Hall is unclear, was elected for labourers and Rajinder Gill was elected for the pickers. The CFU claimed that “the election of Jean Hall was orchestrated by Tove Nesbitt and Jens Jensen (Jensen’s daughter and brother).”<sup>118</sup>

Clearly, Jensen was determined to break the union by inserting his family members into the union’s structure. Union meetings became difficult places to be and were reported by workers to be dominated by Jensen’s immediate family members. According to the CFU, “at one time Jensen had nine family members working at the farm and on average there were seven.” Workers felt intimidated at meetings because they feared that their concerns would be passed back to Jensen and they could be disciplined or fired. On 1 April 1983, the employees of Jensen’s applied for decertification to the LRB and despite the CFU’s confidence the decertification vote would fail, the results of the 8 July vote was for decertification by a count of 23 to 22. The CFU, understandably disheartened, put some blame on the recent immigrants who were “in awe of ‘authority’ figures” and did not want to appear pro-union to new employers.<sup>119</sup>

During an investigation of Jensen’s Farms by the provincial government’s Ministry of Labour, R. F. Bone from the ministry noted some troubling practices by the employer. First, at the time of the strike, it was estimated that ninety percent of the workforce was South Asian and most supported the union. After the strike, Bone noted that “all employees hired (approx. 17) have been non-East Indian, except for four young ladies, all related to the only two East Indians (Gurmit Kaur and Sukhbir Kaur) employed before the strike who then and still are strongly anti-union.”<sup>120</sup> These hires were Euro-Canadians and Laotians. Since the mushroom farm had different greenhouses, Jensen had the Laotians working in areas away from the pro-union employees and scheduled the pro-

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<sup>118</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 53.

<sup>119</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 53-56.

<sup>120</sup> Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 3 May 1983, 2. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 28 File 6.

union employees to work during union meetings.<sup>121</sup> This tactic allowed the anti-union workers who still attended meetings to elect Jean Hall and Gurmit Kaur, workers who scabbed during the strike, to be the delegates for the CFU National Convention in April 1984. Both delegates were expelled from the convention after this revelation and deemed members “not in good standing” by the delegates.<sup>122</sup> Finally, Jensen attempted to have the CFU barred from any certifications for one calendar year, something that was denied by the LRB.<sup>123</sup>

This battle also had an underlying racist tone. As demonstrated by Jensen’s practices after the strike, Jensen was actively avoiding South Asians. Other anti-union employees also hinted at an ethnic divide. Fred Forman, a white worker hired after the strike, suggested that “if I had a grievance, I don’t think it would work because I’m the wrong colour.” The notion that the CFU was an exclusively South Asian union was an idea that farmers used to discourage membership among newly hired Laotians or whites and to discredit the union among its members.<sup>124</sup>

Jensen Farms was one example of unstable member support. The CFU had trouble from the beginning in maintaining their overall presence. Despite the success that they enjoyed in recovering wages and generating public sympathy for farm workers, financial constraints and the workers they were trying to organize made the union’s existence perpetually precarious. The 1983 CFU report identified that the “year round workers have the potential of forming an organizable base of dues-paying members for the CFU, but only a few sectors have large enough units to make organizing worthwhile.” The year-round workers, like those in Jensen’s mushroom farm, were desirable members because they provided a consistent flow of union dues. Seasonal workers, though larger in number, were in a precarious state of employment because the work season lasted only a few weeks. The CFU recognized this as early as 1983, noting that “despite the large

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<sup>121</sup> Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 3 May 1983, 2-3. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 28 File 6.

<sup>122</sup> Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 3 May 1983, 11. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 28 File 6.

<sup>123</sup> Letter from James Russell to LRB, 10 January 1984, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 28 File 7.

<sup>124</sup> Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 6.

number of seasonal farm workers, 14-15000, the season is only four months long and work on any one farm is only one to three weeks, seriously limiting organizing time.”<sup>125</sup>

The CFU also tried to rapidly expand, attempting to organize in the Okanagan and Ontario in the first two years, and this created other problems. The Ontario expansion, specifically tobacco workers in the Peel Valley near Ottawa, was met with some resistance by the CLC who claimed that the CFU was stepping outside of their organizational jurisdiction. Ultimately, lack of funding from union dues, Ontario’s prohibitive labour code, and resistance from the CLC forced them to abandon the Ontario project.<sup>126</sup> The CFU opened an office in Kelowna in the spring of 1981 but again, due to lack of financial resources, the office was closed in December of that year. However, the CFU managed to establish a more permanent presence in the Okanagan, most likely due to its geographic proximity to the headquarters of the National Executive in the Lower Mainland. It was logistically easier to send an organizer to the Okanagan than it was to Southern Ontario.<sup>127</sup>

But the relationship with the Okanagan chapter of the CFU turned soon from friendly to sour. The CFU report describes the unwillingness of Okanagan farm workers to cooperate with the CFU, suggesting that the organizers there “didnot [*sic*] want to participate in strategy sessions without all farm workers present. [The Okanagan organizers] criticized the style of democracy within the [CFU].”<sup>128</sup> One of the National Executive’s organizers, Judy Cavanaugh, explained that the CFU executive at the National made most of the decisions at meetings and pushed their decisions onto members and other locals.<sup>129</sup> Whether union membership was either lacking in enthusiasm or frustrated at the apparent denial of agency within their own union, the

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<sup>125</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 8-9.

<sup>126</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>127</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 79.

<sup>128</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 79.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Judy Cavanaugh by Sadhu Binning, 1985, Side B. SFU Archives, Hari Sharma Fonds, F251-6-1-0-6-13.

Okanagan Union formally left the CFU in 1982 and renamed themselves the Okanagan Farmworkers Group.<sup>130</sup>

The CFU was also facing difficult legislative changes brought by Bill Bennett's anti-labour Socred government in 1983.<sup>131</sup> Described as a restraint program, some of the bills passed in that legislative session were designed to attack unions and their right to organize.<sup>132</sup> This was done by making certifications harder, decertification easier, and allowing employers to intervene in unionizing efforts. This made an already difficult task for the CFU harder. The legislation led to more decertifications of units organized by the CFU, including the one at Jensen's Farms. Ultimately, support for the Union by its members wavered, and Cavanaugh described the farm workers losing the "visibility of struggle."<sup>133</sup> This visibility was important to maintain public support for the CFU, and without it the struggle out fade from the public consciousness.

In addition to these problems within the union, one central theme underlines each issue: money, or rather, the lack of it, to support the Farmworkers Services Centre, the ESL Crusade, and expanding into other regions. The root of this problem was the dues structure that the executive designed. In the CFU's Plan of Action, the National wished to see the CFU financially self-sufficient by June 1983, three years after the founding convention. They had goals for each category of worker. They aimed for 700 year-round workers paying 1% of their gross monthly income, which the CFU worked out to \$8 per month per worker. This was despite that "most [potential bargaining] units are 10-25 workers," meaning having anywhere between twenty-eight and seventy bargaining units that were paying regular dues.<sup>134</sup> The goal for seasonal farm workers was more modest, with the CFU aiming for 1500 workers paying the flat monthly fee of \$5 per month per

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<sup>130</sup> "Draft Report #2," 79.

<sup>131</sup> The response to this by the left and labour in British Columbia became known as Operation Solidarity led by the Solidarity Coalition. The CFU was a part of this movement, and a detailed collection of Operation Solidarity campaign materials is held in the SFU Special Collections under the CFU Fonds in Boxes 36 and 37.

<sup>132</sup> Gordon Hak, *The Left in British Columbia: A History of Struggle* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2013), 150.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Judy Cavanaugh by Sadhu Binning, Side A.

<sup>134</sup> CFU, "Plan of Action 1981-1983 Draft #1- Update," 1983. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 18 File 12.

worker.<sup>135</sup> However, this revenue stream would not be consistent if the farm worker were only working four months out of the year.

