

**The Anti-Conscription movement in BC and its
contribution to the labour revolt of 1918-1919**

by
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Abstract

Historians have generally interpreted the conscription crisis of 1917 as reflective of contending nationalist perspectives in Canada. In contrast this study examines the pivotal role of the labour led anti-conscription movement which developed in British Columbia and throughout Canada in World War One to oppose the threat poses by conscription and other war time acts of repression by the Borden government. A careful study of primary sources and newspapers of the era show that this movement of resistance to conscription also included others threatened by conscription: conscientious objectors, Indigenous nations, farmers, and pacifist social gospel activists. The resistance movement had the effect of changing Federal government policy on conscription during the war and changing the political environment after the war and acted as a catalyst in helping to spark the post-war labour revolt.

Keywords: conscription; conscientious objectors; Military Service Act (MSA); Wartime Elections Act (WEA); Vancouver Trades and Labour Council; British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL); Vancouver general strike; Albert “Ginger” Goodwin; Joseph Naylor.

Dedication

To my parents Joyce Rees and Hugh Latimer and my grandparents Dr. A.E. Kerr and Nessie Beaton Kerr who inspired me with stories of history, encouraged me to read history, and taught me to love history.

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This paper owes much to the mentorship, encouragement and intellectual guidance of Dr. Mark Leier who provided helpful advice, support, and practical suggestions at every stage of the building of this thesis. Dr. Aaron Windel was also a source of encouragement and intellectual challenges that provided many useful insights and contributions to improve this work. Dr. Dale McCartney inspired me with his scholarly work on this topic and provided critical analysis and useful questions in his service as External Examiner. Finally, this thesis would not have been completed without the tireless support, patience, editing and practical suggestions of my life partner Lois Shelton.

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List of Acronyms

AFL	American Federation of Labor
BCFL	British Columbia Federation of Labour
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World.
MSA	Military Service Act
OBU	One Big Union
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SPC	Socialist Party of Canada
TLC	Trades and Labour Congress
VTLC	Vancouver Trades and Labour Council
WEA	Wartime Elections Act

Note to the Reader

Labour vs labor: These two spellings have the same meaning in English. I have used the British English term "labour" throughout this paper as it is proper term for scholarly use in Canada today. However, some historical documents and newspapers from the World War One and aftermath era used the US English term "labor," so I have not changed the term in this text.

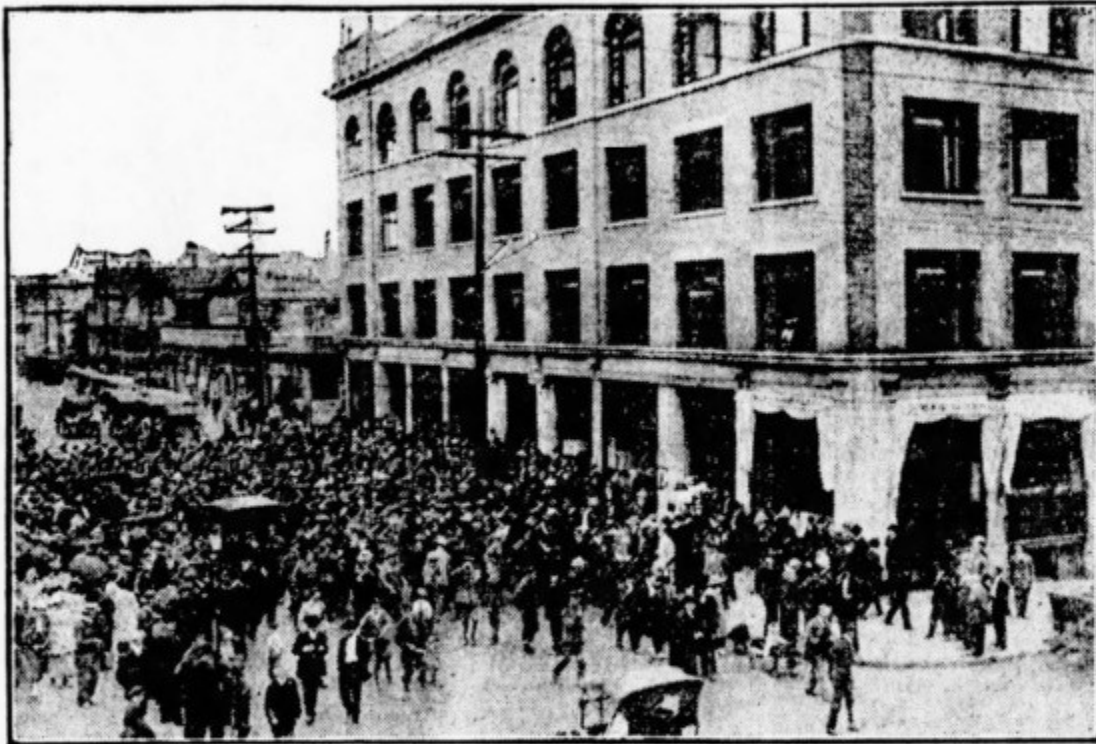
Introduction

When Victor Midgley returned to his office on the second floor of the Labor Temple in Vancouver on 2 August 1918, he had reason to be exhilarated -- and afraid. Midgley and his fellow unionists had just pulled off Canada's first general strike, while the country was still engaged in the First World War. Thousands of organized workers had walked off the job and proudly paraded through Vancouver to denounce conscription and government repression. The initial impetus for the one-day strike was the killing in late July of Albert Goodwin, a well-known BC socialist and organizer of militant industrial unions who had been hiding out in the woods of Vancouver Island to avoid conscription. In response to the strike, right-wing businessmen in the city accused the union leaders of being pro-German, whipped up ex-soldiers into a mob, and urged them to attack the strike headquarters. Hundreds of veterans, directed by their former officers, surrounded the Labor Temple; a group of them charged up the stairs and tried to push their way into Midgley's office, intent on trashing the union offices and throwing him out the window. Union telephone operator Francis Foxcroft blocked the door and prevented the soldiers from storming in while Midgely made his way onto the window ledge.¹ There was no escape, however, and when he made it to the ground Midgley was surrounded by the rampaging soldiers. "Make the skunk kiss the good old flag" he heard as the mob repeatedly forced the Union Jack flag of the British Empire into his mouth.² Midgely and longshoreman George Thomas were beaten by the crowd until sympathetic Vancouver police officers rescued them and took them away. It was only on the next day, when six hundred striking longshoremen battled the rioters in front of the Longshoremen's Hall, that the rioters were forced to retreat.

¹ *BC Federationist*, 9 August 1918, 1 and 5. See also "The Ginger Goodwin Strike," *BC Labour Heritage Centre*, 7 August 2018.

² Ron Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, (Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 2018), 61.

SCENE OF CLASH AT LABOR TEMPLE



The picture was taken outside the Labor Temple, corner of Dunsmuir and Homer street on Friday afternoon, within a few minutes of the raid by returned soldiers who rushed through the main entrance, shown with white pillars, up the stairs to the first floor and ejected the secretary of the Trades and Labor Council, V. R. Midgley, from his office immediately over the main entrance. It was on the pavement immediately to the left of the telephone pole that the official was forced to embrace the Union Jack. This was the banner carried by the soldiers in their procession leading to the protest against the calling of a general strike for twenty-four hours in sympathy with the draft evader, Albert Goodwin, shot and killed by a Dominion police officer at Comox Lake a week ago, when resisting arrest.

Figure 1. Hundreds of demobilized soldiers attacking the Labor Temple during the 1918 General Strike that was called in response to the death of Ginger Goodwin. Credit *Vancouver Daily World*, 3 August 1918³.

These events were the culmination of an extended fight between labour and capital and government that increased in intensity between 1917 and 1919. In the face of attacks by an increasingly autocratic government, Goodwin and Midgely and other labour activists were fighting not only for their own lives, but also for the lives and wellbeing of thousands of Canadian workers.

Key to these events is the little-studied movement of resistance by the labour movement in British Columbia that opposed Borden's conscription and war policies. The

³ *Vancouver Daily World*, 3 August 1918. The photo captures the scene outside the Labor Temple at 411 Dunsmuir in the afternoon of Friday, 2 August 1918.

central argument here is that this anti-conscription movement acted as a rallying cry for labour on more than one front. Not only did organized workers unify to oppose conscription and other war time measures, but through this political work they also developed and strengthened a movement committed to winning rights and power for workers. The anti-conscription movement became a political catalyst to radicalize labour organizations, build their internal unity of purpose, and focus their political opposition to the Borden war policies by taking general strike action. Activists in the labour movement saw the struggle against conscription as an important part of the overall struggle of the working class to fight against the many negative effects of capitalism on working people. This process occurred across Canada to different degrees: this thesis will examine the many ways the British Columbia labour leadership of 1916-1918 combined the struggle against conscription and the war, with the struggle to defend the interests of organized workers and build their power. This thesis will chronicle and analyze the struggles of the anti-conscription movement as it promoted opposition to conscription as part of a broader struggle to defend organized workers and other Canadians repressed by the Borden government, BC employers, and their agents. The struggles against conscription and the war were inextricably connected to struggles for the democratic rights of workers – particularly the right to collective bargaining -- and this evolved into a generalized labour revolt in 1918-19.

Chapter One reviews the historiography of the Canadian World War One war effort, the struggle against conscription, and the labour revolt, to understand existing scholarly work on the subject and identify elements of the conscription crisis that require further study. Chapter Two examines the origins of the anti-conscription movement as a focal point for labour in British Columbia during the war period. Chapter Three considers the strategies used by labour and its allies to fight against the introduction of conscription by the Borden government. Chapter Four examines how the Borden government was able to use the conscription issue in an election campaign to divide the country and considers labour's response. Chapter Five examines the many-faceted movement of resistance and civil disobedience related to conscription which, though led by labour, broadened to include a larger mass oppositional movement. Chapter Six examines the organization by labour of the general strike against conscription in BC on 2 August 1918. Finally, the

Conclusion considers the importance, significance, and consequences of the movement particularly its connection to the labour revolt.

Chapter 1.

Historiography of the Conscription Crisis

Historians have not analyzed in depth the role of labour's resistance to the imposition of conscription in Canada in World War One: most see the "conscription crisis" as primarily a reflection of "national" resistance in Quebec against an English imperial war. Historians have done little research on the anti-conscription movement *per se* in World War One -- especially in British Columbia and English Canada -- and those who consider the issue do not consider the role and significance of the labour movement in resisting conscription. While the Winnipeg General Strike is well-known and studied extensively, little research has been done by labour historians on all of the underlying motivations leading to the Canadian labour revolt of 1918–1919. This paper considers how the Canadian labour movement, and the actions of 1918 --1919, are connected to the struggles of the anti-conscription movement. To put this analysis in context this chapter will review the literature on the anti-conscription movement.

Writing in the late 1970s, John Herd Thompson's *Harvests of War: The Prairie West 1914-1918* does not recognize an effective movement against conscription among organized workers in English Canada.⁴ Thompson describes the Canadian Prairies in World War One as "united behind the war effort" until suddenly and mysteriously Western farmers were "up in arms against the Borden government's 1918 cancellations of the agricultural exemptions to conscription."⁵ Thompson refers vaguely to "the West" as a unit that suddenly recoiled as a region in 1918-19 against the Borden government's mismanagement of the war effort and the national economy. He displays no awareness of the origins of this revolt or the deep divisions along class lines that developed in most Canadian urban and industrial centers and would later culminate in a wave of strike action from Nova Scotia to BC that was highlighted by general strikes in Vancouver and

⁴ John Herd Thompson, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West 1914-1918*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978), 117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

Winnipeg in 1918 and 1919.⁶ Thompson pays little attention to the anti-conscription movement though it was visibly growing in the labour movement and other sectors of society as the war developed.

In her 2009 study, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War*, Amy Shaw agrees with Thompson about the impotence of the anti-conscription movement, but she takes a distinct perspective. Shaw's approach is to profile the resistance of individual conscientious objectors in Canada during the First World War. While she describes the resistance of some conscientious objectors to conscription, her terms of reference for what might constitute a "conscientious objector" is limited to war resisters of conscience within certain Protestant churches – mostly those in English Canada. The religious movement she describes is formally apolitical and quietist. To Shaw, these resisters were deeply private individuals who did not want allies, or to broaden the struggle politically against conscription. Her study also specifically excludes non-religious liberal pacifists, social gospel activists, labour activists, and French-Canadian nationalist resisters to the imperial war effort, who she argues are "not really conscientious objectors."⁷ She concludes that Canadian anti-conscription activists in all spheres were too politically weak to have any political impact because they could not come together in a formal national organization as they had in the United Kingdom with the formation of the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF).⁸ But this argument ignores how the anti-conscription movement in Canada was not contained in any one organization, but included labour organizations, Indigenous political organizations, farmers' organizations, pacifist and anti-militarist women's organizations, and conscientious objectors. It was a Canada-wide movement that was strong not only in Quebec but also in the West, and particularly in British Columbia.

⁶ Tom Mitchell and James Naylor, "The Prairies: The Eye of the Storm" in Craig Heron (ed) *Workers' Revolt in Canada 1917-1925*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 189.

⁷ Amy Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

Much has been made by some Canadian historians about how the “conscription crisis” in the spring of 1918 divided the country along national lines. Elizabeth Armstrong’s *The Crisis of Quebec 1914-1918* focuses on the deep divisions that conscription exacerbated in French/English relations in Canada.⁹ Military historian Jack Granatstein has also analyzed the crisis along ethnic lines, arguing that English Canada was loyal to Britain and supported conscription when asked, but Francophone Catholic Quebec, having little love for the British Empire, resisted and refused support.¹⁰ Granatstein and Desmond Morton present the Canadian war effort as part of a coming of age for the young country -- a patriotic, nation-building project.¹¹ They deny, or gloss over, how the war exacerbated class divisions and had a deeply divisive effect on Canadian society. While they celebrate the achievements of Canadian soldiers at the Battle of Vimy as a unifying moment of nation-building, they downplay other factors that got the Borden government re-elected and silenced those opposed to the war. These works did not consider: the disenfranchisement of many new Canadian citizens as “enemy aliens” in the Borden government’s 1917 *War-time Election Act*; the abuse of war resisters; the denial of citizenship rights to Indigenous peoples, Asian immigrants, and most Canadian women; and the obvious gerrymandering, voter suppression, and violations of democratic norms perpetrated by the Borden government in its application of the *Military Service Act*.

The situation, however, is much more complex than is set out in either of these historical approaches. Opposition to conscription did not derive only from ethnicity. The labour movement opposed conscription for quite distinct reasons. Labour historian A. Ross McCormack posited that the workers’ movement, represented by labour organizations, publicly opposed conscription and threatened to organize a national

⁹ Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec 1914-1918*, (Ottawa: McClelland and Stewart, first published 1937, reprinted 1974), 167-70, 174, 177, 186.

¹⁰ J.R. Granatstein, *Canada at War, Conscription, Diplomacy and Politics*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 5, 18.

¹¹ J.L. Granatstein, “After the fighting, a nation changed,” in *Maclean’s* online magazine, 2020. See also Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007), 144-145.

general strike if the Borden government imposed it.¹² Gregory Kealey, in his 1992 study “State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada,” and in his 1984 work “1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt,” has argued that when the Borden government introduced its many repressive measures to support the war in 1917 – 1918, it was mainly concerned with managing class conflict, and feared opposition from the workers’ movement rather than any national or ethnic tension.¹³ Martin Robin’s study *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930* is a detailed study of the mainstream, mainly Ontario, trade union movement, but suffers from a strong bias in favour of labourism and its resulting ideological blinkers. Robin’s analysis is weakened by his perspective that the socialists who led labour unions during the labour revolt in the West between 1917 and 1919 were following a syndicalist “dead end” which would lead to the destruction of the movement.¹⁴ Consequently, Robin ignores the most important actions of labour in this period and plays down the anti-conscription movement. Craig Heron has edited a strong collection of articles in his *Workers’ Revolt in Canada 1917-1925*, which develops the theme of the labour revolt as a movement of workers for workers’ power. Labour historians Gregory Kealey and Craig Heron both portray the upsurge in labor activism during the years 1917-1919 as a “labour revolt”: a class uprising against exploitative employers and a repressive federal government. None of these works, however, identifies the anti-conscription movement as a central causal force in this labour revolt.

¹²A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: A History of the Western Canadian Radical Movement 1899-1919*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 119.

¹³Gregory Kealey, “State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada, 1914-1920: The Impact of the First World War,” in *Canadian Historical Review* #3, 1992, 288.

¹⁴ Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930*, (Kingston: Queens University Press Industrial Relations Center, 1968), 1999. For Robin, “political action” by workers must be limited to achieving parliamentary reforms. Robin’s analysis is constrained by his liberal perspective which sees the Canadian capitalist political/economic system of the day as open to reforms that could benefit labour. He portrays this “labourist” perspective as the most realistic and best perspective of trade unionists towards the political process. It is a limited perspective on trade unionism which sees parliamentary and electoral struggle as the only valid and meaningful political strategy for workers. Robin characterizes general strikes and sympathy strikes, which were commonly used and effective weapons of workers in this period, as illegitimate “bluffs” which are quickly “called” by employers and governments and would go nowhere. To Robin “political action” by the workers only makes sense if it is focused on electing career-oriented labour representatives to Parliament.

David Bercuson has written widely on the labour movement during the war and on the post-war labour revolt. In his 1970 work “The Winnipeg General Strike, Collective Bargaining, and the One Big Union,” Bercuson argues that the Winnipeg strike, and by implication the Vancouver general strikes, came about as a reaction to the legitimate demands of the workers for better wages and conditions. It seems to have escaped Bercuson that one of the main demands of the organized workers movement by 1917 was for an end to conscription. Instead Bercuson blames authoritarian and aggressive employers, and the repressive response of the Borden government against workers and their demands, for provoking the crises that led to the Winnipeg General Strike. Yet Bercuson’s support for, and celebration of, a military history perspective pushes him into a *de facto* support for Canadian militarism. Thus, there is little mention of the anti-conscription movement in Bercuson’s works. In 1974, in *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations and the General Strike*, Bercuson argues that the labour revolt was based on Western exceptionalism¹⁵ and could have been resolved without conflict if the Borden Government and, in Bercuson’s view, the overly radical Winnipeg strike leaders, had bargained together within the traditional framework of liberal, industrial relations.¹⁶ Bercuson’s liberal viewpoint on the strikes sees the 1917--19 labour revolt itself as an aberration from normal, ‘legitimate’ labour relations.¹⁷

Mark Leier is a historian who approaches the study of the labour movement from a distinct, radical perspective, and a completely different approach from Bercuson regarding the aspirations and struggles of the workers movement in this period. Leier, in his study *Where the Fraser River Flows*, emphasizes the key role the generally un-studied Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) played in the pre-war labour movement, and he has examined the significant role the organization played in the creation of industrial, as

¹⁵ Western exceptionalism is a liberal perspective used by some labour historians such as A. Ross McCormack and David Bercuson which seeks to explain the apparent radicalism of Western workers in this period in comparison to “conservative” trade unionists in Ontario and Quebec.

¹⁶ David Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour Industrial Relations and the General Strike*, (Toronto: McGill Queens University Press, 1990), 193-4.

¹⁷ Craig Heron in his “Introduction” to *Workers’ Revolt in Canada 1917-1925* criticizes Bercuson’s liberal approach which seeks to deflate the political overtones of the revolt and place them into the context of ‘normal’ industrial relations. 5-6.

opposed to craft, labour unions. He shows how these industrial unions were a step forward in unifying workers to struggle as a class for their interests. His study chronicles the emergence of a class-based critique of capitalism, and the building of more democratic rank and file controlled industrial unions. He also identified the IWW's leading role in promoting anti-war consciousness in the BC labour movement. Leier explains how and why the IWW was often at odds with the mainstream labour movement and argues that its influence was larger than its organization might be expected to wield, and it emerged before the war as the cutting edge of the BC left.¹⁸ Leier's work shows a deep understanding of the political differences and commonalities between the socialist and anarchist approaches in the workers' movement in this period, but his research and analysis stops at the beginning of the war.