Achieving these goals was much harder. The CFU only had 1200 workers who had signed cards since 1980, but “they donot [*sic*] pay regular dues” and by 1983 that number had plateaued with 1600 members out of a possible 13,000 farm workers in the Fraser Valley alone. The CFU discovered that members did not feel comfortable sending in pre-authorized or post-dated cheques. Volunteers tried to alleviate this with door-to-door collections, and although that saw an increase in paid dues, the CFU considered it too time consuming. Another reason for withheld dues was that the members wanted the CFU to provide a guarantee of jobs, a promise the CFU could not make. Further, families with multiple farm workers in the same household did not want to pay for multiple family members. Since many farm workers were barely scraping by on the wages they were able to receive, having two dues-paying members from the same household was an incredibly tall order.<sup>136</sup> In this desperate situation, the CFU described itself as “holding its own” and developed a three-pronged strategy.<sup>137</sup> The first, labour organizing, clearly had some merit with members and some success in organizing previously unemployed workers. Some contracts had been signed, as demonstrated by Jensen Farms, and those contracts were valiantly maintained by picketing and demonstrations. Even though some locals had been decertified, others kept a strong presence and won major gains, such as wage increases or better working conditions.<sup>138</sup>

The second was community engagement with members of the public, both those involved with and those indifferent to the labour movement. Starting boycott campaigns against products from certain farms was a simple way to gather the attention of the public outside of the traditional labour sphere.<sup>139</sup> Further, the CFU also put together theatre shows and the film *A Time to Rise* to actively engage with the community. The film and

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<sup>135</sup> CFU, “Plan of Action 1981-1983 Draft #1- Update,” 1983, 3. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 18 File 12.

<sup>136</sup> CFU, “Plan of Action 1981-1983 Draft #1- Update,” 1983, 3. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 18 File 12.

<sup>137</sup> CFU, “Plan of Action 1981-1983 Draft #1- Update,” 1983, 8. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 18 File 12.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Judy Cavanaugh by Sadhu Binning, Side A.

<sup>139</sup> “Don’t buy Maggio Carrots!” sticker, SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 15 File 7.

plays were intended to educate farm workers and non-farm workers alike about the struggle and to show that the CFU was having some success in improving labour conditions.<sup>140</sup>

Finally, the CFU actively lobbied for changes in the labour code to improve the working conditions for farm workers. Legislation such as minimum wage, workers compensation, and health and safety regulations previously excluded farm workers. Although the CFU had managed to make some gains in the BC Labour Code, changes included in the Budget Bill passed by the Socred government in July 1983 made organizing more difficult and unions harder to maintain.

In their early years, the Canadian Farmworkers' Union was a union straddling the roles of a traditional trade union and a community union. This is evident when comparing the objectives outlined in Section 2 of the first constitution in combination with the services that the CFU provided in the Farmworkers Centre and the ESL Crusade. While some consider the union unsuccessful in the "traditional trade union" aspects with "numbers and contracts," the CFU's consistent public profile with meeting community groups and labour organizations ensured that the CFU had continuous public support.<sup>141</sup>

Heather Jensen<sup>142</sup> describes the decline of the CFU as a result of "decertifications, activist burnout," and the cutting of monthly funding from the CLC as the main reasons that the CFU was unable to maintain organizing into the 1990s.<sup>143</sup> Even though this statement is partially true, it omits the struggles that the CFU had within its own union. Thus, this chapter demonstrates that the CFU had many obstacles within its own union that needed to be resolved, and fast. The primary problem was the financial situation that the CFU constantly found itself in. Unable to raise enough money, the CFU had to seriously cut back its organizing efforts. This cutting back made it difficult to support the locals they already had. As Jhappan points out, the CFU preferred to take a "go public" approach that was reliant on community and labour support than grassroots

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<sup>140</sup> Monro, et al. *A Time to Rise*.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Judy Cavanaugh by Sadhu Binning, Side B.

<sup>142</sup> Not associated with Jensen's Farms.

<sup>143</sup> Jensen, "A History of Legal Exclusion," 92.

support from inside its own union, forcing the CFU to consistently rely on the CLC and BC Fed for financial support.<sup>144</sup> Finally, community awareness did not translate into contracts and certifications. While the public did support the plight of the farm workers, public support could not be used as a bargaining tool at the negotiating table. These issues seriously hindered the growth of the CFU but counting on the support from the BC Fed and CLC was far from a guarantee of success.

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<sup>144</sup> Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 115.

## Chapter 2: A Clash of Unionisms.

A series of relationships were critical to the development of the farm workers' union. Financially, the FWOC and the CFU would be dependent on the CLC and BC Fed affiliates to keep the union afloat. In terms of leadership and organizing, IWA president Gerry Stoney had been involved with the farm workers since 1978 when his name was put forward as someone who could educate farm workers on the function of a union.<sup>145</sup> As for navigating the legal landscape, LARA and the BC Law Foundation had been providing information to farm workers about labour rights and immigration law, services which would later be given by the CFU at the Farmworkers' Centre described in chapter one.<sup>146</sup> These relationships would be crucial to the growth of the CFU.

Some notable members from the BC labour movement spoke at CFU meetings for moral support. These people included Gerry Stoney and Sid Thompson from the IWA, John Fryer from the BC Government Employees Union (BCGEU), Mike Kramer and Jim Kinnard from the BC Fed, and Bill Smalley from the CLC.<sup>147</sup> The IWA was an important ally, especially during the early years. At one of the FWOC's earliest meetings Stoney even pledged the IWA's "unconditional support."<sup>148</sup> The Carpenter's Hall, operated by the IWA, in New Westminster was used as a meeting place for the CFU since the CFU could not afford a permanent space large enough for national conventions. When determining a union structure, the CFU asked for help from the "IWA for membership dues, the longshoremen for dispatch methods, and CAIMAW [Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers] for procedures for the [LRB] certification hearings."<sup>149</sup>

In addition to moral support from many BC Fed affiliates, the CFU had international support as well. Cesar Chavez, the president of the United Farm Workers (UFW) in California and Florida, made several trips to BC where he spoke at conventions

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<sup>145</sup> Letter from Farmworkers Legal Information Service to Gerry Stoney.

<sup>146</sup> Colbert, *Farmworkers*, 1.

<sup>147</sup> "Draft Report #2," 73.

<sup>148</sup> Gill, "Birth of the Farm Workers," 9.

<sup>149</sup> "Draft Report #2," 81.

expressing his solidarity with the CFU.<sup>150</sup> Chavez also wrote letters of support<sup>151</sup> to the CFU during organizing drives and sent financial support in the form of \$1,000 a month for six months in 1981.<sup>152</sup> The UFW would later have some influence on the CFU and their internal debate on whether to affiliate with the CLC.

The financial support that the CFU received from Canadian unions was equally important. In the summer of 1980, the CFU received \$10,000 from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), as well as smaller amounts from the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and BCGEU. The CLC was hesitant to support the CFU however, and after many informal conversations, the CFU did "not [receive] any formal and concrete reply" about support from the CLC.<sup>153</sup> This changed by the time of the founding convention, when the CLC pledged an initial \$40,000 with an additional \$3,000 a month that the CFU would come to rely upon for every day, union operations such as organizing.<sup>154</sup> The dues structure explored in the last chapter would not be sufficient enough to be the sole revenue source for the CFU, so the initial donations were critical to helping the CFU get off the ground.<sup>155</sup>

The primary relationship that the CFU had was the financial connection with the CLC. The CLC's strong attachment to business unionism, however, made it difficult for the CFU to grow as a union. Though the CFU's style of community unionism, one that fought for immigration rights and farm worker legislation in addition to wages and benefits, was suited to their members' needs, the CLC considered this type of unionism too radical and often used the CFU's precarious financial situation as a bargaining chip to maintain a compliant union. One such instance was the CFU's attempt to expand and organize in Ontario, another province with a significant population of farm workers, that was hampered by the CLC. The CLC did this by withholding money during key

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<sup>150</sup> "Draft Report #2," 73.

<sup>151</sup> Letter from Cesar Chavez to Raj Chouhan, 6 December 1980. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 4.

<sup>152</sup> Letter from Cesar Chavez to Raj Chouhan, 14 October 1981. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 4.

<sup>153</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Dick Larson, 26 February 1980. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

<sup>154</sup> Terry Glavin, "Farm workers form union against 'slavery'" *The Columbian* 7 April 1980, pg. 1.

<sup>155</sup> Colbert, *Farmworkers*, 33.

jurisdictional negotiations and even ignoring the CFU altogether. As the CFU noted in a 1983 internal report, “dealing with just leadership levels of unions, pressure was great [on the CFU] to conform to the BC Fed/CLC standards.”<sup>156</sup>

This chapter will also show that the relationship between the CFU and the CLC was shaky. At some moments, both parties were suspicious of the other’s intentions while at others they were openly hostile. How could an organization such as the CLC be callous towards a group such as the CFU who were organizing previously unorganized workers? At the founding convention of the CFU, there was an appearance of comradery with the CLC through verbal and monetary support but towards the mid-1980s that comradery had withered away. There are three possible explanations as to why the CLC treated the CFU so poorly, which I will explore in this chapter: to outflank other radical groups, resentment over potential embarrassment, or to control the national labour movement.

From the founding convention in April 1980 to the first national convention in April 1981, the CFU was not affiliated with any large labour organization. The CFU’s main goal was building and maintaining public relations, to devise “a climate of need in order to gain financial and political support” from community organizations and other unions.<sup>157</sup> The CFU was publicized to the community through the *India Now* newspaper, popular among South Asians in North America. After one article published by the newspaper was considered too sympathetic to the farmers, Harinder Mahil wrote the editors and complained that “although we must take steps to make *India Now* a mass popular paper ... it doesn’t mean we follow bourgeois papers” like *The Globe and Mail* or *Vancouver Sun*.<sup>158</sup> The image of farm workers’ struggles and highlighting their victories was important for the CFU.

In addition to image, there were discussions at the founding convention about affiliating with the CLC and BC Fed. CLC representative Bill Smalley had been present at the founding meeting of the CFU and optimistic about the future of the union. Despite

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<sup>156</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 86.

<sup>157</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 49.

<sup>158</sup> Letter from Harinder Mahil to *India Now* staff and executive, 19 December 1980. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 4.

no formal talks between the CFU and the CLC, Smalley claimed “we want them to affiliate. There’s no doubt about that.” Chouhan on the other hand was more pragmatic. Perhaps not wanting to appear desperate, he was not willing to comment on his personal position but stated, “the membership will decide.”<sup>159</sup>

The first signs of tension between the CFU and Canadian labour movement came in the First National Convention in April 1981. Most resolutions passed without serious debate or opposition, but a careful discussion occurred over the issue of affiliating with the BC Fed and CLC. From Charan Gill’s handwritten notes that survived the meeting, it is clear the members were divided on whether to affiliate with the CLC or remain independent. Those for affiliation outlined three reasons why the CFU should affiliate with the CLC. One was that the CLC would allow the CFU to “trend towards Canadianism,” which highlights a desire by the CFU to be considered a “Canadian” trade union and not an “ethnic union.” The idea of an ethnic union was used against the CFU as demonstrated by their experience organizing at Jensen’s Farms. Second was that the CLC could “finance very well – has money.” Finally, affiliating with the CLC would mean wide-spread support for one of the CFU’s primary public relation campaigns, boycotts, from other CLC affiliates because the CLC had the “biggest clout.”<sup>160</sup>

Despite the enticing reasons to join the CLC, there were valid arguments to stay independent. Some members reasoned that the CLC “bureaucracy was too large” and was “out of touch with the worker.” Others took issue with the fact that the CLC did not have a strong environmental policy. But the main issue was that because of its size, CFU members saw the CLC as too politically “conservative.” Among those who opposed affiliation was Mahil, who claimed that “American farm workers [the UFW] did not accept money from anybody,” so why should the CFU? Unable to reach a consensus, the CFU resolved to postpone the affiliation vote until the next convention when they had more information about the CLC.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Glavin, “Farmworkers,” 1.

<sup>160</sup> Minutes recorded by Charan Gill during First National Convention, 5. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 15 File 7.

<sup>161</sup> Minutes recorded by Charan Gill during First National Convention, 5. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 15 File 7.

This resolution did not sit well with the members of the labour community. The CFU noted that the “trust with the BC Fed executive was shaken” by the resolution but defended itself saying that the CFU “needed to join from a position of strength” and that members wanted more knowledge about the CLC.<sup>162</sup> Unfortunately, the CFU commented that this mistrust “seriously hampered support from Fed affiliates.”<sup>163</sup> Attempting to alleviate the situation, Chouhan wrote a letter to the president of BC Fed, Jim Kinnard, and reassured him that “the decision of our National Convention to refer this question to the next convention should not be seen to reflect any negativity towards the CLC.”<sup>164</sup> Chouhan explained that the delegates wanted more information and “did not fully understand the implications of joining up with the Canada-wide labour movement.”<sup>165</sup> Eventually, the CFU turned down the CCU – another option that, based on lack of discussion in meeting notes, was not considered seriously – and, most likely for financial reasons, voted to affiliate with the CLC and the BC Fed in September 1981.<sup>166</sup> According to Chouhan, this decision was met with respect from the labour movement.<sup>167</sup>

The CLC may have welcomed the CFU into their fold to outflank other radical groups organizing farm workers in BC at the time, the most notable being the Communist Party of Canada Marxist-Leninist (CPC-ML), led by Hardial Bains. An active political party in the during the 1970s and 1980s, the CPC-ML was an outlier group from mainstream labour and political movements.<sup>168</sup> In the Lower Mainland, organizing done by the CFU was usually mirrored by the CPC-ML. For example, CFU members were also active in the BC Organization to Fight Racism (BCOFR) that held marches and gathered signatures for anti-racist legislation. Simultaneously, the CPC-ML had their own group, the People’s Front Against Racist and Fascist Violence that had forty to fifty members attend rallies. On two occasions, 4 and 17 October 1981, the marches led by the BCOFR

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<sup>162</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 82.

<sup>163</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 82.

<sup>164</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Jim Kinnard, 6 April 1981, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

<sup>165</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Jim Kinnard, 6 April 1981, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11

<sup>166</sup> Letter from Mike Kramer to BC Fed affiliates, 21 January 1982, SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 4.

<sup>167</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>168</sup> This is the same group that tried to sign up workers in the CFU’s name in Chapter 1.

to end racism that were attended by the People's Front ended with physical violence between the two groups that was provoked and started by the CPC-ML.<sup>169</sup> Ujjal Dosanjh, a one-time lawyer for the CFU who would later become British Columbia's 33<sup>rd</sup> Premier and eventually the federal Minister of Health in Paul Martin's Liberal government in 2004, was also attacked in 1985 with a lead pipe by Sikh separatists affiliated with the CPC-ML after speaking out against their violence and extremism.<sup>170</sup>

Should the CPC-ML be considered a serious threat to the CLC? In short, no, for two reasons. First, the CPC-ML had very little political support. In the 1979 BC provincial election, the seven candidates from the Communist Party of Canada and the CPC-ML combined had 1,394 votes, or about 0.10 percent of the total vote.<sup>171</sup> Second, when the CFU was still the FWOC, the CPC-ML formed the Farmworkers Defense Committee that would later become the GFAWU.<sup>172</sup> While the CFU was having relatively minor success, GFAWU had minimal to no success at all. This could be attributed to Bains' leadership style and the described chaotic, violent nature of the party. In his memoirs, Jack Scott recalls violent assaults against party enemies similar to tactics employed during the marches led by the BCOFR, and "they [would] have their criticism sessions" that were "just screaming affairs."<sup>173</sup> In fact, Dr. Hari Sharma, whose archive I used for part of this research, was a former member of the CPC-ML but left sometime in the 1960s. He would later end up helping Chouhan and the CFU organize farm workers in the Lower Mainland in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to Scott, after Sharma left the CPC-ML, he was on Bains' "shit list."<sup>174</sup>

While the CPC-ML should not be considered a serious threat to the CLC, the CFU joining the rival CCU would have been a symbolic loss for the CLC. Clearly, based

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<sup>169</sup> Ian Mulgrew "A Mysterious party keeps the pot boiling" *The Globe and Mail* 28 October 1981, pg. 8.