A. Ross McCormack, in *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries* extends the analysis of the rise of the workers movement to 1919 but, like Bercuson, identifies western exceptionalism as the primary motive for the revolt. The use of arguments for Western exceptionalism by these historians lacks an analysis of the primary aspect of class forces at work in the Canadian labour revolt. To characterize the western labour movement as 'radical' and 'militant,' and eastern labour as 'conservative' and quiescent is an oversimplification that both exaggerates the radicalism of workers in the West and also denies real, radical, labour struggles taking place in the East during and after the war. As Ian McKay shows in "The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance", a chapter in the *Workers' Revolt in Canada 1917-1925*, and in *Reasoning Otherwise: Leftist and the People's Enlightenment in Canada 1880-1920*, there were very radical pockets of workers in Toronto and in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia and very moderate workers in parts of the West, especially in pockets of British Columbia and Alberta.¹⁹ McKay convincingly argues that the labour revolt of 1917-1919 developed in different ways, with distinct regional variations in different Canadian regions, but that what it had in common was a distinct anti-capitalist character.

¹⁸ Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The IWW in BC*, 13.

¹⁹ Ian McKay, *Reasoning Otherwise, Leftists and the People's Enlightenment in Canada 1880-1920*, 129.

The labour movement in British Columbia before the war period was dominated by an ideological perspective that can be characterized as “labourism.” Ross McCormack in his *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionists* refers to these reformers in the labour movement as “labourites” and argues that they were committed to the “immediate amelioration of the social conditions under capitalism” and hence sought to gain a “fair deal for workers” through political and parliamentary action by labour to change the policies of the state.²⁰ This perspective first emerged in the labour movement in the UK as an practical way forward for workers after the defeat of the more radical Chartists in the 1840’s and was centered on building actual trade unions which could wage the struggle to improve conditions and wages for unionized workers.²¹ These unionists believed that the capitalist system was stacked against labour and hence building labour organizations based on the political and economic power that skilled trades in action could exert could affect positive change for workers with employers and in the parliamentary system.²² Craig Heron in his “Labourism in the Canadian Working Class” characterizes this approach as the political expression of the skilled portions of the working class. These mainly skilled workers were organized as craft unionists who needed to struggle to hold on to their skills and status in response to changes in the development of capitalism.²³ This tendency in British Columbia did not prioritize or favour the work of the new unions who sought to organize and or include the unskilled and semi-skilled, women and Asian workers in their new industrial unions. Rather they favoured building strong craft unions affiliated with the TLC and with the conservative Gompers-led AFL in the US. Championing egalitarian democracy labourists opposed the violations and corruption of democracy and workers’ rights that were clearly exposed in the Borden government’s war policies particularly the passage of Wartime Elections Act, the Military Service Act and the implementation of conscription.²⁴ Unlike the militant labour activists and

²⁰A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 16

²¹ Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Makings of a Union Bureaucracy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 92.

²² *Ibid.*, 92

²³ Craig Heron, “Labourism and the Canadian Working Class,” in Craig Heron (ed) *Working Lives: Essays in Canadian Working-Class History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 278, 281

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

socialists the labourists did not oppose Canadian capitalism but rather wanted to work to create the full promise of liberal democracy: for the workers to share political power with the middle class and capital. However, many labourist supporters of Lib-Labourism became disillusioned with the actual lack of support for labour issues from the Liberal Party during the First World War period and became interested in forming independent workers political formations which would take independent labour action. This paper will argue that the Borden government's war policies of political and economic oppression of workers would push the labourists to join the socialists and militant labour activists in the movement of opposition and resistance to conscription as part of their political strategy to advance independent workers interests.

James Conley, in his 1989 article "Frontier Labourers: Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt in Vancouver 1900-1919" and his later PhD study, examines many defining aspects of the various worker sectors that participated in the labour revolt in Vancouver.²⁵ He identifies some underlying reasons why some Vancouver labour sectors waged a militant and radical type of industrial unionism. He argues that "frontier labourers" who worked in the shipyards and docks, teamsters, and other workers in what he calls "crafts in crisis," actively supported the strikes as a means of finding job security when their economic position was becoming increasingly desperate. In contrast, Conley shows how unorganized workers and workers he calls "secure exclusivist trades," such as printers and railway running trades, generally did not support using the strike weapon. The CPR "running trades" (train crews) which included engineers, firemen, brakemen, and conductors had won paternalistic, well-paid contracts with the company, and rarely joined the rest of the labour movement in job actions. Conley's formulations do not explain why some key workers, such as the Vancouver civic workers, longshoremen, and shipyard workers and the BC Electric street railway workers that he calls "settled urban workers," were solidly in support of the strikes and were so enraged by the conscription of some of their members that they tried to convince the broader labour movement to

²⁵ James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers: Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver 1900-1919," Committee of Canadian Labour History, *Labour/Le Travail*, Volume 23, 1989, 10.

launch a general strike early in January 1918. In fact, Conley only briefly addresses the key role that the anti-conscription movement played as a catalyst for the revolt.

Benjamin Isitt, in his 2007 article “Searching for Workers Solidarity: The One Big Union and the Victoria General Strike of 1919,” examines the many factors that played out to make the Victoria General strike of 1919 a limited success.²⁶ He details how, as with the Vancouver strikes, support for the strike was strongest among shipyard workers, city workers, and longshoremen. He explains how in Victoria many union and political leaders, and particularly trade union leaders who were part of international unions, withdrew their support for the strikes. However, Issit limits his study to events in Victoria in 1919 and does not address the anti-conscription movement or the labour revolt in Vancouver, New Westminster, or the rest of BC.

Peter Campbell has authored various articles which examine the political orientation of socialist activists in the labour movements during World War One particularly those working politically in alliance with Indigenous and anti-imperialist Sikh activists in British Columbia. He discusses how the Vancouver local of the Socialist Party of Canada worked in solidarity with Ghadar activists in Vancouver who were working for Indian independence by organizing a mutiny against British rule in India during World War One.²⁷ He shows how the Socialist Party activists found common ideological ground with the South Asian Ghadar activists in opposing British imperialism. Campbell sees solidarity among these groups but does not see a strong alliance between the white, anglophone Socialist activists and the mainly Sikh Ghadar activists. For example, he quotes Jack Harrington, a Socialist party speaker at a Vancouver support rally for the stranded *Komagata Maru*, urging the Indians to “return to your own country (India) to make revolution against Britain.”²⁸ Campbell also argues that labour struggles against conscription intersected with the struggle of Indigenous

²⁶ Benjamin Isitt, “Searching for Workers’ Solidarity: The One Big Union and the Victoria General Strike of 1919,” *Labour/Le Travail*, Volume 60, Fall 2007, 11-12.

²⁷ Peter Campbell, “East Meets Left: South Asian Militants in the Socialist Party,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, (Volume 20, 1990), 51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

nations against conscription. Campbell and historian Katherine McGowan have extensively studied Indigenous movements in Canada during this period. In her article “Until We Receive Just Treatment: The Struggle Against Conscription in the Nass Agency, BC,” McGowan argues that Indigenous nations waged their own struggle against conscription as part of a larger struggle for land and sovereignty.²⁹ McGowan’s and Campbell’s work makes us aware that the anti-conscription struggle in Canada included many diverse groups in a movement that was much more extensive than either Shaw or Bercuson acknowledge.

Lara Campbell’s new work *A Great Revolutionary Wave: The Suffragette Movement in British Columbia in the First World War* addresses the intersection of the women’s movement with the labour movement. She shows how the women’s movement demanded and won some voting rights under the Borden regime but were treated as pawns in a reactionary scheme by the Borden government aiming to divide the country and get the Conservatives re-elected. Campbell shows why many elements of the women’s suffrage movement opposed Borden’s conscription plans. She also shows that there were socialist feminists in the women’s movement who advocated for the organization and inclusion of women workers into the mainly male organized labour movement.³⁰ These women had to address the fact that in working with labour they were often the subject of sexist derision by some elements of labour and were also viewed as tools of the capitalists and right-wing politicians. Yet socialists in the labour movement supported the inclusion of women workers into industrial unions and supported the women’s suffrage movement as a basic democratic right. Helena Gutteridge, for example, was a pivotal figure in BC who brought together both the labour and women’s suffrage movements.³¹ Women like Gutteridge who helped form unions of mainly women workers,

²⁹ Katharine McGowan, “Until We Receive Just Treatment: The Fight Against Conscription in the Nass Agency, BC.” *BC Studies* Number 167, (Autumn 2010), 62-63.

³⁰ Lara Campbell, *A Great Revolutionary Wave: Women and the Vote in British Columbia*, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020), 193, 206-7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 157. Gutteridge was not only an executive member of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council and a leader of the anti-conscription movement but also the founder of the Women Suffrage League (WSL) a working-class women’s organization.

saw themselves as part of the organized labour movement and participated in its struggles -- including joining the opposition to conscription and support for general strikes.

Dale McCartney's 2010 MA thesis, "A Crisis of Commitment: Socialist Internationalism in British Columbia during the Great War," profiles the British Columbia organized workers' movement which, as the war progressed, saw labour unionists with radical socialist and anti-war perspectives increasingly winning support and influence; they won the support of rank-and-file unionists to gain positions of leadership in the BC trade union movement. McCartney profiles the rise of Jack Kavanaugh, Bill Prichard, Joe Naylor, and Ginger Goodwin as examples of radical, anti-war socialists who were veteran organizers in the labour movement in British Columbia, and who were elected to positions of labour leadership in this period. McCartney makes the argument that the struggle against the war and conscription was a catalyst and unifier of the movement.³²

This study will build on McCartney's work and examine the ways the BC trade union leadership of 1917-19 combined the struggle against conscription and the war with the struggle for workers' power to organize the June 1918 Ginger Goodwin general strike, and the more extensive 1919 Vancouver general strike – the largest and longest general strike in Canadian history. It will explore how the BC labour leadership sought new allies and new forms of organization to first build an anti-conscription coalition and, later, to resist conscription and confront local employers and the federal government through job actions in the 1918 and 1919 general strikes.

³² Dale McCartney, "A Crisis of Commitment: Socialist Internationalism in British Columbia during the Great War," MA Thesis 2010, SFU Department of History, 91-95.

Chapter 2.

“Let us have an end to compulsion in this unjust War!”

The entry of Canada into the imperial war in 1914 exacerbated the tensions and divisions between classes in the country. The Borden government favoured large business interests and used the war opportunity to expand Canada’s manufacturing capacity. Large Canadian corporations received patronage contracts and gained the opportunity to produce war materials at government expense. Canadian manufacturers profited from this approach to managing the war effort. In contrast, Borden asked working people to accept hardship, provide service, make sacrifices, and bear the many burdens of the war.³³ Wartime inflation drove up the cost of living and made life unaffordable for many. Yet workers had to struggle in an unequal battle against employers and the government to gain the collective bargaining rights needed to win wage increases, shorter hours of work, and better working conditions.

Despite the hardships the workers faced during the war, imperial pro-war sentiment dominated attitudes in the Canadian public sphere. In the labour movement, and even among some socialists, attitudes towards the war were mixed.³⁴ Some labour leaders even supported the war, and those who did not hoped the initially voluntary nature of military service would allow most workers to simply ignore it and prosper. A meeting of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC) in 1915 declared the war “a matter of indifference to workers.”³⁵ The National Executive of the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) rhetorically opposed the war but, in the early war years, took no concrete action to mobilize labour against it. Some trade unionists even saw support for the war as a path forward for labour and for themselves to gain legitimacy and influence with the state and access personal benefits. Thus, despite their reputation for western radicalism,

³³ Craig Heron, “The Great War, the State and the Working Class Canada,” *Workers’ Revolt in Canada*, 25. Heron contrasts the profitability of Canadian business during the war with the increasing demands for service and sacrifice demanded of the working class, 25.

³⁴ Dale McCartney, “A Crisis of Commitment: Socialist Internationalism in British Columbia during the Great War,” 59-60.

³⁵ Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930*, 120.

some BC unionists shared the pro-war position of Samuel Gompers, conservative president of the powerful American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the United States. Gompers strongly supported the US war effort, never opposed conscription in the US, and used his influence to convince the AFL affiliated unions in Canada to support Borden's war policies. Gompers gained status and influence with American President Woodrow Wilson as an official liaison between the government and the mainstream elements of labour that supported the American war effort. To convince Canadians to support war policies, Gompers was invited to address the Canadian Parliament where he called for Canadian workers to support the Conservative government's war effort to oppose "tyranny" in Europe.³⁶ This conservative pro-war perspective of some union leaders was inconsistent with the aims of labour because it marginalized and harmed the interests of the labour movement: as the war developed, this position was increasingly challenged as a threat to working people.

Another example of the mixed approach by labour in the early years of the war was its response to the treatment of "enemy aliens" (a term describing immigrant workers from "enemy" countries resident in Canada during the war) by the Borden government. Under the 1914 *War Measures Act*, the Borden government had the power to intern any "enemy alien" in Canada and, early in the war, it quickly moved to intern many workers and immigrants from "enemy" countries. By the end of the war 80,000 foreign-born Canadians were subjected to examinations and registrations under this legislation. Over 8,000 would be interned, most commonly workers who had immigrated to Canada from the Austrian-Hungarian empire; large numbers of Ukrainians and Galatians were caught up in the government's net.³⁷ Many of these "enemy alien" workers in no way supported the war policies of the Austrian or German empire; in fact, many were linked to opposition to the war and support for the Canadian Social Democratic Party (SDP) which actively opposed the war. Further attacks on workers came when, after the Treaty of Brest Litovsk, immigrant workers from Russia, Ukraine, and Finland were deemed

³⁶*BC Federationist*, 3 May 1918, 4.

³⁷Gregory Kealey, "State Repression of the Labour and the Left in Canada, 1914-20: The Impact of the First World War," *Canadian Historical Review*, #3, University of Toronto Press, 1992, 293 .

“enemy nationalities” by the Borden government. Thousands of Ukrainians were interned and used as working prisoners in munitions plants, where they faced ridicule and condemnation by other workers for their forced contribution to the Canadian war effort.³⁸

In the face of the barrage of imperialist war news in the print media and constant government war propaganda, some Canadian workers began to view “enemy alien” workers who were employed beside them in the mines and factories with suspicion. Herman Elmer, a miner who had been born in Germany but was a long-time trade union activist in the Crowsnest coalfields in the town of Michel, made a speech at a union meeting blaming capitalism for causing the war and urged workers to oppose it. Co-workers reported him to police, and he was arrested as an “enemy alien” under the *War Measures Act*. His union, the United Mine Workers of America, despite a history of radical socialism in this local, did not oppose his arrest, nor did it strongly mobilize for his release.³⁹ The BC Federation of Labour and its paper the *BC Federationist*, in its analysis of his arrest and imprisonment, also failed to urge a campaign of solidarity, or to support him unconditionally.⁴⁰ The case indicated that in this early climate of war fervor, the government was quite willing to repress and incarcerate those with anti-war opinions, and that the labour movement, and even socialists, were sometimes unwilling to defend fellow workers facing repression.

However, this early pro-war trend in the organized labour movement was increasingly opposed by many socialist labour activists across the country. In British Columbia, the most important groups who promoted the anti-war position were the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Socialist Party (SPC), and Social Democratic Party (SDP) -- all spoke out and actively worked to oppose the war. The

³⁸ *BC Federationist*, 25 June 1915. See also Gregory Kealey, “State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada, 1914-1920: The Impact of the First World War,” 288. See also Kassandra Luciuk, “Reinserting Radicalism: Canada’s First National Internment Operations, the Ukrainian Left, and the Politics of Redress,” *Civilian Internment in Canada, Histories, and Legacies: an edited Collection*, Jim Mocharuk, Rhonda Hinthner, (eds) University of Manitoba Press, 2020, 56.

³⁹ Dale McCartney, “A Crisis of Commitment: Socialist Internationalism in British Columbia during the Great War,” 47-50.

⁴⁰ *BC Federationist*, 25 June 1915. An unsigned article on page 2 titled “The Amazing Proletariat” seems to abandon solidarity with non-Anglo workers when it condemned Elmer for “not having the good sense to keep his mouth shut” while in an “enemy” country.

IWW was strong in Western Canada and parts of the United States, and in both countries this group led the fight against the war. The IWW was a group of militant industrial unionists who promoted a class-based analysis of capitalism and worked to form democratic rank-and-file controlled unions. Their strategy for workers centered around the willingness to use job actions which could be strikes -- even general strikes -- to win better immediate gains in wages and provide direct immediate benefits to workers. These immediate struggles were seen as steps to achieving revolutionary working-class consciousness.⁴¹ They did not favour unions signing long term contracts with employers for such contracts would limit the range of direct actions available to workers. They also had little interest in electoral political campaigns, and saw parliamentary politics controlled by the state as a waste of time for workers. Rather, they chose to focus on politically educating semi-skilled and unskilled “frontier workers” in logging, mining, longshore, railway, and construction camps to build workers’ power by direct industrial job actions. These were workers who were often ignored and left unorganized by the mainstream labour movement, in part because they were non-Anglo workers; ethnicity and skill often went hand in hand in strategies of labour organization. The IWW frequently engaged in “free speech fights” in various urban areas: in claiming the right to speak to workers on the streets about the need to form labour unions, IWW members were threatened by restrictions imposed by civic authorities and enforced by police. These “fights” to demand the right to freely speak to, and organize, workers in the streets helped to expand the proletarian public sphere, and the democratic rights of workers in Canadian and US cities; however, IWW and socialist activists often went to jail to win these rights.⁴² Heather Mayer in *Rebel Girl: Women, Wobblies and Respectability and the Law in the Pacific Northwest* describes how IWW activists in Seattle and Portland protested war preparedness parades, passed out anti-conscription leaflets, encouraged conscientious objection and otherwise publicly opposed the war and as a result were

⁴¹ Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, “The Great War, the State and Working-Class Canada,” in *Workers’ Revolt in Canada 1917-1925*, 28.

⁴² Mark Leier, “Solidarity on Occasion: The Free Speech Fights in Vancouver of 1909 and 1912,” *Labour/Le Travail* Vol 23, 1989, 43-44,48-49.

arrested and imprisoned by US authorities under charges of sedition and espionage.⁴³ For example, Louise Olivereau was convicted of sedition and given ten years in prison for encouraging young men to resist the draft and become conscientious objectors.⁴⁴ IWW activists in Canada and the United States risked jail, repression, and even death to speak out against the war.⁴⁵

The Socialist Party of Canada (SPC) in British Columbia also strongly opposed the war and promoted its view that the most important thing socialists could do was to conduct political education with the working class to develop socialist consciousness. Their main task, as they saw it, was to “make workers into socialists” through political and ideological education at regular public educational meetings where socialist speakers would explain various aspects of Marxist socialist ideology. Agitation on the streets to reach out to workers in specific political campaigns was also a common tactic. The Socialist Party ran candidates during federal and provincial elections to take advantage of the opportunity to promote its political perspectives -- especially its opposition to the war. It was the largest leftist organization in British Columbia and had support in some working-class communities. It strongly condemned Canada’s involvement in the First World War which, according to its Manifesto issued two days after the declaration of war in 1914, would be detrimental to the cause of the working class in all countries. Their position was:

The international capitalist class provoked wars for business reasons and the result was the division of the working class. As such the working class had no stake or interest in this war. The only struggle that can be of vital

⁴³ Heather Mayer, *Beyond the Rebel Girl: Women, Wobblies and Respectability and the Law in the Pacific Northwest 1905-1924*, 127-132.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁵ *Seattle Star*, 6 November 1916. A front-page story describes how IWW activists demonstrating against the war were massacred by a mass posse of Sheriff’s deputies in Everett, Washington in 1916. Even the pro-war *Vancouver Daily Sun* featured a front-page article in June 1917 which reported that a large crowd of six hundred marched in the labour stronghold of Butte, Montana opposing the war and faced mass arrests by Federal US troops. A little over a month later on 1 August 1917 Frank Little, IWW organizer and opponent of the Anaconda Copper Company and the war was lynched in the same city. Later the *BC Federationist* of 2 August 1918 featured a story on p2 publicizing the charging of an “anti-union gunman” in the murder of IWW activist Frank Little. See also “The murder of Frank Little” in *Peoples World*, 18 Aug 2018.

interest to the working class of all nations is that which has for its object the wresting of power from the hands of the master class.⁴⁶

Similarly, American Socialists strongly opposed the war. In his famous anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio on 16 June 1918, the leader of the Socialist Party of America, (SPA) Eugene Debs, characterized the war in the following way:

The master class has always declared the wars; the subject class has always fought the battles. The master class has had all to gain and nothing to lose, while the subject class has had nothing to gain and all to lose — especially their lives.

They have always taught and trained you to believe it to be your patriotic duty to go to war and to have yourselves slaughtered at their command. But in all the history of the world you, the people, have never had a voice in declaring war, and strange as it certainly appears, no war by any nation in any age has ever been declared by the people.

And here let me emphasize the fact -- and it cannot be repeated too often -- that the working class who fight all the battles, the working class who make the supreme sacrifices, the working class who freely shed their blood and furnish the corpses, have never yet had a voice in either declaring war or making peace. It is the ruling class that invariably does both. They alone declare war and they alone make peace.

If war is right, let it be declared by the people. You who have your lives to lose, you certainly above all others have the right to decide the momentous issue of war or peace.⁴⁷

The words of Debs in this speech were used by the United States Justice Department to convict him of sedition, and then jail him for three years under the US *Espionage Act*. Debs was not alone, as hundreds of socialist activists in the US were arrested and jailed by the Wilson administration for opposing the American war effort.

⁴⁶ *Western Clarion*, 1 March, 1915. See also Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada*, (Montreal: Trafford Publishing, 1981), 7- 8. Angus publishes the Manifestos of the SPC and the SDP in full at the beginning of the war and socialist rejection of it. See also Linda Kealey. *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 196.

⁴⁷ Eugene Debs. Quote from text of the speech delivered in Canton, Ohio 16 June 1918. Reprinted in *Jacobin Magazine*, 16 June 2017. Debs ran for President of the United States in 1920 from a jail cell for his opposition to conscription in the United States during the war and won the support of over a million American voters.

Socialists would also be jailed in Canada for speaking out against conscription and the war.

Socialist activists in Canada would have agreed with Deb's analysis of the origin and injustice of the First World War. Before Debs, B.C. socialist activist and labour leader Albert "Ginger" Goodwin spoke out against the war in 1917 in an article in the *Western Clarion*:

The only movement that has outlined the position of the workers on this war is the Socialist movement, based on the class struggle, for it is the direct antithesis of "Nationalism." ...For what have the proletariat got that they should defend against invasion? What rights have we that must be safeguarded? [We hear that] the workers of the German empire must be slaughtered to break the power of the masters of that country. The facts of everyday life show that the workers did not have anything to do with the calling of the war, neither were they anxious to impose the edifying conditions on any other peoples. The real trouble was that that the masters' interests were endangered by competition with each other, and they called upon the slaves to fight it out...As long as we permit a system of robbery to exist war will be the effect of it.⁴⁸

Goodwin wrote again in the *Clarion* analyzing the war as an inevitable product of capitalism:

War is simply part of the process of capitalism, and it needs money in the carrying out of the exchange of commodities essential to its prosecution by capitalism. The prosecution of this war (which our masters believe is for democracy and freedom) is profitable for the magnates of modern capitalism, and their patriotism will not wane as long as the lucre (profits) filters into their possession.... We have in this country politicians who tell the people to bend every effort to win the war, asking workers to yield every last thing he possesses to aid his master in the prosecution of the war.... The workers have been speeding in the factories and the fields yielding increased amounts of commodities and surplus value to their masters while their conditions of employment have become more and more intolerable...In spite of the treatment of the slaves in industry at the hands of their masters in Canada, they are asked to tighten in the belt some more, eat more sparingly and buy war bonds from the government of the country that the skinning process may be kept up to the limit.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Western Clarion*, June 1917, 3.

⁴⁹ *BC Federationist*, 2 November 1917, 4.

As the war developed and the threat of conscription loomed, this socialist perspective on the war was increasingly embraced by labour in BC.

The Social Democratic Party (SDP), emerging in 1911 after leaving the SPC, was a leading force in Canada against the war, even seen as a “threat to public order” by the Borden government because of its anti-war policies.⁵⁰ Security advisor C.H Cahan advised Borden that the SDP was “weakening the (country’s) moral purpose to prosecute the war” and this was based on reports he had received from police spies in the organization and the labour movement. The party had a political base and organization among ethnic, non-English-speaking socialists based in various immigrant groups (mostly from Eastern Europe) across the country. *Canadian Forward*, the party’s newspaper, included many articles against the war, and published anti-war tracts and pamphlets such as *Brockway’s Defense*, a compelling speech against conscription by Fenner Brockway (head of the NCF, No Conscription Fellowship, and the main anti-conscription organization in Britain), in court.⁵¹ Charged with sedition, Brockway proclaimed to the judge before sentencing:

I believe the ruling classes of all the powers are responsible for the war. I believe the working classes are mere pawns in their hands. I believe the time will come when the workers consent to be pawns no longer, and I hope that the action I am taking now will do a little, at least, to hasten the committing of that time.

The Canadian government was also quick to restrict the rights of individuals speaking out against the war and this evoked a critical response from labour. The Reid case in Alberta in 1915 underlined the danger posed to those willing to criticize Borden’s war policies in the face of the state’s repressive apparatus. John “Jock” Reid was a Socialist Party activist from BC on a speaking tour of Alberta when he was arrested and brought to court for publicly speaking against Federal war policies. Reid equated the imperial war policies that he had personally witnessed as a British soldier in South Africa

⁵⁰Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, “The Great War, the State and Working Class Canada” in *Workers’ Revolt in Canada*, 35.

⁵¹ *Canadian Forward*, 27 January 1917. *Brockway’s Defense* is also quoted by Ian Milligan, “Sedition in Wartime Ontario: The Trials of Isaac Bainbridge,” *Ontario History*, Vol 100 (2), 2008, 164.

with the then contemporary German war policies in occupied Belgium. Although socialists and labour activists supported Reid, this open criticism of British imperial power earned him a sentence of 15 months in jail from an Alberta judge. Labour saw this as a clear violation of free speech in a democratic society and was an example of how those most at risk of repression were those who criticized war policies from a working-class perspective. The incarceration of a socialist for speaking against the war brought the reality of war repression home to Canadian labour activists and socialists and led them to reassess their approach to conscription. Writing in the *Western Clarion*, Jack Kavanaugh, a Vancouver labour leader who was strongly committed to the anti-conscription movement, stated:

One of the most cherished delusions held by the workers resident in the British Empire, and one that is being rudely shattered, is that of the right of free speech. As a matter of fact, this right disappears with alarming rapidity whenever free speech is contrary to the interests of the master class, whose interests are, at the present time, sheltered from the bitter winds of adverse criticism by the mantle of patriotism, which has always been in favor as a refuge by every pirate who desired his operations to remain unquestioned...the fact that a few millions of slaves are killed, disabled, or driven insane is but a side issue. Because of that, our so-called right to free speech becomes restricted to speaking in favour of a continuation of the slaughter now in progress.⁵²

As the war developed, anti-war voices such as Kavanaugh's began to be heard more strongly in the organized labour movement. Socialists in the labour movement, the BC Federation of Labour, and the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, began to wage a political struggle to convince the workers in BC that the Borden government's war policies and conscription must be opposed. The VTLC took a strong stand against the war and conscription, going on record as opposing the "conscription of men" for the war. The VTLC proclaimed that the labour movement must actively combat the war and conscription as part of their overall struggle for workers' rights and social progress.⁵³ Increasingly, local labour councils demanded a more active leadership that would do more than register formal opposition to the war at the national Trades and Labour

⁵² *Western Clarion*, March 1916.

⁵³ *BC Federationist*, 22 December 1916.

Congress (TLC) annual conventions by passing resolutions against the war.⁵⁴ Instead, Labour councils began to move against leaders in their midst who supported the war. Christian Siverez, the Secretary-Treasurer for the Victoria Trades and Labour Council was also a secret mail censor for the Borden government. Similarly, J.H. McVety, President of the VTLC, held a government patronage position on local Conscription Boards and decided appeals on workers who hoped to escape conscription using exemptions under the *Military Service Act*.⁵⁵ The implicit pro-war and pro-conscription political stance of these leaders led to calls in the labour movement for each to resign these government positions as they were seen to be in conflict with the aims of labour.⁵⁶ Socialist Party activist Jack Kavanaugh threatened to resign from the VTLC Executive if President J.H. McVety did not resign his position as a paid member of a government board which sat in judgement over workers claims for exemption. Pressure from the labour movement led to his resignation. If McVety was to be a labour-supported candidate in the coming federal election he knew he would not be accepted by labour if he was involved in implementing conscription. He would only be successful if he was seen as a “anti-conscriptionist.” Unity was increasingly built in the labour movement based on willingness to question Borden’s war policies and promote opposition to conscription.

As the war progressed, the Borden government’s policies became more authoritative and oppressive to workers and the labour movement became increasingly critical of the war effort. This was particularly the case when the government introduced “National Service Registration,” a recruiting initiative for the war that many trade unionists saw as a prelude to conscription.⁵⁷ The National Service Board was presented by the Borden government as “an attempt to encourage enlistment by registration” and

⁵⁴ Martin Robin, “Registration, Conscription, and Independent Labour Politics 1916-17”, 101.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Isitt, “Searching for Workers’ Solidarity: The One Big Union and the Victoria General Strike of 1919,” *Labour/Le Travail* Issue 60, 2007, 15.

⁵⁶ *BC Federationist*, 5 October, and 2 November 1917, 1.

⁵⁷ Greg Kealey, “State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada 1914-1920: The Impact of the First World War”, 291. Kealey explains how Borden denied that there was any connection between his government’s 1916 “National Service Registration” and his government’s later 1917 *Military Service Act* or conscription policy.

included an extensive promotional campaign in 1916, declaring falsely that it was not a prelude to “compulsion”. Labour leaders were vocal in their unanimous opposition to conscription.⁵⁸ Even though the executive of the National TLC had accepted “National Service Week,” a government PR campaign to promote enlistment, many labour councils in the west committed themselves to oppose it.⁵⁹ The labour newspaper, *The Voice*, argued that registration was a prelude to conscription, and that it would “bring the worker to heel, depriving him of collective bargaining rights and forcing him to accept whatever terms might be offered.”⁶⁰ In a similar vein, Fred Dixon, popular Manitoba labour MLA, spoke out strongly against how the war was presented in government propaganda as a “war for democracy”: he argued that “The idea that the war was being fought for personal freedom is a myth, when conscription is slavery.”⁶¹ The growth in the movement is illuminated when even moderate reformist MPP’s like Dixon had been won to public opposition to conscription. He reminded labour crowds that compulsory military service had been recently defeated in a referendum in Australia, and the labour movement had made a major contribution to this result. In January 1917, at a convention in Revelstoke, both the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC) and the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) committed themselves to oppose registration and conscription, demanded that wealth be conscripted instead of labour, and that industries be nationalized.⁶² Many urban labour councils across the West passed similar resolutions. The BCFL convention also censured the TLC Executive for not strongly resisting conscription. They condemned the Executive’s timid opposition to conscription, claiming that it was being promoted as a bargaining chip to gain what would be an ineffective advisory role for labour within the Borden government.⁶³ Labour Leader Bill Hoop declared the TLC leadership “useless to workers” and claimed it had been

⁵⁸ *BC Federationist*, 12 January 1917.

⁵⁹ Martin Robin, “Registration, Conscription and Independent Labour Politics,” 105.

⁶⁰ *The Voice*, 29 December 1916.

⁶¹ Quoted in the *Winnipeg Telegram* from a speech made by Dixon in Winnipeg on 4 June 1917.

⁶² *BC Federationist*, 19 February 1917.

⁶³ According to Craig Heron in *Workers’ Revolt in Canada 1917-1925*, the TLC leadership sought to gain this advisory role in Borden’s government in return for dropping opposition to conscription. Heron argues that though the TLC executive did reverse itself on conscription, but the move gained it little real influence with the Borden government.

“chloroformed” into inactivity by its relationship with the Borden government.⁶⁴ The Registration campaign failed to convince Canadians, and many workers did not fill out the registration cards.⁶⁵ Instead, labour organizations opposed this looming conscription by encouraging workers to tear up, or refuse to complete, their National Registration cards.⁶⁶ Seeing where this was leading the Victoria, Vancouver, and Revelstoke District Labour Councils urged members to defy and resist Borden’s Registration.⁶⁷

In contrast to the increasing strength of labour’s opposition to the war, Canadian churches went to great lengths to promote it, urging sacrifice and compliance with government war initiatives. Church services often featured recruiting sermons urging registration. Historian Thomas Socknat describes Canadian churches as “auxiliary recruiting stations for the government.”⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, these same Protestant churches would throw open their pulpits to Borden’s Conservative/Unionist candidates during the December 1917 federal election where the use of pro-war rhetoric and advocacy for conscription was the Conservative campaign’s main electoral theme.⁶⁹ However, strong support for conscription among the leadership of the organized churches did not prevent a vocal minority of social gospel activists from joining labour, and speaking out and organizing against the war.

In sympathy with the labour campaign against the war, some religious anti-militarists opposed the pro-war agitation, and moved towards open opposition to the war and conscientious objection. The social gospel movement was developing a radical socialist critique of capitalism’s war-making character, critically examining the

⁶⁴ A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement*, 147.

⁶⁵D.C. Eberle, “Conscription Policy, Citizenship and Religious Conscientious Objectors,” 41.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶⁷ *BC Federationist*, 19 February 1917.

⁶⁸ Thomas Socknat, “Witness Against War: Pacifism in Canada 1900-1945.” PhD Thesis, (Hamilton: McMaster University, 1981), 61-2. See also Martin Robin. “Registration, Conscription, and Independent Labour Politics 1916-17,” *Canadian Historical Review Vol. 47*, #2 (June 1966), 93.

⁶⁹ Michael Bliss, “The Methodist Church in World War One,” *Canadian Historical Review*, Volume 43, Number 3, (September 1968), 220.

underlying conditions that had caused the war. In his study of the conscientious objector movement Socknat concludes that any distinction historians try to make between “religious” and “political” objectors to the war would be an artificial narrowing of a broad movement of discontent with the war and struggling for social justice.⁷⁰ According to Socknat, in practice, there were many examples of religious and political opponents to the war and conscription working together in the broad, anti-conscription movement. Reverends J.S. Woodsworth and William Ivens were both socialist, social gospel activists who became leaders of the anti-war and anti-conscription movement - and later the labour revolt.

Reverend J.S. Woodsworth was a Methodist Minister concerned with social justice who theorized on the origins of what he saw as a deadly and unjust war for workers. In a letter to the *Winnipeg Free Press* in 1916, Woodsworth challenged his fellow citizens: “As some of us cannot conscientiously engage in military service, we are bound to resist what will inevitably be forced service. Conscription of material possessions should in all justice precede any attempt to force men to risk their lives and the welfare of their families.”⁷¹ For speaking out against the war and conscription he was immediately fired by the Manitoba Provincial government from his post in the Bureau of Social Research. Woodsworth was transferred as a minister in the Methodist Church to a congregation in Gibson’s Landing, B.C. where he continued to criticize the war and refused to display recruiting poster in his church.⁷² In his subsequent letter of resignation from the Methodist church Woodsworth explains:

The seeds of the war were sown within the existing (capitalist) order... War is the inevitable outcome of our present form of undemocratic government and competitive system of industry. The devil of militarism cannot be driven out by the power of militarism without the successful nations becoming militarized.... For me, the teachings of Jesus are absolutely irreconcilable with the advocacy of war. The position of the church seems

⁷⁰ Thomas Socknat, *Witness Against War*, 145. See also D.C. Eberle, “Conscription Policy,” 179-80.

⁷¹ Quoted by Kenneth McNaught, “J.S. Woodsworth and War,” book chapter in *Challenge to Mars: Essays on Pacifism from 1918-1945*, Peter Brock and Thomas P. Socknat (eds) University of Toronto Press, 1999, 190.

⁷² Ann Farrell, *Grace MacGinnis: A Story of Love and Integrity*, (Markham, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1994), 31.

to be summed up in the words “We must win the war -nothing else matters.” Apparently, the church feels that I do not belong and reluctantly I have been forced to the same conclusion.⁷³

Woodsworth went to work as a Longshoreman on the docks of Vancouver where distinguished himself for his refusal to load munitions for Allied forces and he made many connections with the labour movement. He saw clearly that the anti-conscription policy of labour overlapped with the social gospel movement and pulled ministers like himself to work politically with labour.

Using an anti-militarist analysis, the labour movement was able to foresee ominous and drastic attacks coming from the government towards the labour movement and working people. By the end of 1916, the Canadian war effort was in deep trouble. The government campaign to enlist men in the armed forces was failing as Borden complained that “the number of casualties is greater than enlistment.”⁷⁴ In BC, to make up the shortfall the government had become increasingly reliant on public shaming measures undertaken in the streets of Vancouver to garner “recruits.” In a satirical article in the *BC Federationist*, this recruitment strategy was characterized as “big, hulking, and uncouth ruffians in uniform halting, soliciting, and bulldozing people on the public streets, or shallow pated and impudent creatures in skirts attempting to pin white feathers on male passersby.”⁷⁵

Despite the government’s efforts, many native-born Canadians, especially in Quebec and the West, had little interest in volunteering for the war. Historian Desmond Morton reports that “most native-born Canadian men of military age never volunteered for the war effort. Those who lived on farms, were married, or had jobs or deep ancestral roots in the country were least likely to enlist.”⁷⁶ The majority of volunteers for the war were British-born immigrants. At the same time, massive troop losses in the trench

⁷³ Ibid., 190.

⁷⁴ *BC Federationist*, 12 June 1917, 1.

⁷⁵ *BC Federationist*, 5 May 1916, 2. The public pinning of “white feathers” by women who supported the war on men not in uniform was part of the campaign of public shaming of war opponents who were frequently branded by war supporters as “cowards” or “unmanly” for not enlisting in the armed forces.

⁷⁶ Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 152.

warfare battles of Ypres, the Somme and at Vimy had drastically reduced the number of soldiers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) - a crisis shared by allied British, French, and Russian forces. Facing a critical shortage of soldiers, British Prime Minister Lloyd George introduced conscription in Britain in 1916 and pressured Britain's allies to do the same. By 1917, Prime Minister Borden was persuaded that he needed to find 50,000 to 100,000 more men for the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France, yet recruitment had dried up. Borden decided that, although he had promised not to introduce conscription because he knew it would divide the country, forcing Canadian workers and farmers into the armed forces was the only way to maintain sufficient fighting strength in the CEF, justify the massive government contracts given to the Imperial Munitions Board and allow Canada to continue to contribute to the hoped-for Allied victory.

In the spring of 1917, Borden announced he would introduce a bill for compulsory military service, "conscription of men" for the war effort, and steer its passage through the House of Commons.⁷⁷ The measure promised to have a tremendous impact on working people. In the words of National Service Registration Director, and future Prime Minister Richard Bennett, conscription "would determine the manner by which men can serve the nation at this time, whether in the military or industrial capacity."⁷⁸ To union activists, this threatened the very existence of the labour movement, and raised the possibility of "industrial conscription" which was seen by many in the labour movement as reducing workers into a kind of slavery. Socialists in the BC labour movement led the fight to confront this new repression.⁷⁹ Speaking to a crowded labour meeting in Vancouver, A.S. Wells, Secretary-Treasurer of the BC Federation of Labour, proposed that Canada was fighting a military autocracy in Germany, and yet the same

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec 1914-1918*, 174.

⁷⁸ A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 124.