<sup>170</sup> Kim Bolan, "BC's new cabinet minister welcomed by Indo-Canadians," *The Vancouver Sun* 11 April 1995, pg. B3.

<sup>171</sup> Hak, *The Left*, 146.

<sup>172</sup> Ian Mulgrew "A Mysterious party keeps the pot boiling" *The Globe and Mail* 28 October 1981, pg. 8

<sup>173</sup> Bryan Palmer, ed. *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927-1985* (St. John's: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1988), 220.

<sup>174</sup> Palmer, *A Communist Life*, 218.

on the CFU's 1983 draft report, the CCU was philosophically aligned with the CFU's progressive agenda of community unionism, but, as mentioned before, the lack of discussion of the CCU at the CFU's affiliation debates at their first national convention shows that the CFU did not consider joining the CCU very seriously. However, the CLC would not have been privy to these discussions at the time and a very public admission to the CCU would be viewed as proof that the CLC was a collection of right-wing bureaucrats. It would be better publicity for the CLC to admit the CFU and confront any potential problems later than miss the opportunity altogether.

While Chouhan recalled in 2018 that the relationship between the CLC and CFU was "very supportive" and "very cordial," letters and internal CFU documents show that the tension between the two groups was not resolved and manifested itself in other areas of organizing.<sup>175</sup> The negotiations for affiliation were ongoing at the time the CFU was attempting to expand into Ontario. While the BC Labour Code was amended in 1975 to include farm workers, the Ontario Labour Code still excluded farm workers, and therefore farm worker associations were considered illegal.<sup>176</sup> Despite this legal obstacle, the CFU started an organization drive because the move to Ontario appeared financially promising for the CFU, who estimated that there were "100,000 seasonal farm workers and 50,000 year-round workers" in Ontario.<sup>177</sup> Unionizing even a small percentage of these farm workers would provide a large revenue boost for the CFU based on the dues structure covered in the previous chapter. The Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) sent out an appeal for donations to the new Ontario chapter of the CFU in May 1981 and in total, thirty-nine union locals sent donations during the summer of 1981.<sup>178</sup> Further support came from the Ontario Public Services Employees Union (OPSEU) which loaned office space for the CFU to begin operations.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>176</sup> "Draft Report #2," 98.

<sup>177</sup> "Draft Report #2," 98.

<sup>178</sup> Ontario Federation of Labour memo to affiliates. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 7.

<sup>179</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

But the CLC and BC Fed were hesitant to help with CFU expansion. Despite Chouhan's assertion that it was not his intention to "build an empire of CFU across Canada,"<sup>180</sup> a letter from the BCGEU to Gerry Stoney, recently elected president of the New Westminster District Labour Council, and Maria Melnikoff of the CLC, Jack R. Adams expressed "some cause for concern as it would appear that the farm workers are still placing a great deal of priority on establishing a national organization."<sup>181</sup> The CLC slowed the CFU's movement by claiming that the CFU was organizing outside of its jurisdiction and was conflicting with other unions. The CLC claimed it wanted to make sure that the CFU did not interfere with the five other unions that could also organize agricultural related workers in Ontario.<sup>182</sup>

CFU expansion into Ontario struck a nerve with CLC executives. At the time that the CFU was organizing and receiving support from the OFL and their affiliates, the CLC cut off contact with the CFU. A letter from Chouhan to Smalley in August 1981 outlines that the CFU "had no funds from Congress since April 24, 1981" and that the CFU has "not heard anything from [Smalley's] office since July 15, 1981."<sup>183</sup> On 16 September 1981, a one-page handwritten note describes Smalley entering the CFU's offices irate with Chouhan about not sending the CLC a detailed list of the community support committees. According to the note, Smalley came in accusing the CFU of "stonewalling" the CLC and that the CLC would discontinue funding if the CFU did not send information about their support committees. Chouhan replied to Smalley that "every time we try to talk to Congress, you people treat us as a bunch of kids."<sup>184</sup>

The liaison committee that the CLC set up with the CFU was another example of the CLC's paternalism. The committee in Vancouver was responsible for issuing the

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<sup>180</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

<sup>181</sup> Letter from Jack R. Adams to Maria Melnikoff and Gerry Stoney, 19 November 1981. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 4.

<sup>182</sup> These unions include the Brewery, Flour Cereal, Soft Drink and Distillery Workers, the Bakery, Confectionary, and Tobacco Workers International Union, the Grain Millers, the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union, and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. Letter from Ed Johnston to Raj Chouhan, 27 January 1982, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

<sup>183</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 6 August 1981. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

<sup>184</sup> Handwritten account from Raj Chouhan, 16 September 1981. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

monthly \$3,000 sent from the CLC to the CFU. At a committee meeting on 14 September 1982, the CFU made their position on expansion clear. The CFU claimed to have support committees in Montreal, Toronto, Regina, Simon Fraser University, and the University of British Columbia. Citing this community support, the CFU stated that their union was “not limited to a trade union movement but is also attempting to raise public consciousness.”<sup>185</sup> The CLC felt differently. Under the CLC’s recommendations, the CLC wrote that the CFU “should put all resources into BC, specifically [the] Fraser Valley, to establish [a] base. Support committees give the appearance that [the] CFU is spreading itself too thin [and] could lose support for the union since the lines are not sharp and clear.”<sup>186</sup> The CLC was worried that these support committees made the CFU look “like a political movement.”<sup>187</sup> Clearly, the CLC wanted the CFU to assimilate to a business union model contrary to its existing community union model.

The goals of the CFU should not have been new to the CLC. Even in the first contact with the CLC, Chouhan outlined to Smalley the community aspect of the CFU. “Our task is not easy because the composition of the farm workers is basically ethnic minorities which are subject to racism,” Chouhan wrote. “It is necessary for us to bridge this gap by telling people what the situation is and hopefully through their understanding, the union gains unity and support [and] not the division caused by racism.”<sup>188</sup> Further, Chouhan was quoted as saying that “our objective is to organize all across Canada.”<sup>189</sup>

This correspondence leads to the second possible reason for CLC attitudes towards the CFU – the overall embarrassment that the Canadian labour movement felt when farm workers struggles became publicly known. As Binning suggests, increasing awareness of farm worker struggles during the first years of organizing created an

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<sup>185</sup> Memo from Maria Melnikoff to Bill Smalley, 28 September 1982, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

<sup>186</sup> Memo from Maria Melnikoff to Bill Smalley, 28 September 1982, 2. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

<sup>187</sup> Memo from Maria Melnikoff to Bill Smalley, 28 September 1982, 2. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

<sup>188</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 30 May 1980, 2. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

<sup>189</sup> Author Unknown, “BC farm union faces long, tough battle,” *The Globe and Mail*, 6 October 1981, 3.

atmosphere of sympathy to farm workers. The public awareness “embarrassed the complacent and entrenched bureaucracy of the organized labour movement and shocked the larger community’s conscience, creating a great deal of sympathy for the farm workers’ struggle.” This was done through public rallies, petitions, and boycott campaigns.<sup>190</sup>

Of course, this created a potentially embarrassing situation for the CLC. Seen as the dominant labour body, questions were sure to arise as to why they had not been actively seeking to organize farm workers sooner. Clearly, the structural problems with farm work were evident in the lack of representation and lack of legal protection, but the workers desired to be part of an organized labour body. While the CLC was not explicitly racist, their business unionism primarily served the interests of rank-and-file Euro-Canadians. Community unions focus on issues that are of concern primarily to immigrant communities, such as legal representation and fighting institutionalized racism. These were battles that the CLC was not interested in, instead focusing on the “business unionism” that would dominate the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. However, this embarrassment would have been short lived once the CLC had included the CFU as an affiliate. Also, this reason alone does not adequately explain why the CLC was concerned with university support committees or expanding into Ontario, especially when the CFU was willing to do the work of organizing farm workers the CLC did not appear to be interested in doing.