⁷⁹ Socialists in the labour movement were activists who used a Marxist, class-based analysis of capitalist relations and were organized in various groupings to promote the view that the key struggle was "to everywhere and always advocate for the interests of the international working class as a whole." According to the Socialist Party (SPC) Platform: The working class struggled to "set itself free from capitalist exploitation by abolition of the wage system by which capitalist exploitation is cloaked. To accomplish this necessitates the transformation of capitalist property in the means of wealth production into socially controlled economic forces. This would mean "transformation of capitalist property in the means of wealth into public ownership under the ownership and management of the working class." The complete Socialist Party Platform is contained in most issues of the *Western Clarion*, quoted in May 1915, 9.

kind of autocracy being created here by the Borden Government. E.T. Kingsley, a well-known BC socialist leader who edited the *BC Federationist* for a period and speaking at the same meeting, stated “a conscript is not a free man, and is not a possessor of democratic privileges.” He further suggested that the Borden government was “seeking to fasten the yoke of military autocracy on the necks of the people of Canada and sound the death knell of Canadian democracy.”⁸⁰ In a similar vein, Fred Dixon, popular Manitoba labour MLA, spoke out strongly against how the war was presented in government propaganda as a “war for democracy”: he argued that “The idea that the war was being fought for personal freedom is a myth, when conscription is slavery.”⁸¹ In his view, this new Canadian war policy amounted to what many Canadians thought the war was fighting against – a form of ‘Prussianism’ in which conscripts would become the property of the state, and Canadian citizens would become “subjects” without democratic rights or freedoms.⁸²

In aid of the campaign for conscription, the Borden government promoted a “win the war” policy as beneficial to the Canadian economy and lauded its many distinctive and stimulative effects and benefits especially for Canadian business. Unashamedly promoted with a “War is good for business” spin, Borden claimed his war policies had created a boom in industries servicing and supporting the war effort, thus expanding manufacturing and resource-based industrial activities. As a result, Canada became a key manufacturing base for British weapons, ammunition, and munitions production as well as resource-based war materials.⁸³ The federal government assigned war contracts to Canadian companies based on party patronage, and this generated huge profits for capitalist manufacturers. The Imperial Munitions Board (IMB) was the country’s biggest industrial enterprise and employer, controlling six hundred factories, 150,000 workers (including 40,000 women): it generated revenues of \$2 million a day.⁸⁴ In British

⁸⁰ *BC Federationist*, 8 June 1917, 1,8.

⁸¹ Quoted in the *Winnipeg Telegram* from a speech made by Dixon in Winnipeg on 4 June 1917.

⁸² *BC Federationist*, 14 June 1917.

⁸³ David Tough, “A Better Truth: The Democratic Legacy of Resistance to Conscription” in Lara Campbell (ed) *Worth Fighting For: Canada’s Tradition of War Resistance from 1812 to the War on Terror*, 73.

⁸⁴ Desmon Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 133.

Columbia, coal, lumber, mining, and other industries were booming during the war, and shipbuilding reached almost full employment by 1917.⁸⁵

An unintended consequence of this boom was that it created the economic conditions for the growth in numbers and strength of the labour movement. As the Canadian economy boomed during the war, so did the growth of the organized worker's movement. The emergence of a strong labour movement that made strong economic and political demands for workers was the precondition for labour's launching the anti-conscription movement. The critical shortage of labour in war industries created a climate in which labour activists could demand improvements in wages and working conditions. Successful bargaining-built confidence and led to significant increases in the organization, size, and strength of labour unions. Recruitment and membership flourished, and the numbers of workers with union cards expanded absolutely.⁸⁶ During the war, labour union membership rose across Canada from 140,000 members in 1915, to 160,000 in 1916, 205,000 in 1917, and 250,000 union members in 1918.⁸⁷ Wartime conditions aided trade union growth in British Columbia in particular where membership grew by one third in 1918 to 27,000 workers; at fifteen percent of the labour force this was an all-time high for the province.⁸⁸ With its numbers surging, labour unionism became a popular, grassroots movement across the province and country. A scarcity of labour on the home front meant employers could not easily find replacements for striking workers. This gave labour a renewed self-confidence and a willingness to use job action to fight for improvements in wages and working conditions -- even by waging illegal strikes.⁸⁹ In 1917, the number of strikes was twice that of previous years: while 75% of

⁸⁵ Allen Seager and David Roth, "British Columbia and the Mining West: A Ghost of a Chance," Craig Heron (eds), *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 245.

⁸⁶ David Bercuson in *Fools and Wise Men* reported that the labour movement grew by 100% in numbers during the war years. *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union*. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978), 58. see also Dale McCartney, "Crisis of Commitment: Socialist Internationalism in British Columbia during the Great War," 93.

⁸⁷ Craig Heron, "National Contours: Solidarity and Fragmentation," *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 269-70.

⁸⁸ Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia*, 76.

⁸⁹A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement*, 137.

the strikes were labelled illegal, 40% of them were deemed successful.⁹⁰ These statistics show that the militancy of workers was rising, and they were willing to go on strike in wartime conditions to achieve real gains. Success in worker mobilization, and gains in wages and working conditions through strikes, built increased confidence that labour struggle and action in wartime conditions could win real gains for workers: there was clearly a growing militancy in the labour movement in the late war period⁹¹ and this militancy would extend to the struggle against conscription.

The war-fueled industrial boom also accelerated a change in the kind and manner, of capitalist production in the growing Canadian economy. Corporate management had a new vision of industrial organization which placed increased value on efficiency, specialization, and mechanization. This new approach threatened the limited control craft workers had won through years of struggle over the organization of production.⁹² Increasingly, monopoly capitalism sought division of labour efficiencies, which reduced the need for skilled workers.⁹³ Craft unionists were losing out to changes in production that featured large factories engaged in high volume production where employers could employ unskilled workers to do piecework or run machines.⁹⁴ This shift in the nature of production created a 'crisis' in craft unionism as craft workers faced deskilling and the loss of their jobs, and lost what former power they held over the organization of production.⁹⁵

Another element in his shift was that munitions production required only unskilled or semi-skilled workers, so factories employed an increasing number of women workers, Asian workers, and non-Anglo immigrant workers who were brought in as a

⁹⁰ Ibid., 269.

⁹¹ Ibid., 27. See also Greg Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Workers Revolt," 47.

⁹² James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers: Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900-1919," *Labour/ Le Travail*, Issue 23, 1989, 11.

⁹³ Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia*, (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990), 13.

⁹⁴ Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatacki, "The Great War, the State and Working Class Canada," *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 22.

⁹⁵ James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers: Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900-1919," 15-16.

cheap labour force.⁹⁶ Predictably craft workers affiliated with the internationally based American Federation of Labor (AFL) or Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) in Canada criticized this industrial labour trend. This led to calls for the exclusion of Asian, immigrant, and women workers. In contrast the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council held a meeting at the Labor Temple to organize for minimum wage legislation for women workers in BC.⁹⁷ The VTLC supported women telephone and laundry workers in bitter strikes in Vancouver by organizing fundraisers and boycotts, and providing money for strike pay.⁹⁸ In industries where women dominated the workforce the organized labour movement generally helped newly organized women workers win strikes and wage struggles to gain a minimum wage and equal pay with men on the job. Helena Gutteridge, a VTLC executive member and labour organizer of working women who wrote a weekly column in the *BC Federationist* successfully argued to the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council that newly hired women “were not replacing men but taking their places beside them as comrades and equals and deserved equal wages.”⁹⁹ Solidarity among all workers in the same shop and a commitment to fight together for common goals were key elements in the success of the new industrial unions. Craft unions too often failed to understand it was not competition from Asian, “alien” or women’s labour that was preventing unity. The new-found confidence of labour in this period did not always overcome longstanding issues of racism and sexism which would divide and trouble the movement.

Despite these challenges, the labour movement became stronger with the formation of many new unions and labour councils which often demonstrated a militant attitude towards bargaining. New groups of workers began forming themselves into unions: firemen, teachers, postal workers, policemen, clerical, and municipal workers in

⁹⁶ Ibid., 19. Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, “The Great War, the State, and Working Class Canada,” *Workers’ Revolt* notes that Ukrainian “enemy alien” prisoner labour was used extensively in munitions production during the war.

⁹⁷ *BC Federationist*, 26 October 1917.

⁹⁸ Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 140, see also Irene Howard, *The Social Justice in BC: Helena Gutteridge: the Unknown Reformer*, (Vancouver :UBC Press, 1992), 116-7, 120-1.

⁹⁹ *BC Federationist*, 15 October 1917.

the public sector; factory workers in processing plants; and, others formed on ethnic lines, such as Chinese shingle workers and South Asian workers in the lumber industry, or Black sleeping car porters in the CPR all moved to organize.¹⁰⁰ In urban areas and ports, street railway workers and longshoremen also organized according to this industrial union type pioneered by the IWW. Most of the new unions were unions of the industrial as opposed to craft type and affiliated themselves with labour councils that brought local union reps together to play a coordinating role in bargaining and political action. They also played a role in public education in the community, bringing labour supporters together to debate political and economic strategies. Local labour newspapers such as *BC Federationist* in Vancouver were editorially independent of international union control and was “the largest labour newspaper in the West” with a circulation which had climbed to 15,000 in 1918.¹⁰¹ Labour councils like the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC) provided a forum to discuss and debate local issues where union representatives could play a leading role in the coordination of solidarity for industrial actions, or in building support for labour political involvement in parliamentary politics as well as in political campaigns such as the opposition to conscription.

Overall, the latter part of the war period was one of growth for labour and labour organizations: a variety of workers’ organizations gained new members and took on new political approaches. Both the VTLC and the BC Federation of Labour went on record as supporting industrial unionism, and, significantly, both these labour formations also led in the struggle against conscription.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 270.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Ben Isitt and Many Malhotra, *Able to Lead: Disablement, Radicalism, and the Political Life of E.T. Kingsley*, (Toronto: UBC Press, 2021),172-3.

Chapter 3.

“No Conscription, No Compromise!”

In early 1917, parts of the Canadian workers' movement moved to openly confront the Borden government's introduction of the proposed Conscription Bill. Labour activists knew that conscription would be a denial of rights of workers. According to the labour press, conscription would not only send workers into the murderous conditions of the trenches of World War One, but it would also weaken the struggle for collective bargaining that would directly and indirectly affect all workers. This measure was seen to fall on working people as the war would be waged with the lives of working-class men. Workers would lose their bargaining rights and lose their power to influence the conditions of employment. “A civilian can make a contract...but not a soldier” warned a labour newspaper.¹⁰² President Watters of the Trades and Labour Congress stressed that: “In the event of [conscription] being established, any attempt by the workers to ameliorate conditions will be met by simply calling them to the colors and placing them under military discipline when orders must be obeyed, and punishment meted out by court martial.”¹⁰³

The labour movement was also concerned that the bill meant the federal government could not only conscript workers for the trenches in Europe, but it could also industrially conscript workers for work in industry at home. Furthermore, the bill gave employers the power to direct all elements of a worker's life -- where and how they could work, as well as how much they would be paid. The labour movement reasoned that workers who could not choose to leave their jobs would experience *de facto* industrial conscription. To the labour movement it seemed unfair for the federal government to

¹⁰² *The Voice*, 29 December 1916.

¹⁰³ *Vancouver Daily World*, 15 June 1917.

conscript labour while corporate employers operated freely with their wealth untouched, and many companies were profiting greatly from the war.¹⁰⁴

The labour press advanced the political goal of “conscription of wealth” as a better approach; they argued that certainly it was a measure which should be undertaken before men were conscripted. The *BC Federationist* led this campaign to target the vast wealth corporations were making through munitions production that depended on an underpaid and exploited labour force.¹⁰⁵ Labour newspapers argued that conscription of the “real property of the capitalists” was preferable, and this would entail the nationalization of industry. In this labour vision, corporate wealth would be used to achieve national goals instead being lost to the country through private profiteering. TLC President J.C. Watters joined this campaign, arguing:

Conscription cannot be justified... Organized labour has every warrant to defeat it by political or economic means. The greatest service Canada can render the allies is to conscript (not borrow) the wealth of the nation, to take over and operate the mines, railways, munitions works and other establishments necessary for the prosecution of the war, including the banking system. And to eliminate the last vestige of profiteering so as to give the nation, not the profiteer, the benefit of the work.¹⁰⁶

Labour leader Parm Pettipiece continued this theme at an anti-conscription meeting in Vancouver when he proposed to the crowd that the government should “conscript wealth before men.”¹⁰⁷ Labour representative Walter Head emphasized the class character of the conscription issue when he noted: “the only people who are opposed to the conscription of wealth alone are the IODE [Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire], the Ministers of the Crown, the Boards of Trade, the food speculators, and profiteers like PT Rogers.”¹⁰⁸ [Roger’s Sugar plant was a long-time anti-union employer in East Vancouver.]

¹⁰⁴ *BC Federationist*, 21 September 1917, See also G. Stafford Whitford, “The Conscription of Wealth,” 6, 25 October 1916.

¹⁰⁵ *BC Federationist*, 26 January 1917.

¹⁰⁶ *Vancouver Daily Sun*, 15 June 1917.

¹⁰⁷ *BC Federationist*, 8 June 1917.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in the *BC Federationist*, 6 June 1917.

Labour newspapers pursued this theme of “conscription of wealth” as an alternative to Borden’s “conscription of men” in many articles between 1916 and 1917: even though some radical labour activists felt it did not go far enough and was compromised because it implied acceptance for some version of conscription.¹⁰⁹

While the anti-conscription movement was growing in Canada, in November 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia. The world was shocked to see the red flag of the workers’ movement flying over the symbols of the Russian state, but this was an inspiration to workers everywhere, and particularly to socialists in British Columbia.¹¹⁰ To many newly arrived Ukrainian and Russian workers in Canada, the revolution brought about the end of Tsarist oppression in their former homelands, and signified hope for the future. The revolution had been brought about, to a considerable extent, by the Tsarist regime’s mishandling of the war effort and its disrespect for workers and farmers. The Bolsheviks, or the Russian Social Democratic Party, had brought a coalition of socialist workers to power, and had been the anti-war party in Russia — the only group that had consistently opposed the Russian war effort and conscription from the beginning of the war. Lenin characterized the war thus: “On Russia’s part it unquestioningly remains a predatory imperialist war...owing to its capitalist nature.”¹¹¹ The Bolsheviks strongly opposed conscription for the war effort and organized mass desertions and mutinies within the Russian-armed forces. The success of this movement in Russia proved that there was massive support among the people for a movement of opposition against the war. Workers throughout the world were inspired by a new vision of a world in which those who toiled in the factories and fields could be a dominant force in society. To workers in many countries, Bolshevism signified the possibility of socialism, and, after the 1918 Russo-German Peace Treaty of Brest Litovsk, it also stood for world peace instead of imperialist war. The *BC Federationist* called the new workers’ government of Russia “a new day for workers ...a beacon of light showing the way to freedom.”¹¹² The

¹⁰⁹ *Western Clarion*, August 1917, 4.

¹¹⁰ Craig Heron. “Introduction,” *Workers’ Revolt in Canada*, 3.

¹¹¹ *Pravda*, 6 April 1917, Number 26, V.I. Lenin “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution.”

¹¹² *BC Federationist*, 3 January 1919.

Red Flag, a newspaper of the Socialist Party in Vancouver, commented that “the success of the Russian workers acted as a stimulus to socialists the world over.”¹¹³ In December 1918, E.T. Kingsley addressed a crowd gathered at the Empress Theatre in Vancouver assembled to provide support for the Russian workers; he criticized Canada’s participation in the Allied military intervention in Russia and demanded that Canada play no role in the Allied “intervention in Siberia or any interference in Russia’s internal affairs.”¹¹⁴ While these declarations are illuminating about BC perspectives historians might be cautioned from drawing too much from these comments as though these events were contemporaneous. BC Leftist didn’t know much about the Russian revolution until after the war.

As the support for the anti-war movement grew, strategies for opposing conscription developed. One of the strategies used by the labour movement was to broadly encourage its members to claim exemptions from active service in one of the eight categories allowed by the *Military Service Act* (MSA).¹¹⁵ While the National Executive of the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC) thought that they could gain leverage with the Federal government by supporting National Registration, many radical, urban-based labour councils saw this as a ruse or a form of class collaboration and refused to go along with this approach. The BC Federation of Labour issued a manifesto against the *Military Service Act* and urged non-compliance, expressing open defiance of the TLC Executive’s willingness to consider acceptance of conscription once it was passed into law.¹¹⁶ Labour in BC would not compromise with Borden’s attempts to co-opt labour leaders to support conscription. Support for the anti-conscription movement was demonstrated when Joe Naylor, a Vancouver Island coal miner and radical socialist committed to opposing the war, was elected President of the BCFL. Naylor predicted that soon “the weight of conscription will fall on the working class” and so, called for

¹¹³ *The Red Flag*, 21 June 1919.

¹¹⁴ *BC Federationist*, 3 January 1919, 2, 7.

¹¹⁵ J. Witham, “Opposition to Conscription in Ontario in 1917”, Witham describes the campaign in *Canadian Forward*, organ of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which aimed to encourage labour conscientious objectors to apply for the exemption clauses contained in the *Military Service Act*, 21-2.

¹¹⁶ *BC Federationist*, 9 June 1917, 1.

organized preparation and resistance. The convention voted to defend any trade unionist arrested for noncompliance with registration.¹¹⁷ This resolution shows the growth of support for the anti-conscription movement, and it stands in sharp contrast with BC labour's earlier lack of support for anti-war labour speakers. Later this resolution became BC Federation of Labour policy whereby, in the event of conscription, the workers of BC would 'down tools' in an immediate general work stoppage.¹¹⁸

By May 1917, Borden stated that his government was fully committed to implementing conscription. He announced that "conscription of men" was necessary to win the war. Declaring that "casualties were greater than enlistments" Borden told Parliament that conscription would defend Canada from the German imperial threat. He told Parliament "Our CEF [Canadian Expeditionary Force] men are fighting for the defense of Canada. When the Canadians on April 26, 1916, barred the path of the Germans to Calais I say they barred their path to Halifax, Quebec, St. John, and Montreal."¹¹⁹ However "conscription" as it was popularly known, still lacked popular legitimacy and a grassroots campaign would be waged by labour and other forces to defeat it. Massive opposition to conscription became manifest throughout the country in the spring and summer of 1917.

Public opposition to conscription developed quickly. The BCFL, led by President Joe Naylor, the VTLC, and the SPC, jointly launched a campaign against conscription under the slogan "No Conscription! No Compromise!" This campaign began in the 1 June 1917 issue of *BC Federationist*.¹²⁰ President Naylor wrote a front-page message to all BC workers explaining why labour opposed conscription. "What does conscription mean? It means that the master class will have free scope to do whatever it likes with workers; to make murder machines of them; ... it means you will be driven to work like a mule to be used like a beast of prey to kill whatever comes within your reach when you are told to do so." Throughout the summer of 1917, the labour movement in Vancouver

¹¹⁷ Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 129.

¹¹⁸ *BC Federationist*, 1 June 1917.

¹¹⁹ *Vancouver Daily World*, 12 June 1917.

¹²⁰ *BC Federationist*, 1 June 1917.

and throughout British Columbia continued this well-organized public political campaign against conscription: there were many large public meetings at downtown theatres such as the Orpheum, Empress Theatre, Avenue Theatre, and Rex theatres.¹²¹ Meetings were planned in Victoria but had to be held in public parks as pro-conscription forces there worked behind the scenes to prevent labour renting a large hall.¹²² The campaign was not just public education: at an emergency meeting on May 30, 1917, Vancouver Trades and Labour Council voted 90% to resist “by any means” the passage of the conscription law and pushed the BC Federation of Labour to organize a referendum of all BC organized workers regarding the growing call for a general strike in the province if conscription became law.¹²³ The actual ballot question on the referendum asked “Are you prepared to place in the hands of the Executive of the BC Federation of Labour, the power to call a general strike in the event of conscription, either military or industrial by the Dominion government?” The BCFL later announced that the referendum had passed overwhelmingly with more than forty unions reporting and voting in favour of the motion, by a ratio of 5-1. The *BC Federationist* reported that “down tools will be the order of the day when the Executive of the Federation deems this drastic step necessary as the only means left to protect the workers.”¹²⁴ In plain language, the report indicated that the BCFL Executive had been given the power to call a general strike in response to conscription at the time of its own choosing.¹²⁵ Helena Gutteridge was a moderate trade union member of the executive of the VTLC who had been pushed to the left to now help lead the fight to oppose conscription. She was the feature speaker against conscription at a meeting held at the Avenue Theatre on Main Street where she proclaimed that the British war effort was motivated not by the fight for freedom and democracy, as the Borden government frequently claimed, but rather, by the imperialist desire for a larger

¹²¹ *Canadian Forward*, June 25, 1917. See also Linda Kealey. *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 209-210, 302.

¹²² *BC Federationist*, 7 June 1917.