Towards the end of 1982, the jurisdictional question between the CFU and CLC in Ontario had not been settled and the CFU kept organizing in Ontario with the support of OFL affiliates. Hopes were high for a breakthrough in Ontario but in September 1982, the critical monthly \$3,000 from the CLC was cut again. No reason was provided, although the timing suspiciously coincides with their September 1982 meeting regarding support committees, and it appeared the CLC was outright ignoring the CFU. Chouhan wrote in a letter to the CLC that his “hope was that the [jurisdictional] meeting would take place in October and that a resolution to the situation would be clear. This has not

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<sup>190</sup> Binning, “The Canadian Farmworkers’ Union,” 5.

happened. I havenot [*sic*] been contacted for any such meeting. I have made numerous calls to Brother Bill Smalley and Brother Ed Johnston but was unable to reach them.”<sup>191</sup>

After two weeks without a reply, Chouhan, once again writing to Smalley, took a harsher line. In the letter, Chouhan claims that Smalley insinuated there would be no support for the CFU in BC until it pulled out of Ontario.<sup>192</sup> Chouhan countered that “the sentiment behind the resolution [to organize in Ontario] plus the fact it was endorsed by 21 labour councils and locals is in total contradiction to your statements that ‘none of the affiliates will put any money to support the CFU in Ontario’.”<sup>193</sup> Chouhan then separated the jurisdictional issues with Ontario organizing, writing that “if Ontario organizing is contentious fine. Let’s deal with it in a meeting with other unions involved. But support for organizing in BC should not be halted or used as an organizing weapon.”<sup>194</sup> A swift reply from the CLC determined that the jurisdictional meeting would be held on 20 December 1982.<sup>195</sup>

The jurisdictional meeting between the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCWU and later UFCW), CLC, and CFU was tense. An unknown author transcribed some of the conversations between the representatives of each union. After Chouhan requested more financial assistance from the CLC, CLC representative Ed Johnston suggested that the “CFU has made some contributions [to labour organizing] – not major” ones though. Further, he questioned the CFU’s usefulness, asking if the CFU “couldn’t find a better cause? Farm workers have [a] union and legislation,” some of the original goals of the CFU. Then, referring to the difference between family farms in BC versus agribusiness in Ontario, Johnston concluded that the “CLC cannot finance a fight

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<sup>191</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Dennis McDermott, 16 November 1982. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

<sup>192</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 3 December 1982, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

<sup>193</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 3 December 1982, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

<sup>194</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 3 December 1982, 1. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

<sup>195</sup> Letter from Dennis McDermott to Raj Chouhan, 6 December 1982. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

against multinationals.” After a reply from Chouhan, Johnston made the CLC’s position crystal clear: “If you want support, confine [your] activities to BC.”<sup>196</sup>

It is interesting that the CLC would suggest that fighting multinationals was not in their interest. In 1974, eight years prior to the CFU meeting, Dennis McDermott, then the president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) and later to be the CLC president – coincidentally between 1978 and 1986, the peak years of CFU organizing – supported the nationalization of energy resources that was put forth by liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and the NDP. McDermott and those affiliated with the CLC believed that multinational corporations should not have a hand in the Canadian economy. I speculate that the CLC slowly moved to the political right between 1974 and 1982, hoping to reinforce their business unionism to avoid conflict with Trudeau’s government and maintain the labour movement’s gains. This stance on part of the CLC does cause speculation about what is deemed a “good fight” rather than an “ill-conceived” one.<sup>197</sup>

This leads to the final possible explanation – that the CLC was hoping to control the CFU to maintain the carefully constructed labour peace that had been maintained since 1945. As demonstrated by O’Connor and other scholars on community unionism in the introduction, many leftists felt the labour movement bureaucracy had become stale and out of touch with the worker. The CFU sought a new way to organize a union that had success, albeit limited. This success represented a threat in the eyes of the top-level bureaucrats to the stability of the labour peace, especially if organizers in the CFU like Judy Cavanaugh considered themselves Marxist in nature. Further, if a new model to organize like the CFU’s meant the undermining of CLC authority, the CLC would lose its relevance in the Canadian labour movement.

After the CFU’s 1982 meeting with the CLC, organizing in Ontario came to a formal end on 30 June 1983.<sup>198</sup> Why would the CLC want to confine the CFU to British

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<sup>196</sup> Author unknown, “Ontario jurisdictional meeting between CFU and CLC,” 20 December 1982. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 25 File 4.

<sup>197</sup> Christo Aivalis, *The Constant Liberal: Pierre Trudeau, Organized Labour, and the Canadian Social Democratic Left* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018), 101-104.

<sup>198</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Dennis McDermott, 27 April 1983. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 25 File 1.

Columbia? The financial woes were no secret to the CLC. In April 1982, Chouhan wrote to the CLC describing the CFU as in “a desperate financial situation” and that “it is clear to all of us that we will need the financial backing of the trade union movement for quite a while.”<sup>199</sup> This reliance on the CLC for funding was a key bargaining chip in favour of the CLC. The withholding of funding coinciding with debates over jurisdiction appears more than coincidental. The CFU identified the underlying source of this tension and the power of the CLC in an internal report that stated the “CFU naively underestimated the politics of the trade union movement. That is the CFU reps are strongly pro-Canadian, have a distaste for business unionism and for ‘bureaucrats,’ supported CCU and were not involved with the NDP.”<sup>200</sup>

After one year confined to BC and subjected to the vicious attacks of the Socred government, the CFU was on the brink of folding in 1984. A merger between the CFU and another union within the CLC was the CFU’s best chance of survival. In a plea to the CLC, Chouhan wrote that the CFU was “at a crossroads, [with] a need to maintain our presence and gains but to also move in new directions of organizing. We need the moral and financial support of a larger union in order to tackle the agricultural industry head on.” Since the CFU was forced to stay in the Lower Mainland and was strongly discouraged from public awareness campaigns, they needed to find another way to move onto the national stage, as the dream of the CFU going national as outlined in the constitution was not forgotten by the executive.<sup>201</sup>

Here too however, the CLC dragged its feet. In early 1985 the CLC made overtures to the UFCWU but to no avail.<sup>202</sup> Chouhan made an appeal to UFCWU himself trying to convince International Vice-President Frank Ben that the CFU could come up with incentives “such as starting some kind of group insurance plan” to get members to

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<sup>199</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 9 April 1982. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 13 File 11.

<sup>200</sup> “Draft Report #2,” 86.

<sup>201</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Len Ruel, 24 September 1984. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 3 File 4.

<sup>202</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Dennis McDermott, 5 March 1985, SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 14 File 4.

pay dues on time.<sup>203</sup> Despite claims that a merger was in the works since 1984, a formal meeting on a merger did not take place until 30 April 1986. The reluctance of the CLC was all too clear as described by the new CFU president, Sarwan Boal:

Present at this meeting were Brothers Ed Johnson [*sic*], Len Ruel, Vern Daryl, Lief Hansen, Pritam S. Mikker, and myself. We discussed the proposal CFU had submitted and they indicated some reluctance to make an immediate decision in favour of the merger, because of “structural problems.” It was then decided to defer their decision until they had conferred privately amongst themselves, after which they would get back to us. They didn’t but later advised Ed Johnson, who passed their decision on to us, that it would be impossible for the UFCWU to consider a merger with us at this time because of the aforementioned “structural problems.” Apparently their decision has nothing to do with financial considerations, but for some other reason which have little to do with our suitability.<sup>204</sup>

The nature of these “structural problems” was never revealed to the CFU.

In 1991 the CLC finally decided to cut its funding to the CFU. In a final plea to then CLC president Shirley Carr, Charan Gill reiterated the small legal victories that the CFU had won and a promise made by the NDP BC Minister of Labour Moe Sahota to eliminate Bill 19, the law that made it easier for farmers to crush unionizing efforts.<sup>205</sup> Further, Gill touted the CFU’s public relations campaign that raised awareness on the use of pesticides to the Federal Pesticide Registration Review Team.<sup>206</sup> Finally, Gill repeated that the CFU was aiming to be financially self-sufficient within two years and would no longer need the funding from the CLC. He closed with, “don’t give up a chance to see the efforts of so many people finally come to fruition.”<sup>207</sup> What Gill did not provide evidence for were the number of contracts and unionized workers the CFU had, and instead

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<sup>203</sup> Letter from Raj Chouhan to Frank Ben, 12 June 1985. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 14 File 4.

<sup>204</sup> Letter from Sarwan Boal to Shirley Carr, 13 May 1986. SFU Special Collections, CFU Fonds, Box 14 File 5.

<sup>205</sup> Letter from Charan Gill to Shirley Carr, 6 December 1991. SFU Special Collections, CFU Digital Fonds, CRA0065-001. Accessed 2 July 2018: <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/cfu-996/cra0065-001>.

<sup>206</sup> Letter from Charan Gill to Shirley Carr, 6 December 1991. SFU Special Collections, CFU Digital Fonds, CRA0065-002. Accessed 2 July 2018: <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/cfu-997/cra0065-002>.

<sup>207</sup> Letter from Charan Gill to Shirley Carr, 6 December 1991. SFU Special Collections, CFU Digital Fonds, CRA0065-002. Accessed 2 July 2018: <http://digital.lib.sfu.ca/cfu-997/cra0065-002>.

provided romantic promises with no plan of action on how to reach financial independence from the CLC. There is no evidence of a reply from the CLC.

This chapter has explored three possible reasons why the CLC would may have treated the CFU the way it did from 1980 to the early 1990s. First, the CLC may have been using the CFU to outflank other radical groups in the Lower Mainland. Conflict between the CFU and the CPC-ML in organizing and at demonstrations was out in the open. However, it seems unlikely that the CLC would invest many resources into the CFU to “beat” the CPC-ML in organizing farm workers, especially when the CPC-ML was weak both politically and as an organization. The larger concern for the CLC would have been the CFU joining the CCU which, according to CFU documents, was not considered very seriously.

Second, there may have been potential embarrassment on the part of the CLC when the public became aware of the CFU and unorganized farm workers. Here was the biggest labour body in Canada, and with its vast resources the organization had not bothered to try and organize farm workers? It is important to remember that the CLC was operating under a business unionism model, one that did not work for farm workers. The CFU had to come up with its own style of unionism in order to serve their members’ needs effectively. Perhaps this was embarrassing for the CLC but welcoming the CFU as a CLC affiliate would have been an easy way to rectify the situation and silence the critics. This also does not explain the continued animosity from Smalley and others.

Finally, the CLC could have welcomed the CFU as an affiliate in order to maintain the labour peace with the federal government. If the CFU’s model of unionism became successful, pressure on the CLC to change would increase, and the executive could lose control of their affiliates. However, considering the small size of the CFU and the continued financial precarity they were in, investing thousands of dollars over many years to keep a few hundred workers “in line” would have been overkill on behalf of the CLC, especially when union resources were under attack by neoliberal friendly governments.

While each of these arguments have some level of credence, I suggest that it was a combination the latter two that contributed to this tense relationship. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the members of the CFU were more sympathetic to the CCU's rank-and-file unionism than the vastly bureaucratic business unionism of the CLC. By offering enough funding to keep the CFU reliant on the CLC, the CLC was able to control the CFU and pry them away from and outflank the more radical CCU. Further, the CLC, fueled by embarrassment, could maintain an image that they were the face of labour in Canada and erase any questions raised by the CFU's public relations campaign. Even though the CFU clearly needed the financial support to maintain their activities, this choice to affiliate with the CLC proved ultimately to hinder the CFU's nationwide goals.

## Conclusion.

The historical record is unclear, but sometime in the early 1990s the CFU became affiliated with UFCW Local 1518, ending a period of administrative autonomy for the CFU.<sup>208</sup> After the mid-1980s however, many of the organizers and associates who were involved in the CFU moved on to other pursuits. Chouhan moved on to work for the Hospital Employee's Union and in 2005 was elected to the Legislative Assembly in British Columbia.<sup>209</sup> Gill formed the Progressive Intercultural Community Services in Surrey, BC in 1987 where he still works to improve the lives of farm workers.<sup>210</sup> Today, the CFU's offices occupy an industrial complex in the Newton neighborhood of Surrey, still the geographic centre of the South Asian community in the Lower Mainland.

Despite the CFU's reduced role, the union and the people within it still had a lasting impression on the labour movement. Chouhan would continue his crusade for farm workers even after he left the CFU in 1986, where he would advise numerous legislative committees that pushed for change to the Employment Standard's Act to improve the health and safety for farm workers. His work would help create the Farm and Ranch Safety and Health Association (FARSHA, later AGSAFE) which is the equivalent to WorkSafeBC, but specifically designed for agricultural workers. Tellingly, when the BC Liberals – a right wing party comprised of the former BC Conservatives, Socreds, and Liberals – came into power in 2001, the new government rolled back the protections for all workers but left the health and safety regulations untouched.<sup>211</sup>

The CFU's experience as a community union provides a previously unexplored case study into community unions and a unique example of how the larger Canadian

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<sup>208</sup> <http://bcfed.ca/unions/cfu>.

<sup>209</sup> At the time of this writing, Chouhan is still a serving member for the riding of Burnaby-Edmonds and deputy speaker in BC's legislature.

<sup>210</sup> <http://canadianimmigrant.ca/canadas-top-25-immigrants/canadas-top-25-immigrants-2010/charan-gill>.

<sup>211</sup> Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018. Tellingly, Dennis McDermott, president of the CLC during the period of CFU organizing between 1978 and 1986, was appointed by conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney to be Canada's ambassador to Ireland.

labour movement handled a union practicing outside the model of business unionism. The CFU not only fought for better wages and working conditions in the fields, but for farm workers to enjoy the same fundamental health and safety regulations as workers in other industries, legislative changes in the labour code, and an end to systemic racism. These aims had mixed results. While the CFU was able to organize some farms and create a space for people to come for help with immigration and English language training, these services were reliant almost exclusively on dues paid by members and donations from other labour unions. Therefore, when the funding was either absent, on hold, or cut altogether, the CFU had to consolidate their position within the community by ending some programs.

Clearly, community unionism is not an all-encompassing term that can be applied evenly in all situations. Even in its infancy, theorists such as O'Connor and Alinsky had different visions on the role of membership and bureaucracy. For O'Connor, community unionism was driven from the membership that was considered outside of standard industrial or craft unions. These unorganized areas were left behind by the broader labour movement. For Alinsky, community unionism required a top-down approach led by the organizer who became accepted into the community. In some instances however, this process could be patronizing, decision making was left to union officers, or in the case of the CFU, the National Executive.

The CFU took a hybrid approach in forming their unique community union. On the one hand, the union maintained popular support in their first years of organizing. Pushes for unionization from members of the FWOC accelerated the process and opened the doors for assistance from members of the BC labour community. Further, support accumulated in the public through boycotts and theatre productions put on by the CFU. However, there are few records that indicate active participation on behalf of union members. The members themselves supported the union by marching on picket lines and enforcing boycotts, not by grassroots participation aside from some as elected delegates to annual conventions. In the example of the CFU's failed attempt to organize in the Okanagan, the Okanagan Farmworkers Group were tired of the CFU's top-down approach to organizing. The CFU's union model should be viewed in transition in that

their organization was initially based on community unionism, but eventually centralized decision making to a National Executive that handled liaison committees between themselves and other labour groups, such as the CLC.