¹²³ Marin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930*, 127.

¹²⁴ *BC Federationist*, 7 September 1917. Title story on page 1.

¹²⁵ *BC Federationist*, 8 June 1917, 8.

share of world markets.¹²⁶ In support of the BCFL's "down tools" strategy Vancouver labour leader Jack Kavanaugh bluntly told the crowd "conscription was not necessary and was intended as an industrial measure to remove what rights the workers had. The only weapon you have, and it is an effective one, is to quit working."¹²⁷ The BCFL leadership was willing to use political and economic means, including job actions and strikes, to defeat conscription.

When the machinery of conscription began to be implemented in 1917 the numbers show overwhelmingly that many draftees followed the advice of the labour movement and asked for exemptions. Of the 401,882 men registered by the *Military Service Act*; the tribunals processed 379,629 appeals for exemption. In other words, 94% of all men who were conscripted, not just those in Quebec, asked to be excused from military service.¹²⁸ In BC, 12,824 conscripts out of 15,821 total draftees applied for exemptions.¹²⁹ This is an indication of the successful campaign labour led against conscription, and a massive rejection of conscription by the men most threatened by it. It would be useful for historians to study the government's conscription records of exemption claims and tribunal decisions, as well as their reasoning for the various decisions they made to gain more insight into how the Tribunals operated. Unfortunately, these files were destroyed after the war. Justice Lyman Duff, the Chief Appeal Judge, speaking to a journalist twenty-five years later, admitted that he was embarrassed by the scale and character of the exemptions and did not want the public to ever see the records because of what they revealed about the divisions in the country caused by conscription.¹³⁰

Before the Quebec anti-conscription riots in March and April 1918, ninety eight percent (98%) of the applications for exemptions from military service had been granted

¹²⁶ Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in BC: Helena Gutteridge: the Unknown Reformer*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), 119.

¹²⁷ *Vancouver Daily Sun*, 7 June 1917.

¹²⁸ J.R. Granatstein, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 96.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Quoted from Granatstein above in Roger Stonebanks, *Fighting for Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story*, 73.

¹³⁰ Grant Dexter, "Grant Dexter Papers," Queens University Archives quoted by Jack Granatstein in *Broken Promises*, 98.

in Quebec, and each successful applicant received a card to carry as proof of exemption.¹³¹ This policy may have been an attempt by the Canadian government to placate the broad movement of anti-imperialist and nationalist sentiment in Quebec.¹³² In contrast, exemptions in Ontario and much of the West were routinely denied, with the aim of punishing the labour and anti-conscription movement.¹³³ In BC, Ginger Goodwin, an anti-militarist and socialist Vice President of the BC Federation of Labour, initially succeeded in his claim for exemption on the grounds of physical disability, as he was initially listed as Category D “unfit”, but his classification was mysteriously changed to Category A, “fit” after he led a wartime strike in Trail against Cominco’s munitions plant.¹³⁴ This was the coming-to-life of one of labour’s worst nightmares about conscription; that labour activists who opposed it -- indeed all labour activists -- would be targeted for arrest and immediate removal to the trenches in Europe.

The Vancouver anti-conscription campaign was a joint effort of the local Socialist Party and the VTLC. One essential element of the Vancouver local campaign was the production and mass distribution of union pamphlets aimed at educating workers and the public in opposition to conscription. The local anti-conscription coalition produced the “No Conscription Manifesto” under the auspices of Dr. W. J. Curry of the local Anti-Conscription League and distributed it widely at public and union meetings, and on the streets. The Manifesto argued that conscription “strips from us some of the last vestiges of liberty we possess.” It identified conscription as having its origin in Canadian capitalism and urged Vancouver workers to support the campaign:

We take particular exception to being forced to take part in any war between sections of the master class in which we would be compelled to shoot down

¹³¹ J.R. Granatstein, *Canada at War: Conscription, Diplomacy and Politics*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 21.

¹³² Nicholson, H.F, “Conscription is not needed.” in *Saturday Night*, May 24, 1941. The author reports to having been a member of the Military Service Appeal Tribunals in Quebec in World War One and claims that political pressure was applied to tribunal judges to grant all exemptions. Elizabeth Armstrong in her 1937 *The Crisis of Quebec 1914-1918* quotes Borden telling the House of Commons that the federal government could not prevent local tribunals who sympathized with the anti-conscription movement from granting all exemptions, 226.

¹³³ Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Radical Revolutionaries*, 139.

¹³⁴ Roger Stonebanks, *Fighting for Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story*, (St. John’s: Canadian Committee on Labour History 2004), 81-84.

or be shot down by, other members of the working class no matter what flag they may accidentally be living under.

Workers of Canada! You have but one enemy, the master class. Your fight is not against your fellow workers but against the system of exploitation under which we suffer and from which springs war and all its attendant horrors.¹³⁵

The labour sponsored anti-conscription campaign included bi-weekly, public meetings promoting various forms of opposition to conscription. At one meeting at the Avenue Theatre, E.T. Kingsley, a prominent socialist speaker, suggested that conscription “was not unlike the old ways of the press gang” and predicted that its successful implementation “will sound the death knell of democracy in Canada.”¹³⁶ At a later meeting at the Empress Theatre on June 13, Kingsley linked the historical origin of soldiers with the labour struggle:

The soldier made his appearance when the first slave was shackled and has been in existence ever since and will remain so as long as there are slaves. The Parliament of Canada has never been given authority to put a military yoke on the people, yet they try to pass a conscription law when their span of life has long passed. We will not have conscription! We will lay down our tools until it is repealed.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ *Vancouver Daily Sun*, 9 June 1917, quoted from an article p 2.

¹³⁶ *BC Federationist*, 6 June 1917, 1.

¹³⁷ *BC Federationist*, 14 June 1917, 4.



Figure 2. *Vancouver Sun* 1917. Vancouver Trades and Labour Council used the Empress Theatre as one venue of its many mass meetings against conscription in its campaign in the summer of 1917. Photo of the Empress Theatre on Hastings at Gore taken during the campaign on 13 July 1917.¹³⁸

At the BC Federation of Labour Convention in September 1917, Vice President Albert “Ginger” Goodwin suggested that “a massive force opposing conscription was lying dormant throughout the length and breadth of this country” and could be awakened by labour. At a meeting of one union participating in the campaign, the newly unionized women telephone operators of Local 2013 of the Telecommunications Workers Union, the members voted overwhelmingly to oppose Borden’s policy of Registration as a prelude to industrial conscription. The motion reflected the perception by workers of the inherent class bias of conscription and affirmed that the union movement would continue to oppose conscription until “all honorary colonels are sent to the front; and all wealth is

¹³⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 13 July 1917, Empress Theatre, Vancouver, BC, Harold Robbins Photo credit.

conscripted.”¹³⁹ The movement against conscription was awakening class consciousness among workers.

The labour press waged the fight against conscription in print, reporting on growing struggles against conscription by labour throughout the world. In its issue of 28 December 1917, the *BC Federationist* announced that conscription had been defeated in a referendum in Australia for a second time, this time by a larger margin than in 1916 when the government had originally disenfranchised 100,000 voters. In 1917, conscription opponents led by the labour movement won the vote by 175,000 votes: the *Federationist* concluded it was a “defeat for autocracy and Prussianism.”¹⁴⁰ In a similar vein, *Canadian Forward*, the newspaper of the SDP, published the well-known American anti-conscription pamphlet *The Price We Pay*.¹⁴¹ The newspaper and pamphlet were widely distributed in Canada and condemned conscription in harsh terms:

Conscription is upon us; the draft law is a fact! Into your homes the recruiting officers are coming. They will take your sons of military age and impress them into the army... taking the younger ones as they grow to soldier’s size...those who are sent out to maim and murder another for the profit of bankers and investors.”

The *BC Federationist* also reported that US workers were willing to brave repression to protest the American participation in the war. The paper reported that the labour movement in Seattle had organized a successful one-day general strike to protest the planned execution of Thomas J. Mooney, an IWW and socialist activist falsely accused of bombing a war-preparedness parade for the entry of the USA into the war.¹⁴² Mooney’s execution was averted due to labour pressure. Even the pro-war *Vancouver Daily Sun* reported that in the US “a procession of six hundred workers under the banner ‘Down with War’ marched in Butte, Montana against conscription. The march was declared a riot and dispersed by federal troops, with leaders arrested, and martial law was imposed

¹³⁹ Cited in Elaine Bernard, “The Long-Distance Feeling; History of the Telecommunications Workers,” PhD Thesis, (Burnaby: Simon Fraser University, Department of History, 1988), 101.

¹⁴⁰ *BC Federationist*, 28 December 1917, 1.

¹⁴¹ *Canadian Forward*, 24 July 1917. See also Ian Milligan, “Sedition in Wartime Ontario: The Trials and Imprisonment of Isaac Bainbridge 1917-1918,” 167.

¹⁴² *BC Federationist*, 26 May 1917.

as troops patrolled the streets.”¹⁴³ In spite of attempts at repression by various governments, the strength of labour’s fight against conscription was strong and growing in many countries, becoming a force to be reckoned with. In Vancouver as elsewhere, conscription provoked resistance that moved workers to critique capitalism and the state, and to adopt more militant forms of action.

¹⁴³ *Vancouver Daily Sun*, 6 June 1917.

Chapter 4.

“Canada’s Khaki Election”

In the fall of 1917, the Borden government’s electoral term was up (having finished its constitutionally defined term of five years) and it needed to find a way to retain political power. It was seen as having lost its political legitimacy and was facing increasing discontent across the country. Borden produced what he thought would be a winning strategy: he introduced a “khaki” themed election in wartime so the government could wrap itself in explicitly patriotic rhetoric, target the campaign against labour, immigrants, and Quebec, and introduce conscription as the solution to a national crisis.¹⁴⁴ The positive spin of the Borden campaign was to stress repeatedly that the Borden government aimed to “Win the War” and ask the public rhetorically “Who would disapprove of that?”¹⁴⁵ This tactic was successful in as much as it caused a split in the opposition Liberal Party where many of the Party’s anglophone members quit to join Borden’s Conservatives in a new “Unionist” pro-war coalition. However, in BC the BCFL together with other labour Federations across the country took up this challenge with a strong independent labour campaign that saw many labour leaders standing as anti-conscription candidates in the election. The labour campaign was highlighted with a focus on educating workers to defend themselves against the Borden government’s attempt to impose conscription and other repressive laws. In the view of the BC Federation of Labour, the Borden government deliberately launched polarizing and divisive attacks on marginalized Canadians to highlight its intent, and to win support for militarism and conscription.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ The term “khaki election” comes from the successful but questionable electoral strategy of the British Conservative Party in the general election of 1900 where “patriotism” in wartime conditions of the British imperial war with the Boers in South Africa was used as a “valuable weapon in the Conservative armoury.” See Paul Readman “The Conservative Party, Patriotism and British Politics and General Election of 1900.” *Journal of British Studies* Vol 40, No 1 (January 2001), 108-110.

¹⁴⁵ *BC Federationist*, 9 November 1917. Labour campaign platform featured on 1,3,4.

¹⁴⁶ *BC Federationist*, 28 September 1917.

The “Unionist” campaign was helped by major Canadian corporations and employers and had the support of the mainstream media and large English Canadian churches. Their election campaign highlighted conscription as the answer to a national need and aggressively denounced those who opposed it variously as traitors, effete intellectuals posing as pacifists, cowards, disloyal French Canadians, slackers, and immigrant “enemy aliens” who did not want to do their part against the German Huns and “Kaiserism.”¹⁴⁷ Historian Desmond Morton characterized Borden’s divisive campaign as “one of the ugliest in the Canadian experience.”¹⁴⁸ Historians Granatstein and Hitsman refer to the common Unionist campaign portrayal of French Canadians as “slackers” and of recent immigrants as traitors as “overtly racist.”¹⁴⁹ According to the *BC Federationist*, the Unionist campaign emphasized the theme that “war is good for business,” that the war provided the opportunity to develop resource industries profitably. Conservatives claimed that the munitions plants that provided materials for the war effort created employment for many, and that when government bought the farmer’s harvest and used it for the war effort, Canadian business large and small would thrive on war contracts.¹⁵⁰

An essential element of Borden’s re-election strategy was the introduction of the *Wartime Elections Act* (WEA) which introduced blatantly racist and undemocratic electoral measures designed to remove the franchise from groups that opposed conscription, and to grant the vote to groups that were likely to favour it. The legislation took away the right to vote from all immigrants who had arrived in Canada after 1902 from what were currently “enemy” countries – this included not only many Ukrainians, but also many other East Europeans in the West. This measure met with outrage as it retroactively removed a fundamental right that citizens had been granted. *The BC Federationist* thundered against the *Act*, charging it was manipulating the voting rolls and was a “proposal allowing the franchise only to sure Borden supporters.” In its article

¹⁴⁷ Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, “The Great War, the State and Working-Class Canada” in *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada*, 24.

¹⁴⁸ Quoted in Amy Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada*, 32.

¹⁴⁹ J.L. Granatstein, and J.M. Hitsman. *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*, 78.

¹⁵⁰ *BC Federationist*, 11 January 1918.

“Franchise to be Limited to Assured Supporters of Conscription,” the *Federationist* pointed out that “the Act disenfranchised Mennonites, Doukhobors and all other conscientious objectors, and those claiming exemption from military service for conscientious reasons.”¹⁵¹ At the same time, based on the theory that active soldiers would support conscription, the legislation bestowed the franchise for the first time on anyone serving in the armed forces in Europe, as well as on any British subject in the military -- including any immigrant, minor, woman or Indigenous person serving in the armed forces -- regardless of the length of time they had been in Canada.

Departing from British parliamentary electoral norms, the Borden government also set up an overseas voting protocol which classified votes by soldiers as either “Government” or “Opposition” rather than for specific candidates in local constituencies: government electoral officials could then assign the votes to any electoral constituency in Canada that they chose.¹⁵² In complete violation of democratic electoral procedures, this allowed government officials to assign votes as needed, without transparency, to ensure the election of the maximum number of Conservative/Unionist candidates.¹⁵³ After a long campaign for suffrage, women were finally granted the vote, but not all women were given the franchise. The vote was only given to female relatives of soldiers -- wives, widows, mothers, and daughters, or sisters of soldiers who had gone overseas -- who, quite understandably, wanted reinforcements to be sent to their male relatives and, consequently, would vote for conscription so that conscripts would replace these men at the front. The women’s suffragist movement was outraged that this long fought for democratic right was to be denied to most Canadian women and an extremely limited suffrage was used cynically in this way.¹⁵⁴ Indigenous people who maintained status under

¹⁵¹ *BC Federationist*, 12 October 1917, 1.

¹⁵² J.R. Granatstein, *Canada at War, Conscription, Diplomacy and Politics*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020), 25.

¹⁵³ Daniel Francis, *Seeing Reds: The Red Scare of 1918-1919: Canada’s First War on Terror*,” (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010), 43. Francis argues that at least fourteen additional federal seats went to the Conservative Unionist government by manipulating the vote in this way.

¹⁵⁴ Lara Campbell, *A Great Revolutionary Wave, Women, and the Vote in British Columbia*, 193, 206.

the Indian Act, and Asian immigrants, were not deemed Canadians, and therefore were not given citizenship, or the voting rights it implied.

The BCFL election campaign featured articles in the *Federationist* such as “The Case against Conscription: from the viewpoint of the Working Classes” arguing that the whole election was a “wheeze” aimed at putting the working classes under compulsion for military and industrial purposes and was a serious menace to the liberties of the people.¹⁵⁵ The article argued that conscription was unnecessary as the war was almost won, and there was not enough time for conscripted troops to play any significant part in the war: conscription was really implemented mainly because grafters in industry would benefit from it. The article went on to argue that Borden did not ask the Canadian Parliament or people for the 100,000 troops, but did:

Consult with the profiteers when he fixed the amount of Victory loans and it is into the pockets of such men as Flavelle, Bertram, Carnegie ...etc. that the money will go, for are we not told that all the money will be spent in war needs, to be supplied by Canadian Conservative Manufacturers? And we have such men in Vancouver, men who only look at the conscripts and the troops as a means of enriching themselves.¹⁵⁶

In support of this view, the article quotes the leader of the Canadian Manufacturing Association who went on record as stating: “The depleted Dominion treasury will receive a fill-up in the shape of the Victory loan and this credit will be exhausted by orders placed with Canadian manufacturers.” In the author’s view from the point of view of the grafter, “the principal interest in compulsory military service is in raising an army of conscripts, whose main objective is to wear out boots and clothing so that the Manufacturing friends of the politicians in Ottawa will have fresh orders and more profits, ...and the funds subscribed...will find themselves into the banking accounts of parasitical conservative heelers.”¹⁵⁷ In the view of the *BC Federationist* the whole scheme, financed by the Canadian people, will only benefit the same old, rotten Borden bunch now known by the new ‘Unionist’ cognomen.

¹⁵⁵ *BC Federationist*, 14 December 1917, 8.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

The *BC Federationist* reported extensively on the BCFL election campaign. A representative example would be an article in the paper that described the campaign rally held in the Fraser Hall in South Vancouver that took place on the night of Tuesday 11 December 1917: where both Labour Candidate McVety, and Labour campaign speaker, E.T Kingsley, addressed the crowd. The *Federationist* reported that Labour candidate McVety began by stating “I charge the Borden government with three indictments which show they should be found guilty and refused a further period in office.”¹⁵⁸ Firstly, McVety referred to the various grafts that had been carried on by the “Win the War” Borden team since the beginning of the war. He produced a Conservative/Unionist poster of a skeleton marked “Canadian army” who was accusing the electorate of having deserted him. McVety pointed out that the artist should have marked the rifle the skeleton was holding as a Ross rifle “because if there is one thing more than any other that had contributed to making the Canadian army a skeleton it was the Ross.”¹⁵⁹ The skeleton also had no shoes, and McVety suggested that this was probably because they had been of the cardboard kind often produced by Imperial Munitions contractors. McVety then charged the Conservatives with the second indictment which was the “the Military Service Act by which 100,000 men were to be secured to win the war.” Although the labour speaker recognized the excellent worth of the Canadian soldier, he was not prepared to concede that the war in which thirty million soldiers are presently engaged was likely to be won or lost through the presence or absence of such as small group of men. McVety argued that “While securing men for the front was the pretense for placing the Act on the statute books, the real reason was to begin the industrial conscription of the workers who would play their part in the war effort at home by working long hours, for low pay, in industry.” In fact, McVety stated they were already being exempted as they were needed by industry “provided they remain in their present occupations for the same employers.”¹⁶⁰ This meant they could not leave these jobs or improve their conditions in them. The third

¹⁵⁸ *BC Federationist*, 14 December 1917, 8.

¹⁵⁹ Danie Francis, *Seeing Reds: the Red Scare of 1918-9*, 35-36. The Ross rifle was issued to Canadian forces based on patronage munitions contracts with the Ross Rifle company who were Borden Conservative supporters. Canadian soldiers reported that the Ross rifle frequently jammed in combat leaving soldiers defenseless.

¹⁶⁰ *BC Federationist*, 14 December 1917, 8.

formal accusation by these labour speakers was that the *Wartime Elections Act* showed that the Conservatives were afraid to entrust the franchise, that labour had long argued for, to Canadian women. McVety stated “the local [voting] lists are a scandal and a shame where every possible effort was being made to exclude those known to be opposed to the government and to include those likely to vote in its favour.”¹⁶¹ E.T. Kingsley, who concluded for the labour campaign, traced the position of the worker from earliest times, “showing just what happened to them through the chattel and wage systems and what they the workers would have to do in order to break the bondage in which they were held by the capitalist class.” The author of the article reported that Kingsley held the attention of the audience for more than an hour, peppering his address with “many humorous sallies at the expense of the workers themselves, and illustrating his points with homely, simple examples.”¹⁶² With rallies like this the BCFL waged a class-based electoral campaign criticizing the policies and record of the traditional parties -- particularly the Conservative war policies – and critiquing conscription from a working-class perspective.