The CFU's community unionism also created tension with the CLC. The CLC and BC Fed stuck by a form of business unionism that sought to win better pay and benefits for already unionized workers instead of resolving other problems faced by immigrant labourers and newcomers. Taking advantage of the CFU's perpetual need for financial assistance, the CLC was able to coerce the CFU into organizing strictly in BC and to conform to CLC standards, despite massive support from the OFL affiliates.<sup>212</sup> It is difficult to determine a single motive on the part of the CLC, but this move to back the CFU was probably in response to the CPC-ML's Farmworkers Defense Committee and to prevent the CFU from affiliating with the CCU, which was more philosophically aligned with the CFU than was the CLC.

While the CFU has been explored through various graduate theses, and to a lesser extent in other published academic articles, the focus has primarily been on the CFU as a social movement. This thesis argued that based on the material conditions and the needs of farm workers, the CFU needed to organize a community union to accomplish the union's goals. Factors such as labour contractors, lack of legislative recognition, non-existent health and safety regulations, and systemic racism all pushed organizers like Raj Chouhan, Charan Gill, and Harinder Mahill to create the CFU and combat these oppressive factors.

Second, this thesis demonstrates that the CLC and larger Canadian labour movement was unwilling to accommodate a community union like the CFU. Numerous moments of cut funding and coercion on the part of Bill Smalley and the CLC to

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<sup>212</sup> Ironically, almost twenty years after the CLC forced the CFU to cease organizing in Ontario, in 2001 the CLC partnered up with UFCWA and UFCW to begin the Global Justice Care Van project. This initiative gathered information on migrant agricultural working living and working conditions, the same strategy adopted by the FWOC in the late 1970s in BC and later by the CFU as they tried to organize in Ontario from 1980-1982. The CLC partnership even opened a "Migrant Agricultural Workers Support Centre where workers can come for information on health and safety," labour mediation, and other services. Cranford and Ladd "Community Unionism," 48.

assimilate the CFU reveal the CLC's commitment to business unionism. Unions like the CFU show that the business union model does not work for all workers and a more innovative response is needed to fight neoliberal policies. However, the CLC has the financial resources to stay the course, making it difficult for grassroots organizations to survive without CLC support.

The CFU emerged at a time when unorganized and oppressed groups were struggling to find representation within the larger Canadian labour movement. Unions like the CFU and SORWUC in the Lower Mainland provided unorganized groups the opportunity to enter the labour movement under their own terms, forming unions that did not conform to the business unionism that dominated the labour landscape. While these unions did not remain active or autonomous after the end of the 1980s, the CFU's legacy in trying to organize the unorganized and adapt to the relentless pressure of the neoliberal agenda stands as a testament to the creativity and ingenuity of grassroots organizations. As neoliberalism continues to attack unions and workers' rights today, historians and labour organizers alike can turn to unions like the CFU and SORWUC as inspiration for new ways to organize.

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## Appendix A.

### Interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018

Nick Fast: Thank you so much for sitting down with me. It's the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November at 1pm, sitting with Raj Chouhan..?

Raj Chouhan: Chouhan.

NF: Mr. Raj Chouhan. So just to get started, how did you get involved with farmworkers, the Farmworkers Organizing Committee, and the CFU?

RC: Ok it's a long story, I'll try to be brief. I came to Canada, I was quite young, in 1973. I come from a farming family. So I was going to go to school here and do my Masters or whatever I could do, and while I was waiting for the school I found out there was... how the workers were taken to field, so I just wanted to see what was going on. So I went with ... I called one labour contractor, he came to pick me up in an Econoline van which had no seats in it, there were people sitting on the floor which was quite a shock [laughs] no seat belts, no nothing. And we went to farm and found out there was no running water, no toilets, no nothing; conditions were horrible. And so, there were people working so I asked one guy "what happened?" and he didn't say anything then later on I found out he was the son of the farmer. That didn't put me in a very positive light. Then I was working at a turkey farm. We were collecting eggs, and then I asked the same question to another guy standing there, it was really horrible, and *he* was son of farmer so I got fired. That really caused me to learn more about it. As a result, when I found out there was no union, no nothing, nothing was available.

So then I talked to some of my friends and people knew that workers in the fields were treated very badly, there was no protection under Employment Standards Act, Workers Compensation Act, Labour Code, nothing applied to farmworkers. They were not even deemed workers. So while we were talking, then there was a friend of mine, he

was a professor at SFU, Dr. Hari Sharma, he was quite actively involved in an organization called Indian People's Association in North America, IPANA we used to call it. So I got involved talking about workers rights and all of that sort of thing. So collectively we thought we should do something about it. But, more I tried to find out, the more we learned that was no union effort, there was no nothing for these workers, basically majority of the workers working in the field were from the South Asian community, elderly people, in the summertime there would be young people going to work. But again, then over the time I found out the union in California, United Farmworkers of America. The idea was that if they could organize there to protect, why can't we do it here for our people working in the fields? So that, really, entrusted me to going more deeply.

So we kept working on it, kept working but nothing was moving. People were so afraid, people were so fearful to talk because of the intimidation of the labour contractors. Most of the workers in the Lower Mainland and the Fraser Valley were working through a labour contractor who also came from the same community, most of them. So they knew how to manipulate these workers. While this was going on, we kept talking to people but it didn't work out. It took basically, five years before we were able to get twenty people in a meeting, in September 1978. When they came, we thought "wow, that was quite a breakthrough and we can do more." Until then we were able to get a lot more support and understanding from the labour unions. Especially the IWA, the International Woodworkers of America, they were very supportive. So were other unions like BCGEU, BC Government Employees Union, CUPE and many, many other unions, so we said "Okay, let's push for more." So after about six more months of very intense work that we were able to bring a group of people together who were willing to participate and were willing to devote more time to organize farmworkers. In March of 1979 we organized the Farmworkers Organizing Committee, the FWOC. I was the founding president when we started it and many other people came and joined us. As a result of the first organization we were able to go to the fields more often. More people learned about that in the media that it was set up so we had rallies, we had meetings, almost every month we had a big rally or a meeting somewhere in the Fraser Valley or Lower Mainland in Surrey or Vancouver. Within one year, FWOC signed up more than 2000 farm workers...

NF: Wow!

RC: To join. It wasn't easy. However, the other barrier we had because many of the farmworkers were going to the local Sikh temples on the weekends for prayers and all that, and we had no access to that. Sikh temple executives were mainly controlled by labour contractors, so they would not let us speak there. We were struggling and we were frustrated, "what should we do?" We came up with an idea, rather than simply waiting for us to have access to workers through contractors in the temples we came up with an idea to have kitchen meetings, it was another organizing tool. We will ask one worker that we will come and meet with... just call your friends or your neighbours whoever you can, that way will not afraid to be seen by labour contractor or in the temple or in a public place. That helped us a lot to reach out to more people. And then, also, we thought okay, instead of asking the local temple executive to have access to temples, we would reach out to the families who may have had an event at the temple, the family's doing it, they have absolute right to invite anyone they want, so *they* invited us, so I would go and speak there. That's how we expanded our universe to go meet with people. And those were the basic tools you would not see in a traditional union organizing way to do it, because organizing farm workers is not just traditional union organizing, it was a social movement. It was not recognized by the labour code and employment standards we had to go beyond the concept of traditional organizing. So that ... in the meantime we were getting lots of media coverage, because people thought ... people were familiar with what happened in California you know, they were familiar with the grape boycotts and all sort of stuff and the struggle of farmworkers led by Cesar Chavez, so they thought okay, something is happening here in British Columbia. So we would get quite a bit of prominence by doing this.

At the same time, rather than concentrating on working with farm workers we thought we would need broad based support from the community. All kind of community people, faith groups, labour organizations, NGO's, you name it, and students. So I travelled to basically every single university in Canada. I was invited by students there, we had student support committees for farm workers. Many of those students at student clubs at the universities organized events themselves to support us. So that helped us *a lot*

by doing that. And also reached out to religious groups, United Church, Catholics, you know everybody.