While labour campaigned hard against conscription during the election, it was not successful in winning any seats in Parliament in the thirty-eight constituencies across Canada that were contested by labour candidates. The result was seen as a disaster for labour and anti-conscription forces. Official results gave Borden’s “Unionist” Conservatives 68% of the vote in BC and all thirteen federal seats, while Labour candidates won 6% of the vote and no seats. The *Victoria Times Colonist* cheered the result calling the election “a sweeping victory for the cause of Union government and for the enforcement of the *Military Service Act*.”¹⁶³ Conversely a *BC Federationist* article mocked the Federal “first past the post voting system” which had delivered the Conservative victory, and argued that even in a strong labour city like Vancouver “it is impossible under the existing system for a labor man to be elected to public office” or “for Vancouver to gain Labor representation.”¹⁶⁴ Seeking to explain the election results,

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14 December 1917, 8,

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 14 December 1917,8.

¹⁶³ *Vancouver Province*, 18 December 1917, “Canada is safe from Treason,” 3.

¹⁶⁴ *BC Federationist*, 4 January 1918. “Something you’ve been looking for: A chance to elect a Labor Candidate in a Model Election” based on Proportional Representation, 5.

the *BC Federationist* argued that gerrymandering and exclusions were decisive factors in the government win. The paper commented:

Most of the people who were allowed to vote, voted for the government. This does not mean that the majority of the people of Canada are in favour of conscription: if Mr. Borden had thought this was the case, the *War-Times Election Act* would not have been born. The refusal to take a referendum on the question of conscription and the enactment of the above-mentioned *Franchise Act* are conclusive evidence, ...that Mr. Borden has stolen the election.¹⁶⁵

BC Federationist also mocked Borden's deceptive "Unionist" ploy where "the dishonest Borden government is masquerading as a "union" government after having added to the cabinet some self-seeking politicians of the Grit stripe."¹⁶⁶

The success of the Conservatives was due in part to the difficulties experienced by labour candidates in the "first past the post" electoral system, as well as the gerrymandering and widespread voter suppression. Labour considered that the election results did not really show the support that labour had among the working class in the country, nor did it show the opposition that existed to the Borden government and conscription. This led to soul searching which may have pushed labour to consider that more effective opposition needed to include more radical extra parliamentary measures such as the general strike. While Borden interpreted the results of the election as a mandate to go full on with conscription, labour believed that opposition to conscription was much more extensive than the election results seemed to indicate. In the aftermath of the election, labour and other progressive forces braced themselves to oppose the looming government repression highlighted by conscription with a campaign of resistance, civil disobedience, and eventual general strike action.

In *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, Historian A. Ross McCormack proposed that the BCFL Convention of September 1917 had decided to try 'constitutional' or parliamentary and political means to gain recognition for the rights of

¹⁶⁵ *BC Federationist*, 4 January 1918. quoted from article "The Priests and the Leaders Swept the Country: Barabbas in Jerusalem 2000 Years ago and Borden in Canada 1917," 5.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2 November 1917. "Labor David will Hurl Defiance at Capitalist Goliath," 1.

labour in Canada's wartime society; however, after the electoral defeat of the labour candidates in the federal election a few months later, it was clear that this strategy had failed.¹⁶⁷ The election was seen by many in the labour movement as actually a defeat for the "labourist" strategy. In response to this, 'direct action' became the chosen tactic of the newly unified labour movement where the use of, as the *BC Federationist* predicted, "more deadly and destructive weapons ...[were] ... imperative, this meant organizing the general strike."¹⁶⁸ Of course, radical labour activists at the time would not have been torn by the false dichotomy McCormack presents between political parliamentary activism, and direct-action strikes. The socialist labour activists organizing these actions knew that it was necessary to change tactics as needed in order to utilize both strategies.

In spite of labourism's defeat, there were some labour activists who thought the way forward for labour lay through the building of an independent workers' party that would oppose conscription and seek political power in government. In many parts of the country there were independent Labour candidates, and in BC, the Federated Labour Party (FLP) carried the hopes of workers and challenged the mainstream parties in federal and provincial contests. Some socialist and labour activists began to see that a big tent political party based on labour with the support of the labour unions could, over time, aspire to capturing political power through the electoral process. Long time socialist theorist and *BC Federationist* editor E.T. Kingsley, and moderate socialist MLA James Hawthornthwaite worked with labour supporter J.S. Woodsworth and others to build this party. At the same time, labour activists found common cause in building a workers' movement that embraced not only election campaigns but also direct labour actions, political strikes, and general strikes to achieve its ends. In 1918, in the aftermath of the Federal election, and as the workers' movement confronted the implementation of conscription and increased government repression, there was a coming together in common purpose of labourist, militant industrial unionist and revolutionary socialist tendencies in the labour movement.¹⁶⁹ Joe Naylor and other labour union activists, often

¹⁶⁷A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 136-7.

¹⁶⁸ *BC Federationist*, 9 November 1917.

¹⁶⁹ A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, McCormack identifies and describes these three major tendencies in the labour movement, 34. see also Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 13.

from the Socialist Party, worked to build this labour coalition that supported the awareness within various workers' groups and unions that the war must be confronted. These radical labour leaders were also the leading force in the Vancouver District Labour Council and the BCFL which would be the key organizers of the general strikes of 1918-19. All sectors of the labour movement seemed united in British Columbia to confront the threat posed by conscription.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia*, 69.

Chapter 5.

“A massive movement against conscription lies dormant across the country.”

With the *Military Service Act* now in full force and being ruthlessly implemented by a Borden government that used all the powers available to the Canadian state, a movement of non-compliance, civil disobedience and resistance developed across Canada. In addition, active opponents of conscription not only had to contend with the potent enforcement powers of the federal government, but frequently also had to endure physical attacks by violent gangs that supported the war and conscription. Many of these attackers were demobilized soldiers who often had an opaque relationship with local “Citizens Committees” that Borden supported to help “maintain public order” in cities “when the loyalty and strength of local police might be in question.”¹⁷¹ In Vancouver, that was certainly an issue for the government as the Vancouver Police Union had been founded in the Vancouver Labor Temple with the support of VTLC organizers and was organically affiliated with labour.¹⁷² Borden was hopeful that the Citizen’s Committees would complement the work of the police in “controlling alien subversion and groups that might obstruct the full prosecution of the war.”¹⁷³

Anti-conscription meetings held in Ontario and Winnipeg had already faced the threat of physical violence by organized opponents who mobilized soldiers to assault both speakers and meeting participants. When returned soldiers attacked meetings of the Anti-Conscription League in Winnipeg, the Winnipeg Labour Council created the Workers’ Council to “resist the curtailment of liberties...and further the cause of freedom of speech

¹⁷¹ Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930*, 164. Robin quotes from the *Borden Papers* correspondence between Borden and Cahan, his chief security advisor.

¹⁷² *BC Federationist*, 21, 28 June 1918. The *Federationist* reported that the Vancouver City police held an organizing meeting at the Labor Temple to form a union. *The BC Federationist* 28 June 1918 reported that 90% of the men were now members of the Police Union.

¹⁷³ Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930*, 164. Robin quotes from a letter from C.H Cahan to R.I. Borden, 27 August 1918, *Borden Papers* (Public Archives of Canada).

and the press as well as citizenship rights ... through political action.”¹⁷⁴ A meeting against conscription organized in Toronto was attacked and taken over by 300 returned soldiers. Another large anti-conscription meeting of 9000 at City Hall Square in Winnipeg was attacked by returned soldiers, and Alderman Queen, who was to speak, was assaulted.¹⁷⁵ At an anti-conscription meeting in Winnipeg, MPP Fred Dixon was assaulted as he rose to speak, and Helen Armstrong, an anti-conscription labour activist, was also roughed up.¹⁷⁶ In Toronto, the League for Combating Universal Military Service (The Anti-Conscription League) was launched with a public meeting in Alexandra Park. Isaac Bainbridge, editor of *Canadian Forward* of the SDP and a leader in the anti-conscription movement, addressed a crowd of 2000, but the meeting was disrupted by soldiers and had to be cancelled.¹⁷⁷ Previous anti-conscription meetings in the Ontario cities of Guelph, Port Arthur, and Toronto had also been attacked by soldiers and broken up.¹⁷⁸ It is worth noting that police did not lay charges against any of the violent attackers who broke up these labour-sponsored meetings. Yet after the Toronto meeting was disrupted, the Chief of Police ordered the park and nearby streets closed to anti-conscription events due to “the threat of violence,” and Federal Chief Censor Chalmers ordered the media not to report on anti-conscription events or author articles about the anti-conscription movement.¹⁷⁹ These events show that the Borden government was hypocritically using “law and order” as a weapon to beat down the labour sponsored anti-conscription movement.

In the face of these attacks, BC labour became increasingly aware of the challenges they faced in this campaign, where they originated, and how to deal with them. The *BC Federationist* and the leadership of the BC labour movement had no doubt who was behind the violent attacks on the anti-conscription movement. They did not

¹⁷⁴ *The Voice*, 10 and 17 August 1917.

¹⁷⁵ *Vancouver Daily World*, 2 August 1917.

¹⁷⁶ Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 209.

¹⁷⁷ *Industrial Banner*, 24 August 1917.

¹⁷⁸ *The Globe*, 6 June 1917.

¹⁷⁹ John R. Witham, “Opposition to Conscription in Ontario,” 19.

blame or criticize the returned soldiers, viewing them as pawns manipulated by dark forces. “It must be remembered that members of the BC Manufacturers Association and members of the business element in this city were instrumental in the gathering of the returned men ...and in instigating the violent acts.”¹⁸⁰ The VTLC stated that it “did not blame the returned men but rather, the real instigators from the Board of Trade and Manufacturers who opposed organized labour and were waiting for a chance to destroy it.”¹⁸¹ At the same time, the labour press repeatedly reached out to demobilized men who suffered unemployment and lived in poverty in the city to make common cause against corporate power. The *Federationist* reasoned “If labour is to be victorious the various groups of workers must be drawn together or hang separately. The returned men can be our allies, drawn mostly from the ranks of labour, disillusioned, and broadened by the experience of the front they are not going to settle down into the old ruts.”¹⁸² To reach out to them, the VTLC sponsored joint meetings and discussions with returned soldiers’ groups. These talks led to fruition as “Soldier/Labour Councils” were established in Vancouver and Victoria.¹⁸³ Labour leaders hoped that growing numbers of returned men would flock to labour’s banner in the coming struggles across the country.¹⁸⁴

Another problem the anti-conscription movement had to overcome was the Borden government strategies of active censorship, police raids, and the use of criminal charges and repression to try to silence the movement. Homes of labour activists were raided by Dominion police and RNWMP who were looking for literature that criticized the war or called for “socialism” which the Borden government deemed as “seditious.” VTLC leader Ernest Winch had his home raided and searched in the middle of the night

¹⁸⁰ *BC Federationist*, 9 August 1918, 5.

¹⁸¹ *BC Federationist*, 9 August 1918, 5,8.

¹⁸² *BC Federationist*, 30 August 1918.

¹⁸³ *Victoria Times Colonist*, 8 December 1918, “Returned Soldiers Agree to Cooperate with Labour Unions to insure Future.”

¹⁸⁴ A similar coming together and alliance of labour supporters and returned soldiers was observed in Halifax and Cape Breton in 1917. see Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton, “The Maritimes Expanding the Circle of Resistance,” Craig Heron (ed) *Workers Revolt in Canada*, 47, 48. Mackay quotes from stories in the *Sidney Daily Post*, 11 and 14 August, and 11 and 14 December 1917 which describes how in Nova Scotia labour supporters and returned soldiers made common cause against local employers, in protesting abuses in the shipyards and by immigration agents.

by police who turned the house upside down looking for “seditious” socialist literature. Isaac Bainbridge, a prominent spokesman against conscription, was arrested four times during 1917 and 1918 on charges of seditious libel, and possession of seditious literature: he was sentenced to multiple jail terms.¹⁸⁵ The anti-conscription pamphlet “*The Price We Pay*”, which had been published in *Canadian Forward*, was used as evidence against him in the trials. Chief Censor Colonel Chambers authorized a raid on the SDP paper *The Messenger* in Victoria to silence its anti-war and anti-conscription articles; he was also prepared to move to close down the *Western Clarion* and *BC Federationist* in Vancouver.¹⁸⁶ Government censorship fell heavily on the labour movement, imposing a real threat to freedom of speech when in July 1918 the VTLC-supported newspaper *The Week* was closed by government order and its editor jailed for publishing the terms of recently negotiated Allied secret treaties. The offices of both the *BC Federationist* and Socialist Party in Vancouver were raided by police and threatened with permanent closure if they continued their criticism of the war and conscription. Police spies and informers reporting to the RNWMP infiltrated the labour movement and reported to their superiors that they detected among workers “a very strong undercurrent of feeling against conscription.”¹⁸⁷ The anti-conscription movement had to manage and resist many obstacles and threats, coming from the lowest to the highest levels of authority.

While clearly an ongoing threat to labour, these government attacks did not slow down the growing strength of the anti-conscription movement as rallies and actions against conscription continued across the country. At the same time, anti-conscription activists in the labour movement criticized the lack of leadership from of the TLC executive. In this vacuum created in the national labour centre, local labour councils came to play a leadership role in openly criticizing and organizing against the repressive

¹⁸⁵ *BC Federationist*, 5 October 1917, 8. See also Ian Mulligan. “Sedition in Wartime Ontario: The Trials and Imprisonment of Isaac Bainbridge,” *Ontario History* 100 (2), 2008, 150.

¹⁸⁶ A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 131.

¹⁸⁷ Greg Kealey, “The Surveillance State: Origins of Domestic subversion and Counterintelligence in Canada 1914-1925,” *Intelligence and National Security*, Volume 7, No 3, 1992, 181. see Mark Leier, *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden*, 91-101. Leier explains how Gosden, an IWW activist, became a police spy attempting to infiltrate and influence the labour movement, particularly the OBU. He provided reports and profiles of leaders and strategies he observed and made recommendations to the RNWMP on how the OBU, and labour struggles could be defeated.

actions of the Borden government. The situation succeeded in awakening a sleeping labour giant.¹⁸⁸ This opposition movement would challenge the government on many fronts, and the crisis would deepen into a labour revolt.

As the reality of the horrors of war and Borden's repressive policies became more visible to the people in Canada, pacifists and liberal conscientious objectors increasingly joined the anti-conscription movement. As noted earlier, the war sparked liberal conscientious objectors to shift from being a primarily religious movement, to joining a movement of more political, even radical dissent. Liberal pacifists increasingly joined the political campaigns of the labour movement and began to oppose conscription publicly and politically. All three branches of the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Toronto issued a joint statement opposing the conscription bill. When the *Military Service Act* became law, the Quakers urged their supporters to support the call of the labour movement for resisters to apply for what exemptions were allowed. In these ways, the movement of liberal anti-militarists became allied with the anti-conscriptionist labour movement. Some progressive churchmen even faced expulsion from their church organizations for their anti-war activism, and they chose to join the anti-war movement. Reverends J.S. Woodsworth, Salem Bland, and William Ivens transformed their Christian social gospel pacifist approach to the war and conscription, into a more radical, socialist perspective and were consequently dismissed from their Methodist church positions. Some forged direct connections with labour: Reverend Ivens became editor of the *Western Labour News*, a popular labour newspaper. These social gospel activists enriched the anti-war labour movement with the creation of the Labour Church -- a creedless, secular, popular, and non-sectarian church seeking social justice. Thousands regularly joined its Sunday services that were usually held in public parks, and which became a basis for radical public education that supported the anti-conscription and workers' movement.¹⁸⁹ J.S. Woodsworth explained: "The Labour Church was born during the war as a protest against war. We believe that physical force settles nothing... The cooperative commonwealth must be founded on justice and goodwill. It presupposes the "consent of the governed."

¹⁸⁸ Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour*, 137.

¹⁸⁹ Thomas Socknat, "Witness Against War," 137.

Democracy that is maintained by coercion is not worthy of the name. Education, then, not the sword, is the instrument of our emancipation.”¹⁹⁰

While thousands of war resisters in Canada claimed exemptions under the *Military Service Act*, and increasingly expressed their opposition to the war effort, many other conscientious objectors refused to serve in the armed forces in any way and were convicted and imprisoned by *MSA* tribunals. These tribunals sentenced hundreds of workers who had claimed exemption from military service because of their religious convictions (deemed by *MSA* tribunals as outside of the official “peace churches” recognized by the Canadian government), political opposition, or any of the other rationales for exemption. Historian Amy Shaw has documented the path of resistance taken by hundreds of objectors whose usual sentence from *MSA* tribunals was a minimum of two years hard labour in a federal prison. Although records of the *MSA* tribunals were destroyed after the war, Shaw has pieced together a list from other sources, including Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) files, of 254 named conscientious objectors in Canada in World War One. Her research includes detailed information about the basis of each claim, and the eventual sentence.¹⁹¹ Shaw infers that, almost without exception, the conscientious objectors listed were working class men.¹⁹² She has also compiled a list of conscientious objectors who were members of historic peace churches who accepted non-combatant service (designated as “work of national importance”) as an alternative to imprisonment when they were conscripted. Even by her own narrow, religiously oriented definition, Shaw admits her registry is not a comprehensive list of objectors and is at best a “useful sample” of conscientious objectors because it does not include many of those with political and moral objections to the war. Given that some resisters were sentenced to life imprisonment, Shaw notes that even in 1919, a year after the war had ended, there were one hundred and thirty six conscientious objectors still imprisoned in Canada and

¹⁹⁰ J.S. Woodsworth, “The Story of the Labour Church and some things for which it stands,” text of an address given by Woodsworth in the Strand Theatre, Winnipeg, 5 April 1920, microfilm of original pamphlet issued by Labor Church, 1920, office 530 Main Street, Winnipeg, 18-19.

¹⁹¹ Amy Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War*, see Appendix “List of Conscientious Objectors,” 166.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 158.

36 more awaiting trial.¹⁹³ As an indication of how large a complete list of Canadian war resisters might be and by way of comparison, Cyril Pearce, a British historian, has worked for decades compiling and documenting a British “Registry of Conscientious Objectors” during World War One in the UK: its number now approaches 20,000.¹⁹⁴

An important aspect of the labour campaign against conscription and the war was the public exposure and denunciation of the abuse of conscientious objectors held in custody in internment camps by the Canadian military. Daniel Wells, a 24-year-old conscientious objector who refused to report for military service, was charged with desertion and received a sentence of two years hard labour. When he died under suspicious circumstances three weeks after being placed in custody in the Minto Barracks in Manitoba, labour-allied anti-conscription activist Rev. William Ivens accused Canadian authorities of abusive treatment.¹⁹⁵ Ivens exposed evidence of the mistreatment of prisoners by starvation, beatings, repeated cold showers in outdoor winter conditions, and other forms of torture.¹⁹⁶ Manitoba Independent Labour MPP Fred Dixon, followed the case closely and denounced this mistreatment of conscientious objectors in the press stating “The day of torture should be past. If there is no other way of dealing with these men, it would be more humane to shoot them at once than to submit them to this torture.”¹⁹⁷

Anti-conscription was a part of the politics of Indigenous nations. Indigenous nations waged the anti-conscription struggle not only to oppose the injustice of compulsory military service, but also to take advantage of the political platform it provided to address many longstanding grievances and oppose other forms of governmental control and dispossession. The Tsimshian and Nisga’a Indigenous nations

¹⁹³ Ibid., 150.

¹⁹⁴ Cyril Pearce was quoted by the author in live online *Socialist History* seminar on Zoom in October 2020 which highlighted Pearce and his research in the recently published book *Communities of Resistance: Conscience and Dissent in Britain during the First World War*, (London: Francis Routle, 2020).

¹⁹⁵ Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labor*, 156.

¹⁹⁶ Amy Shaw, *Crisis of Conscience: Conscientious Objection in Canada during the First World War*, 83, 89-90.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 91.

initiated and led a political campaign of resistance against conscription of Indigenous peoples by the Borden government. The campaign was joined by the Allied Tribes, an Indigenous political alliance centered in the BC interior that was led by Peter Kelly, who worked closely with James Teit, his secretary, translator, and a Socialist Party member. These Indigenous groups waged a coordinated campaign of telegrams to the Borden government in November 1917 opposing conscription on constitutional grounds.¹⁹⁸ They argued that as Indigenous people were a marginalized group in Canada -- not considered British or Canadian citizens by the Borden government, and without a voice in Canadian affairs - that they were being denied their basic rights. Their argument was that, in this context, forced military service would amount to “enslavement.”¹⁹⁹ In their telegram to Borden the Allied Tribes pointed out that the land question so central to Indigenous concerns had not been settled, and advised Borden that any attempt to impose conscription on Indigenous people would be forcibly resisted and lead to “bloodshed.”²⁰⁰ They cited the Irish land question as also “unsettled” and argued that the fact that “Irish people are excluded from the British Conscription Act” was a legal precedent for the argument that Indigenous people in Canada should be exempt from the *Military Service Act*. Kelly and Teit asked Borden rhetorically how a government claiming to be committed to fighting oppression and militarism could consciously force a small, disadvantaged, and disenfranchised population into uniform.²⁰¹

Even before the campaign of 1917 there was already strong resistance to conscription among First Nations. Historian Katharine McGowan has argued that Indigenous nations opposed conscription as part of a larger struggle they were waging against control by the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) over the lives of Indigenous

¹⁹⁸ Katharine McGowan, “Until We Receive Just Treatment: The Fight Against Conscription in the Nass Agency and British Columbia 1917-1918.” *BC Studies* Number 167, (Autumn 2010), 62-63.

¹⁹⁹ Peter Campbell, “Not a white man, Not a Sojourner: James A Teit and the Fight for Native Rights in BC 1844-1922, Toronto: *Left History Press*, 1994, 1 September 1994. Vol 2 (2), 50.

²⁰⁰ P.R. Kelly and J.A. Teit, Committee of Allied Tribes of British Columbia, to Prime Minister Robert Borden, 17 November 1917, lac, RG 10, vol. 6768, file 452-20, 1. As quoted by Katharine McGowan in “Until We Receive Just Treatment: The Fight Against Conscription in the Nass Agency, BC,” *BC Studies* Number 167, (Autumn 2010), 63.

²⁰¹ Katharine McGowan, “Until We Receive Just Treatment: The Fight Against Conscription in the Nass Agency and British Columbia, 1917-1918,” 63.

people, for land rights and to protect existing Indigenous reserves from the arbitrary redrawing of boundaries planned by the Federal government.²⁰² Nass Agency Indian Agent Charles Perry reported to the DIA that he had received death threats over attempts to impose conscription, and warned that the residents of his agency were “feeling very bitter and [were] holding frequent and lengthy meetings in which their statements [were] quite hostile and drastic.”²⁰³ Allied Tribes Leader Peter Kelly had stated in an earlier letter that “we [the Indigenous people] are practically landless, and this is our own country.”²⁰⁴ The letters and telegrams that Kelly and Teit had sent to Borden were published in the *Victoria Daily Times* in December 1917.²⁰⁵ To support this campaign the Allied Tribes organized a protest rally against conscription in front of the BC Legislature in November 1917.²⁰⁶ This was an unusual attempt by Indigenous nations to reach out to anti-conscription forces in the political arena and participate in BC politics more broadly. Unfortunately, this event was not covered in the mainstream press, or even in the labour press that shared the same view on conscription. Teit, Kelly and Nass Valley activists had helped build a movement among Indigenous people that was allied to the labour movement on this issue; their position was that most Indigenous people were against conscription and would oppose it. Historian Peter Campbell has argued that Teit created a connection between the socialist, labour activists and the Indigenous movement for land rights by collaborating with Socialist party members on Indigenous issues, and promoting the Socialist Party anti-conscription stance among the Allied Tribes.²⁰⁷ Alternatively McGowan cites sources that shows that opposition to conscription was widespread

²⁰² Ibid., 48-49, 67.

²⁰³ Indian Agent C.C. Perry to D.C. Scott, 11 November 1917, lac, RG 10, vol. 6768, file 452-20, pt. 1. Quoted by McGowan in “Until We Receive Just Treatment: The Fight Against Conscription in the Nass Agency, BC,” *BC Studies* Number 167, (Autumn 2010), 58.

²⁰⁴ Wendy Wickwire, “We Shall Drink from the Stream and So Shall You: James A. Teit and Native Resistance in British Columbia, 1908-1922.” *Canadian Historical Review*, 79, 2 (June 1998), 216.

²⁰⁵ *Victoria Daily Times*, 20 November 1917, 11 December 1917.

²⁰⁶ Peter Campbell, “Not a white man, Not a Sojourner: James A Teit and the Fight for Native Rights in BC 1844-1922,” 50. Campbell references Indigenous leader C.M Tate’s description of the Victoria demonstration at the Legislature noting the presence at the rally of many Indigenous leaders.

²⁰⁷ Peter Campbell, “Not a white man, Not a Sojourner: James A. Teit and the Fight for Native Rights in BC,” 49, 50. Campbell cites evidence that Teit paid subscription fees to the *Western Clarion*, corresponded with Socialist party members on issues related to the war and conscription and published those letters in the *Western Clarion* in 1916.

among Indigenous people in the Nass Valley and that Indigenous people opposed it for more complex reasons.²⁰⁸ McGowan argues that the government's insistence that Indigenous men be subject to conscription allowed Indigenous communities the legal space to question the legitimacy and validity of the *Indian Act*, and to advance and legitimize their other claims defending their land from settler and government encroachment, and asserting their rights in the face of non-Indigenous authorities.²⁰⁹ What is clear from the research of historians' Campbell, Wickwire and McGowan, is that this movement was Indigenous led, that it united both coastal and interior Indigenous political forces against conscription, that they collaborated together to build this political campaign, and that the campaign was instrumental in changing Federal government policy on conscription. In response to this mass political opposition, on 17 January 1918, the Canadian government conceded, and issued Order-in-Council P.C. 111, that referenced the overwhelming volume of petitions from Indigenous peoples and their advocates which argued that "in view of their not having any right to vote, [Indigenous men should] not be compelled to perform military service." Borden's Order suspending conscription for Indigenous men applied not only in British Columbia but also across Canada and exempted all Indigenous people in Canada from conscription. This blocking of Borden's repressive policy towards Indigenous peoples, although not well known or discussed in labour circles or by historians, was a victory for the broad movement of resistance to conscription.

As the war continued, anti-conscription feeling grew across the country - particularly on the West Coast, the Prairies, and in Quebec - and this opposition would shape a series of events that would affect Canada as a whole. Anti-conscription meetings were held every night in Montreal during the spring and summer of 1917. The climax of the protests were the nights of Aug 29 and 30 1917 where there were of thousands of people protesting in the streets of the city. Anti-government and oppositional feeling against conscription had reached an extremely prominent level in Quebec. The *Montreal*

²⁰⁸ Katherine McGowan, "Until We Receive Just Treatment: The Fight Against Conscription in the Nass Agency and British Columbia 1917-1918," 61.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

Gazette reported that as the *Military Service Act* received royal assent, thousands of anti-conscription activists paraded through the city and loudly applauded as speakers urged armed resistance and a general strike against conscription.²¹⁰ Ninety-eight per cent of the men conscripted in Quebec applied for exemption under the *Military Service Act*, and their opposition was supported by crowds and marches in the streets.²¹¹ In the summer of 1917, there were thousands of draft resisters hiding in the woods in Quebec, or finding sanctuary in Church seminaries.²¹² During Easter in March 1918, riots broke out in the working-class neighborhoods of Saint Rock and Saint Sauveur, in Quebec City, when Dominion Police tried to arrest men on the streets whom they assumed were draft evaders when they would not show exemption cards. An angry crowd supporting the resisters attacked and burned a police station and a government building housing records of conscription.²¹³ The Federal government felt it could not rely on local troops to control the crowd, so it quickly brought in army contingents from Ontario. The troops opened fire on the crowds with Lewis machine guns, killing four, and injuring many others.²¹⁴ In the aftermath of the crisis, the Borden government decided to cancel all exemptions which had been granted under the *Military Service Act*. Fearing a drastically negative impact on replacement numbers, on 20 April 1918 the government announced Order-in-Council P-919 which dropped the age eligibility for Class 1 draftees (fit for active military service) from 20 to 19 years old and included widowers without children in the call-up. The field of available recruits was further broadened when Order-in-Council P-262 called on all conscripted men to report “irrespective of exemptions granted or claimed.”²¹⁵

²¹⁰ *Montreal Gazette*, 30 August 1917, 1,4. See also Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec, 1914-1918*, 197.

²¹¹ Report by the Director of the *Military Service Act* to the Minister of Justice, letter on the workings of the *Military Service Act* to the Minister of Justice 1917, published in 1919, quoted by Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec 1914-1918*, 238.

²¹² Elizabeth Armstrong, *The Crisis of Quebec 1914-1918*, 243.

²¹³ *Montreal Gazette*, 30 March 1918, 1.

²¹⁴ *Montreal Gazette*, 2 April 1918. See also *Vancouver World*, 1 April 1918.

²¹⁵ D.C. Eberle, “Conscription Policy, Citizenship and Religious Conscientious Objectors,” 59-60.



Figure 3. Large Anti-Conscription march at Victoria Square in Montreal, 17 May 1917.²¹⁶

This cancellation of all *MSA* exemptions in the spring of 1918 was an important moment in the struggle of the anti-conscription movement across Canada. Popular resistance to conscription had forced Borden's hand, and he responded with even more repression. The new Order-in-Council 919 cancelled the exemptions from military service that the labour movement had fought for and won. This caused a political crisis and created an even greater popular outcry across the country; leading the oppositional movement to conscription to move to mass civil disobedience. The anti-conscription sentiment was so strong that draft evaders in their thousands "took to the woods" or went into hiding with the support of local communities. The *Winnipeg Telegram*, a pro-conscription paper, acknowledged that of those drafted in Manitoba, only 40% reported to military camps. In Quebec, the *Montreal Gazette* reported that less than 50% of those

²¹⁶ Photo from *National Archives of Canada* C-006859.

conscripted reported to the military. Catholic seminaries sheltered draft evaders from pursuit by Dominion police. In BC, Ginger Goodwin, an anti-militarist, and socialist Vice President of the BC Federation of Labour, initially succeeded in his claim for exemption on the grounds of physical disability. He was initially listed as Category D “unfit;” however, his classification was mysteriously changed to Category A, “fit,” after he led a wartime strike in Trail against Cominco’s munitions plant.²¹⁷ After failing all his appeals, Goodwin became a wanted man on the run. This was the coming into reality of one of labour’s worst nightmares about conscription; that labour activists who opposed it, indeed all labour activists, would be targeted for arrest and immediate removal to the trenches in Europe.

In BC, impromptu camps and colonies of draft evaders sprung up on Vancouver Island and BC ‘s Lower Mainland. Many anti-conscriptionists, including J.S. Woodsworth, knew of the draft resisters’ camp on Mt. Elphinstone north of Gibsons on the Sunshine Coast.²¹⁸ Other camps were organized in the Pincher Creek region of Southern Alberta, and on Indian reservations in Southeast Manitoba.²¹⁹ In the woods of Vancouver Island, especially west of the coal mining town of Cumberland, a haven community of draft resisters formed. The war resisters lived in the woods, evading police searches, and survived for many months with strong community support from local businesses and solidarity from friends. To avoid a federal criminal charge of aiding fugitives, local supporters would bring food, clothing, and supplies to pre-arranged drop off points on the woods for the war resisters to pick up.²²⁰ In Cumberland itself, the Campbell Brothers General Store on Dunsmuir Avenue was a local business known to be

²¹⁷ Roger Stonebanks, *Fighting for Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story*, (St. John’s: Canadian Committee on Labour History 2004), 81-84.

²¹⁸ Mark Leier, *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden*, 82-3. See also Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Radicals and Revolutionaries*, 139.

²¹⁹ UBC Special Collections Angus McInnis Collection Vol 53-17. Quoted by Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Radicals, Revolutionaries*, 139.

²²⁰ Transcripts of testimonies of witnesses to Cumberland community support for war resisters in 1918 collected by local teacher Ruth Masters. Also see transcripts of statements by Winnie Williamson and Jimmy Ellis audio-taped by Ian Forbes in 1968. See also transcripts of testimonies of Ed and Doll Williams audiotaped by Ruth Masters in 1981 contained in *Ruth Masters Affidavit, Ginger Goodwin Collection*, Cumberland Museum Archives, Cumberland, BC.

generous in providing free food, boots, clothing, supplies, and sanctuary to local customers who were strikers during the Great Coal strike of 1912-14. The Campbells also provided sanctuary for draft evaders and were central to an underground railroad of safe houses used to evade police.²²¹ After the notorious manhunt and police killing of Ginger Goodwin, other resisters on the run from Dominion police were helped to escape the region in this way.

The Borden government acted decisively to apprehend draft evaders, issuing a directive to the Dominion Police and RCMP to begin mass arrests and incarceration of resisters. The *BC Federationist* informed its readers that in Sherbrooke a draft evader was shot in the back by Dominion police – in a manner not dissimilar to the shooting of Albert Goodwin.²²² To assist in this process the reward for capturing a runaway conscript was \$10 per man – available to civil policemen.²²³ Order in Council PC 1013 declared that “all men not on active service should carry documents showing why they were not in Category #1 (fit for military service).”²²⁴ This order was aimed at assisting police in identifying and arresting draft resisters. Groups of conscript hunting soldiers and police searched the docks of Vancouver for suspected conscription evaders: and on one occasion this actually led to a showdown with unionized workers from the Longshoremen’s Union on Tuesday 22 January and a shutdown of the docks. When soldiers arrested shipyard worker W. Westwood for not having MSA registration papers with him, his fellow workers stopped work.²²⁵ After negotiations with a committee of union workers Westwood was released, and work on the docks resumed. Even verbal opposition to the arrests had the threat of sanctions. Tommy Roberts, a BC labour activist, and organizer of miners in the Kootenay community of Silverton was arrested for “seditious utterances” in Nelson when he commented that he preferred to get information about the war from a labour newspaper, the *BC Federationist*, rather than the mainstream press. He was found

²²¹ Ibid., “Testimony of Doll Williams.” Transcript of audiotapes made by Ian Forbes, 1968, Cumberland Museum Archives.

²²² *BC Federationist*, 16 August 1918.

²²³ *BC Federationist*, 1 February 1918.

²²⁴ D.C. Eberle, “Conscription Policy, Citizenship and Religious Conscientious Objectors,” 148.

²²⁵ *BC Federationist*, 25 January 1918, 1.

not guilty by a jury, but had faced criminal charges, incarceration, and a trial because of his open public opposition to conscription and his activism in the labour movement.”²²⁶

The Borden government was quick to punish those who refused to fill out registration forms or report for conscripted service: they were deemed military “deserters” and faced criminal charges which led to jail sentences. The Deputy Minister of Justice sent a message to all Chiefs of police on 8 November 1917: “As soon as possible ... steps should be taken to arrest and prosecute those men who have openly defied the law and who are known to police or notified by them by registrars of the *Military Service Act*.”²²⁷ Duncan Kerr, an operating engineer in Pitt Lake, BC, was quickly arrested by police on the complaint of his employer: he was brought before an *MSA* tribunal which sentenced him to two years in a New Westminster jail for not completing registration papers for conscription.

This sparked outrage in the BC labour movement and inspired it to campaign against, and confront, conscription in an even more public way. The *BC Federationist* called “Brother Kerr” a “political prisoner exiled to New Westminster [jail] without trial by jury, guilty with 20,000 others of disobeying a law they never had any say whether it should be enacted.”²²⁸ The imprisonment of Kerr inspired the Vancouver Longshoremen and the BC Electric railway workers’ union to call on the BC Federation of Labour executive to implement the agreed-upon strategy of a general strike by BC unions against conscription whenever a BC worker opposing it was imprisoned.²²⁹ By way of comparison and in the new year when BC labour activists were planning future job actions, they knew that a successful general strike had been organized by labour in Ireland on April 23, 1918 and it had halted the British plan to impose conscription on that country.²³⁰ The labour movement in Dublin organized a successful one day “Strike to Stop Conscription” and

²²⁶ *Vancouver Daily Sun*, 18 October 1918, 1.

²²⁷ *BC Federationist*, 14 December 1917

²²⁸ *BC Federationist*, 14 December 1917.

²²⁹ *BC Federationist*, 7 December 1917. see page 1 article “May Call Strike on Kerr’s Imprisonment”.

²³⁰ *BC Federationist*, 26 April 1918.” Big Conscription Strike in Ireland: Work of Every Description Tied up in Protest to Conscription.” See also John Dorney, “A Declaration of War on the Irish People: The Conscription Crisis of 1918,” *The Irish Story online*, April 24, 2018.

the country was brought to a standstill, with most businesses, munitions factories, and railways completely shut down. *The BC Federationist* celebrated this example of successful labour action in its headline “Big Conscription Strike: Work of Every Description Tied up in Protest to Conscription.”²³¹ The example of a mass movement of workers led by organized labour taking direct action and halting, by their efforts, a British attempt to impose conscription on people in an Allied country, was exactly the kind of example of solidarity the *BC Federationist* wanted BC workers to hear: they clearly set out the implications for the Canadian labour movement. However, the BC Federation of Labour executive noted that the time for this kind of general strike action was inopportune as voting in the Federal Election loomed within days. While the Vancouver dock workers and civic railway workers were in favour of strike action, there was reluctance among some unions to call out members for the general strike at this time and, to preserve labour unity, the strike call was postponed until later in 1918.

Eventually, government actions aimed at other groups in society, such as farmers, increased support for the movement in opposition to conscription. In spring of 1918, the Borden government broke its election promise made to farmers which had promised that: “young men engaged in rural food production for the war effort would be exempt from conscription.”²³² W.C. Good of the United Farmers of Ontario denounced this backtracking by the *MSA* tribunals as “unjust, careless of life, and callous.” Many in the labour movement saw the farmers as natural allies of labour, not only in the fight against conscription, but also in the political struggle for a more equal society. It was widely seen that farmers as well as workers were producers and creators of wealth; both labouring under a system which gave all the power to large capitalists, who robbed both groups of the fruits of their toil. Some farmers’ organizations even supported labour’s alternative demand for the “conscription of wealth” during the war.²³³ Attempts to form a

²³¹ *BC Federationist*, 26 April 1917.

²³² J. Witham, “Opposition to Conscription in Ontario in 1917,” 78. In spite of promises made by Borden during the December election he cancelled the exemption for farmers after the election. Many young men reported being refused previously valid exemptions based on their engagement in farm work in the spring of 1918.

²³³ Thomas Socknat, “Witness Against War,” 124. Socknat argues that for the United Farmers of Ontario the Borden conscription program was a catalyst for grievances.

labour/farmer opposition to conscription were promising and were discussed by farmer and labour leaders. In 1918 a mass opposition movement to conscription built throughout rural Ontario featuring many anti-government protests.²³⁴ A crowd of 5,000, composed of Ontario and Quebec farmer activists, organized a public protest in Ottawa peacefully storming Parliament Hill. Speakers denounced conscription for the war as unjust and noted that the program was responsible for rural depopulation. In 1919, this anti-conscription movement would help cause a labour and farmer's revolt which led directly to the defeat of the Ontario Provincial Conservative government, and its replacement by a United Farmers and Labour Government. Similarly, the farmers and workers in Alberta would not forget Borden's betrayal of his promise on conscription. In the next Provincial election in Alberta, a Farmer/Labour slate did well, and in the Federal Election of 1921 Borden's government was decisively defeated, with anti-conscription activists and Farmer/Labour MP's William Irvine and Joseph Shaw elected in Calgary.²³⁵ Later this alliance would set the stage for the breakdown of Canada's traditional two-party political system and the success of labour/farmer third parties such as the Progressive Party of the 1920s and the CCF in the 1930s.

Opposition to conscription was a catalyst in mounting opposition to the war. However, the response of the Borden government was to implement more and greater repression. The actions of Borden and his government would succeed in awakening and radicalizing labour and its allies across the country. The labour movement and its allies: farmers in Ontario and the West, Indigenous people, workers and anti-imperialists in Quebec, and pacifist conscientious objectors and social gospel activists would rise across the country to challenge the government on many fronts. Conscription had pushed allies towards labour, and consequently, the movement became a real force of resistance. The crisis would escalate in 1918 to produce mass resistance, and push labour to organize general strikes.

²³⁴*Weekly Sun*, 1 May 1918.