And then at the same time, because we were not affiliated with anybody and we were getting close to the point where we would need to formalize structure of the union after having Farmworkers Organizing Committee for many months. And we were approached by the CLC [Canadian Labour Congress] because CLC is the largest labour organization in Canada with 95% of the organizations affiliated with them. And then we had also had a group of Canadian Unions, I forgot their full name, locally they were CAIMAW, Canadian Association of ... anyway, mining workers here. There was a rift, or there was a difference, between the CLC and so-called Canadian unions, they wanted to have Canadian presence, because people thought international control of unions was no good. We were meeting with both. And then after the union [CFU] was formed on April 10 1980, we formed the Canadian Farmworkers Union and we had to think about affiliating, who should we affiliate with? So we were approached by both groups and we had to make a decision. Here's a group of very progressive Canadian workers who wanted to be in the forefront to highlight the struggle of farmworkers. On the other hand there's a hugely large organization which most of the unions are affiliated with. They also wanted us to be affiliated with them so they could support farmworkers. But we had to make a decision, what's the best for our cause? And we then met with the Canadian unions and I told them that we very much appreciated their support but we are going with the CLC because of the reasons of, getting wider support from the labour movement and on-going support. We had no funding or finance base we were going to go and ask everyone to give us some money to help us, because farmworkers were not in a position to pay union dues like other union members do. And to their credit, the Canadian unions, that group, they understood, they appreciated, that's fine, that we went to CLC. So there was no problem in going that [route].

So after we had quite a bit of success here in British Columbia, we were not only organizing here in the Fraser Valley we were also organizing in Okanagan Valley, people coming as seasonal workers from Quebec picking fruits. Once we established, naturally the next step was people from other provinces approached us, if we could do the same

thing in Ontario and Manitoba, everywhere else. We said okay and did some research, and we found out in Ontario that there were tobacco workers in the Peel area near Ottawa Valley that we could go do something there. That's when, you might have seen in the records, that some unions, not very many, one or two unions thought that it was one big organization coming to Ontario organizing and taking away potential members. We had an initial discussion, then they realized that it wasn't a threat to anybody. We were basically trying to raise awareness and to help farmworkers in Ontario. So, you know, after one or two meetings it worked out fine. We got full support from Ontario Government Employees Union, CUPE there, from UFCW, Steelworkers, everybody as very supportive. Our main focus was here in the Lower Mainland to make sure that not only workers get better working conditions but that they were also covered under the law. So we were pushing the Socred government at that time who were in power to make those amendments to the labour laws. To protect and cover the farmworkers. So that's a nutshell of what happened.

NF: That is a very large nutshell. So you would then consider, you sort have alluded to this already, but that idea that there was national support from various student groups, from individual [union] locals. So you decided to go with the CLC because it was a large organization, was that an accepted decision within the CFU to go with a larger union?

RC: Yes. There was no opposition because we were a very close, tightly knit group of friends who were trying to do this. It was unanimous decision that that was the direction we wanted to take and we did that.

NF: When you went to Ontario, you talked a little bit about some worries from other unions that you might be impeding on jurisdictional grounds. Do you remember who was involved in that, if the CLC was involved in that or..?

RC: No, CLC knew, the leadership in CLC knew what we wanted to do in that area and they were very supportive. As a matter of fact, the Ontario Public Service Employee Union, OPSEU, which is the largest public sector union there in Ontario, they gave us office space in their own building, and helped us to hire a couple of people on part time basis who would be acting as local organizers. As I said, there are some people who had

some concerns and comments, they thought we should stay in British Columbia, there was no need for us to go to Ontario, they will take care of it. When we sat down and explained what was going on until then and nobody did anything, these are the workers who need representation and once they get organized and are a part of CLC anyway, they can go with any other organization they wanted to do. It wasn't that we wanted to build an empire of CFU across Canada, that was not our desire to do that, it was not our intention. However, it took some explaining and convincing and once that happened then there was no problem.

NF: Did you have success in Ontario in terms of organizing?

RC: Uhh, not much. We had some. We were able to reach out to those tobacco workers and work with them quite a bit. However, we were not able to achieve any certification. So under the limited labour code we didn't do it. But we kept our presence there, we worked with them for over two years I would say that we were there. That helped other unions to learn about farmworkers. Especially UFCW who did quite a bit of work after that to help those workers in the fields.

NF: When you finished after two years, was that due to financial reasons or were you not getting those certifications?

RC: We were a small organization. We were stretching too thin. We could not sustain it for that long. We needed to concentrate and focus here in British Columbia so that's why we decided to pull out of there.

NF: Could you describe your relationship with the CLC? I imagine that you were probably, as you were looking in different areas to help bring farmworkers into this big umbrella, that you probably worked with them a lot. Would you be able to describe what that relationship was like?

RC: It was, without any doubt, very supportive, very cordial relationship, because the leadership of the CLC is nationwide. It's not one or two people; I'm talking about their executive board. They were all very supportive, they understood the need to organize farmworkers. They also understood the need to increase pressure on the local provincial

governments to protect and to bring workers under the law. So that's what they helped us to do. Finally, in British Columbia changes were made to the Employment Standards Act to protect farmworkers. But it wasn't enough, it had to be far more broader than what we were able to do. I remember it was in 19... late in the 80s the Socred government set up, we were asking them to draft health and safety regulations to protect farmworkers, and they did that, and I was on that committee as well. We had many meetings, there was equal representation from the farmers, growers, and from the farmworker union, but after a few months when we drafted all of the regulations and everything the Socreds pulled their support because, they said, they can't be because the growers lobby was so heavy, that it didn't happen. So once the government changed in 1991 and the NDP came to power, the first thing the Minister of Labour said was that the farmworkers must have equal rights. So they made all those necessary changes to the Employment Standards Act, Workers Compensation Act and the [Labour] Code that we would get protection under the law.

Then Minister of Labour, Moe Sahota, at that time set up another committee to draft health and safety regulations. By that time I was already gone from CFU. I left CFU in 1986, after that I was working with Hospital Employees Union, I was head of the bargaining department and [Moe Sahota] appointed me as an advisor to that committee. We met for months and months and months, we drafted really extensive broad-based health and safety regulations just for the agriculture industry. Which both sides accepted, the growers and the workers. We also did one more step, rather than drafting those regulations and giving them to Workers Compensation board and asking them to enforce them. We set up a separate organization under Workers Compensation Act, it's called FARSHA, Farm and Ranch Safety and Health Association. That organization was established, I'm the founding director of that organization for several years and then I moved on. It still exists. They have changed the name of it, it's called AGSAFE, Agriculture Safety, like Worksafe BC, along the same lines. Those health and safety regulations are still in place. Even the BC Liberals, when they came to power in 2001, they changed many of the things, they basically rolled back the protections of the workers, farm workers, had, but they did not touch the health and safety regulations. That is still in place.

NF: That's quite the legislation package to put forward and then not have touched. You outlined the idea that these concerns that the CFU were going for like health and safety regulations, minimum wage, employment standards, they were outside of what one would consider trade union ideas. How did that work with the CLC suggesting to them that "we have concerns outside of what you would consider a trade union", how did that work?

RC: The CLC and the union movement knew, and we knew it, that having long lasting union of farmworkers is not that easy. Because the work is so seasonal and transient, you cannot have workers, farmworkers organization that could sustain itself. You could not do it. After realizing that, we thought okay, at least what we should focus on to have long lasting changes to the working conditions, health and safety, transportation and all of that, to make sure that even if the union is not there, so that they would be protected. That's what we focused on, that's what we achieved.

In 1990s we had a joint committee of the provincial government, the federal government, the RCMP, it would do anonymous audits of the farm fields itself to check that everything was taken care of. And it worked really well. That's what my disappointment is, when the liberals came to power, they dismantled it. Those kind of protections that we had put into place were gone. But health and safety itself, those regulations, were maintained. So CLC knew it, the BC Federation of Labour, the provincial organization that is the affiliate of CLC, they knew it that, you know, we need to have something in place that will, which will protect farmworkers on an ongoing basis.

NF: I think that covers everything that I had listed here. Thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me.

RC: No problem!

[Recording Ends]