²³⁵Finkel, Alvin, "The Rise and Fall of the Labour Party in Alberta, 1917-42." *Labour / Le Travail* 16 (1985), 70-72.

Chapter 6.

“The beginning of a wave of general strikes.”

The struggles by the labour movement and its allies against the Borden government’s wartime repression, although focussed initially on opposition to conscription, sparked a resistance movement that transformed itself into the beginning of a Canada-wide, class-based, labour revolt. In Vancouver, an important catalyst for this revolt was the one-day political strike organized by the BC Federation of Labour, the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, and the Vancouver Metal Trades Council on 2 August 1918. The strike was the long-awaited implementation of the BC Federation of Labour’s agreed-upon policy to “down tools” in the event of the arrest, imprisonment, or the killing of a labour unionist to enforce conscription. The August action was called to protest the late July shooting of Ginger Goodwin, a BC labour leader who resisted conscription by hiding out in the woods of Vancouver Island. After an extensive search -- the largest police manhunt in BC history -- a recently deputized “special constable” caught up with Goodwin and shot him dead.²³⁶ Thousands of people in Cumberland, BC attended Goodwin’s funeral and workers from all over BC were asked by their unions to protest Goodwin’s sacrifice with a general strike. As VTLC strike leader Jack Kavanaugh put it to a crowd of workers: “Whether shot in self-defence, or without a chance, it does not alter the fact that he was of ourselves and the least we can do is stop work for twenty-four hours to punish the employers.”²³⁷ This event was militant job action by workers -- a political strike organized as resistance to conscription on a mass scale.

The operations centre and “headquarters” of the strike in Vancouver was the Labor Temple on 411 Dunsmuir Street that volunteer labour completed in 1911 with funds contributed by BC trade unions. It became a meeting place for workers and a community hall: it housed the offices of the VTLC and many local unions, a labour print

²³⁶ Roger Stonebanks, *Fighting for Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story* is the best source on the shooting of Goodwin by Dan Campbell and Campbell’s subsequent trial and acquittal for murder, 90-107.

²³⁷ Quoted by Rod Mickleburgh in “How the Ghost of Ginger Goodwin painted the town ” Red,” *Canadian History: The Ginger Goodwin General Strike of 1918*,” *The Ex-Press News and Reviews*, 2018.

shop operated by E.T. Kingsley, the offices of the BC Federation of Labour and the production facility for its weekly publication *The BC Federationist*, and the offices of the Socialist Party and its newspaper, *The Western Clarion*. The building also featured a workers' library and reading room, a pool hall, and a cooperative store selling low-cost food and goods in the basement.²³⁸ Local unions held meetings of representatives weekly and the times of meetings were published in the *Federationist*. The Labor Temple was also a focal point of meetings on political issues of interest to workers, ranging from lectures on socialism, current events, and immediate issues. The Temple famously hosted political meetings where well-known labour leaders, socialists, and anti-war activists spoke. Meetings in the building had featured speeches by: Lucy Parsons, Eugene Debbs, Big Bill Haywood, Mother Jones, and Emma Goldman, among others.²³⁹

²³⁸ Lani Russwurm, "A Temple for Labour" in *Past Tense: Fragments of Vancouver History and Reflections thereon*, 31 October 2014. Retrieved from <https://pasttensevancouver.wordpress.com/2014/10/31/a-temple-for-labour/>.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, See also Lani Russwurm, *Vancouver was Awesome: A Curious Pictorial History*, (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013), 50.



Figure 4. The Labor Temple in Vancouver was completed in 1911. ²⁴⁰

During the general strike, the strike leadership committee operated out of the Labor Temple. On the initiative of the VTLC, unions representing 11,000 workers voted 117 to 1 in their unions to launch a one-day political strike to protest the shooting of Ginger Goodwin and “show opposition to conscription and the unfettered autocracy of the Borden government.”²⁴¹ The strike was a test of the strength and unity of the labour movement against conscription. It began on Friday 2 August at noon when workers of forty-five unions walked off the job all over the greater Vancouver area. Thousands of workers throughout BC also joined the strike. The most visible elements of the strike were the hundreds of Vancouver streetcars that stopped work at noon and returned *en masse* to the Car Barns Depot Yard which was then on the corner of Westminster Avenue (now Main Street) and Prior (see picture below). The striking streetcar workers parked

²⁴⁰ Architect Thomas Hooper’s original drawing of the Vancouver Labor Temple. *Vancouver Daily World*, 11 March 1911.

²⁴¹ *BC Federationist*, 2 August 1918, 1,5.

their streetcars or trams at the BC Electric Barn Depot at noon and walked out of the yard.²⁴² This effectively paralyzed commuter movement on the entire greater Vancouver transit system. (see map below)



Figure 5. BC Electric Tram Barns at Prior and Westminister Ave (Main), Vancouver City Archives, Reference AM54-54-BuP212, 1899.

²⁴²*Vancouver World*, 2 August 1918. The BC Electric Street railway workers union bulletin overwhelmingly endorsed the strike, and the union notice was published on the front page of this day's paper.

Striking Vancouver city workers shut down all municipal offices and services. Construction workers stopped work and left sites throughout the city. Municipal clerks and other city employees shut down services. At the same time, thousands of shipyard workers and all the longshoremen walked off the job from the Vancouver docks and waterfront, moving as a group into the downtown area.²⁴³ Similarly, the large workforce of three thousand shipyard workers in Coughlan Yards on the south shore of False Creek, just east of the Cambie Bridge at the foot of Columbia, walked off the job and joined the strike. Coughlan and Sons was the largest shipyard in the British Empire



Figure 6. Hundreds of workers in the Coughlan Yard posing for a photo.²⁴⁴

during World War One, and it specialized in the production of steel ships -- during the First World War it produced twenty-one vessels. Even in the labour press, it was a local

²⁴³ *Vancouver World*, 2, 3 August 1918. Articles reported that the entire Vancouver shipyards in Burrard Inlet and False Creek were “out [on strike] to a man.”

²⁴⁴ *City of Vancouver Archives* PAN 73. Photo of workforce at J. Coughlan Shipyards, 9 May 1918. (Less than three months before the strike). Major James Mathews photo credit.

media sensation when the large munitions ship *SS War Camp* was launched by the yard in 1918.²⁴⁵

Similarly, the workers of the Wallace Yards in North Vancouver walked off the job at noon, Friday 2 August, leaving wartime ship contracts idle.²⁴⁶ Wallace Shipyards built naval vessels and produced artillery shells for 18 pounder guns for the Imperial Munitions Board. In addition to labourers in the shipyards, 1200 stevedores, boilermakers, and other shipyard workers on the Vancouver docks on Burrard Inlet (later known as Ballantyne Pier), as well as non-union workers at the Rogers Sugar plant, also walked off the job. Workers going to work in the shipyards had to cross the CPR tracks at Heatley street, the one access road, which would be the location of union strike pickets. Closing this strategic access point had the effect of closing Canada's main Pacific port to the movement of goods and, consequently, brought wartime production to a halt. Workers participating in the strike on this day shut down most of the industries within a five-kilometer radius of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.

²⁴⁵ *BC Federationist*, 3 May 1918.

²⁴⁶ *Vancouver World*, 3 August 1918.



Figure 7. The Wallace Shipyards in North Vancouver.²⁴⁷

It was not an accident that the Labor Temple would become a target for supporters of the war in the city: they saw the building as the nerve center of the revolt. The Vancouver Labor Temple on 411 Dunsmuir was the heart and base of the labour movement which had been created by workers to challenge the capitalist order in the city. It was built and paid for by workers and was a space taken over or “appropriated” by workers to oppose the capitalist hegemony in the city.²⁴⁸ The Temple itself was a physical presence as a space of resistance, symbolically challenging the dominant repressive apparatus of the state and capital. It was a building whose creation carried the potential to challenge the capitalist order and at the same time provide support for, and facilitate, movements of workers’ solidarity such as this strike. Spurred on by pro-war businessmen and middle-class Kerrisdale women who were outraged at the purpose and nature of the

²⁴⁷ Photo of Wallace Shipyards, North Vancouver in 1915. *Vancouver City Archives* BO P30.

²⁴⁸ Michel Foucault called these urban spaces “heterotopias- real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institutions of our society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangements, of effectively realized utopia, in which all real arrangements that are within society are challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable.” Foucault in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* October 1984; (“Des Espace Autres,” March 1967, translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec)

general strike, hundreds of demobilized soldiers convalescing at Shaughnessy Hospital decided to take violent action against the strikers. On 2 August, as the strike paralyzed the downtown areas of Vancouver, hundreds of soldiers were ferried by private cars to 411 Dunsmuir Street to attack the Labor Temple. Many soldiers wearing blue armbands, indicating they had been hospital patients, broke into the labour offices, throwing files and broken furniture out the window. They manhandled and threatened women workers in the offices and assaulted two labour leaders.²⁴⁹ The mob soon moved a few blocks east to the Cambie Street Transit Barns where the striking workers had parked the BC Electric trams. Soldiers from this group entered the barns to try and get the streetcars moving again. Onlookers who expressed disapproval of the soldiers' actions were brutally beaten: a crowd at Prior Street Barns assaulted a strike supporter named Mackenzie and threatened to lynch him because he had criticized their actions.²⁵⁰ Mayor Henry Gale supervised attempts to move a tram out of the yard and into operation. The soldiers tried to get the trams into service but, because they did not have the skills needed to operate the vehicles, one car got stuck in the tracks at the gates, blocking any other exits: attempts by soldiers to get the trams working during the strike had to be abandoned until more skilled operators arrived later that night.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Helena Gutteridge, a Vancouver labour leader organizing women workers was present in the Labor Temple that day and was a witness to the attack. She recounts her experience of the strike that day in a biography of her written by Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in BC: Helena Guttridge the Unknown Reformer*, 119.

²⁵⁰ *Vancouver Daily World*, 3 August 1918, 3,12.

²⁵¹ *Vancouver Daily World*, 3 August 1918, 1. The Street Railway workers resisted demands by Mayor Gale to immediately get the trams running in the afternoon of Friday 2 August. After a large meeting of street railway workers with vocal anti-strike soldiers the union workers formally voted to maintain the planned full 24 hours of the strike. However, by 11 PM that evening scab workers had been found to get the trams moving again.



Figure 8. Demobilized Soldiers convalescing at Shaughnessy Hospital less than 2 months before the attack on the Labor Temple. Photo June 12, 1918.
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That evening, a large crowd gathered for an anti-strike rally at the Empress Theatre on Hastings and Gore in East Vancouver. Calling themselves the “Vancouver Citizens League” and chaired by P.G. Shallcross, the president of the Vancouver Board of Trade, and supported by Mayor Gale, the meeting included some Members of Parliament, local businessmen, members of the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire (IODE), and representatives and members of the Women’s Auxiliaries of some Vancouver Regiments. The group passed resolutions to “suppress all seditious and anti-war movements ... and to conscript all leaders fostering such ideas and send them to the front.” In addition, angry soldiers threatened more violence and reprisals if seven union leaders who had organized the strike were not removed from their union offices and exiled from the city. “Repudiate the strike or else, this is our ultimatum” Mayor Gale was quoted as demanding of the labour movement.²⁵³

The next day, the violence continued as a large crowd of demobilized soldiers attacked the Longshore Union Hall on Pender Street, seeking the leaders of the strike. The Longshoremen’s Union had voted overwhelmingly to support the strike and many of

²⁵² Photo of demobilized soldiers convalescing at Shaughnessy Hospital in Kerrisdale taken 12 June 1918. Photo by *Vancouver Sun* photographer Stuart Thomson.

²⁵³ “This is our ultimatum!” *Victoria Times Colonist*, 4 August 1918, 1.

their members had gathered at the Hall to support the walk out.²⁵⁴ The crowd of soldiers approached the Hall and loudly voiced their claims that immigrants and ‘enemy aliens’ were to blame for the country’s problems. They demonstrated a propensity for violence and a willingness to use that violence against new immigrants, socialists, and the labour movement. Charging up a flight of stairs to attack the Longshore union office on the second floor, they were beaten back by Longshore Workers who used chair legs as clubs.²⁵⁵ Labour activists had stood their ground against vigilante attacks aimed at crushing the strike. To prove to the city that the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC) union leaders had acted with the support of their membership, the elected labour strike representatives of all striking unions willingly resigned and stood for re-election. All the strike leaders of major unions were re-elected, showing the extent of grassroots labour support for the political strike. Mayor Gale himself had cause to reconsider his attempt to exile the strike leaders. In his 1974 memoir Bill Pritchard, a well-known Vancouver strike leader and a prominent name on the Citizen’s League’s seven member “exclusion list”, details how the Vancouver general strike Committee responded to the “bounty” which had been placed on the strike leaders by the Citizens League. The VTLC arranged a squad of burly bodyguards to guard the strike leaders. They also conveyed to Mayor Gale that if any harm came to the labour leaders the same fate would be meted out to the Citizen’s League leaders. According to Pritchard, fearing a similar fate at the hands of Vancouver workers, Mayor Gale publicly withdrew the Citizen’s League exclusion threat to force the seven main strike organizers in Vancouver out of town.²⁵⁶

Even after the attacks on the Labor Temple and Longshore Hall, and the attempts to restart the BC Electric railway with scab labour, the anti-strike political work of Vancouver Citizens’ League was not finished. They organized a major political backlash to the strike at the highest level of government, industry, and the military. The Citizen’s League held a rally two days later, on the Cambie Grounds across the street from the

²⁵⁴ *Vancouver World*, 2,3 August 1918. Articles in the issue reported that 100% of the membership of the Longshoremen’s Union had joined the strike, 1.

²⁵⁵ Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in BC: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer*, 120.

²⁵⁶ W.A. Pritchard, *Oral Autobiography*, Los Angeles: University of Manitoba at Brandon, 1974.

Beatty Barracks and Armory at 620 Beatty Street, to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the declaration of World War I. P.G. Shallcross from the Board of Trade joined Mr. Bushby, a representative from the Canadian Manufacturing Association, to denounce the general strike as “Hun propaganda.” Major C.C. Owen and other officers addressed the crowd of returned soldiers, demanding the forced expulsion of VTLC strike leaders from the city.²⁵⁷ In the labour press Vancouver strike leader Ernst Winch was quoted as stating that “The (VTLC) vote [by local unions] was overwhelmingly in favour of calling the strike. It was 110 in favour, to one against. If anyone has broken the law, it was not labour, but these returned soldiers who have engaged in violence and have taken the law into their own hands.”²⁵⁸ The *BC Federationist* criticized the hypocrisy of Shallcross and other Citizen’s League leaders who praised “lawless mobs of thugs who trample underfoot the lives and liberty of law-abiding citizens, threatening their lives and liberty” all the while claiming to be supporting “law and order in the City.”²⁵⁹

The strike leaders of the VTLC had led the city’s unionized workers in Canada’s first general strike: striking workers had shut down all the main industries within five kilometers of downtown Vancouver for a day. The strike had been called by the organized workers’ movement to express opposition to the war policies of the Borden government towards workers-- particularly the implementation of conscription, and the arrests of war resisters. Despite the violence directed against them by the Citizens’ League, the labour organizers assessed the day as a qualified victory in the struggle against conscription and concluded that the labour movement had been equal to this test of strength.

By adopting anti-conscription as its central demand and focus, the labour movement had come a long way from its quiescent days early in the war. While labour had once simply stood by while immigrant workers and war critics had been rounded up and imprisoned, it now built solidarity across its ranks to confront the Borden government and BC employers in defense of draft resisters and any worker repressed by

²⁵⁷ *Vancouver Daily World*, 5 August 1918, p1-3.

²⁵⁸ *Vancouver Daily World*, 5 August, 1918, P3.

²⁵⁹ *BC Federationist*, 9 August 1918, p1,5.

war policies. Years of political work by socialist activists had won over the majority of the labour movement to take direct action to struggle against conscription and the Borden government's repression of the working class. The anti-conscription movement built increased solidarity among many different workers. The Vancouver general strike organized by labour in 1918 showed a rising class consciousness and militancy among Vancouver workers. The unity and militancy of the strike would not have been possible only a few years before. The events of this period show that opposition to conscription created a growing awareness among organized workers that they must fight against not only against conscription, but also the repression brought on by Borden's war policies, and other issues facing labour.

Conclusion

The anti-conscription movement was a leading part of a labour offensive against a variety of repressive acts imposed on workers during the war. The movement was also a spearhead of a worldwide worker's revolt which gained momentum as the war ended. As in many countries, the popular anti-government energies from the war period in Canada - particularly against the imposition of conscription - continued to escalate into a generalized Canadian labour revolt in which events in Vancouver and British Columbia would play a significant part. The end of the war did not signal the end of labour activism and militancy; it was a gathering of momentum for the struggle of workers to build a better life in a new period.

The success of the 1918 Vancouver general strike inspired a wave of general strikes by labour across Canada over the next few years. Just a few months later on 6 October 1918, 1200 railway workers at the Ogden shops in Calgary walked out in a wildcat strike over the firing and arrest of 5 of their leaders. A crowd of 400 workers appeared at their trial and a threatened general strike in the city forced charges to be dropped and the CPR to quickly reinstate them.²⁶⁰ This was direct action by workers which demonstrated how in this labour climate collective defiance against acts of repression could act as a catalyst to expand and intensify the workers struggle. Similar acts of labour defiance would begin to escalate across the country. In the late war and post war period in Canada, rebellion by workers against capitalism was growing: the month of May 1919 recorded sixty-nine strikes involving 75,088 employees. In June, when Canadian workers were called out on strike in a number of cities in sympathy strikes with the Winnipeg general strike, there were 80 strikes and 88,000 workers participating.²⁶¹ Similarly Gregory Kealey in "1919: Canadian Labour Revolt" reports strikes increasing in Canada from 168 in 1916 with 26,971 workers involved to 428 strikes in 1919 with 149,309 workers involved and 3,401,843 striker days lost that

²⁶⁰ Tom Mitchell and James Naylor. "The Prairies: The Eye of the Storm," 195-196.

²⁶¹ Quoted in Dorothy Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and His Times*, 51. Original source *Ottawa Labour Gazette*, see also W.S. Ryder. "Canada's Industrial Crisis of 1919", (Vancouver: MA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1920).

year.²⁶²In a similar way the anti-conscription movement played a role as a catalyst for intensified labour struggles. The movement was more extensive than historians have hitherto acknowledged and acted as a force which unified and rallied the forces of labour and many others to create this movement of defiance and resistance.

Fearing this rising of labour, the Borden Government unveiled more repressive measures in September 1918. Most of the new authoritarian initiatives were incorporated in the Orders-in-Council 2381 and 2384 and were introduced by Borden and his cabinet without the authority of parliament.²⁶³ The measures outlawed many progressive and ethnic organizations opposed to conscription and the war. Chief Censor Colonel Chambers and military intelligence operatives had advised Borden that labour newspapers and radical political groups who spoke out against the war were a serious threat.²⁶⁴ This view was echoed by C.M. Cahan, Borden's security advisor, who counselled him that these groups must be suppressed as they reflected alternately "enemy" German sabotage or dangerous Bolshevik revolutionary ideas.²⁶⁵ As a result of their leading role in organizing resistance to conscription and the war in Canada, the Borden government outlawed both the IWW and the SDP as part of this escalation of repression. The SPC was surprisingly not proscribed but whether this was because it had few non-Anglo members or because of bureaucratic incompetence is unclear. However, the Canadian state would remedy this oversight with intensified repression of SPC members in the fall of 1918 and during the 1919 general strikes.

The new Orders-in-Council made public opposition to conscription a criminal offense. Minister of Justice Arthur Meighan added heavy penalties for non-compliance into the *Military Service Act* to punish labour, and those in Quebec who defied

²⁶² Gregory Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," 16-17.

²⁶³ For details on Order-in-Council 2384 see also Gregory Kealey, "State Repression of Labour and the Left: Canada in the First World War", 294-5. See also Paul Phillips. *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia*, 74.

²⁶⁴ A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement*, 131,153. McCormack quotes from The Borden Papers, Vol 272 Chambers to Hindmarch, 26 November 1917, see also Chief Press Censors files, Vol 144 A-1 Chalmers to Coulter, 14 May 1918, and Chalmers to Davis, 6 September 1918.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 151-153.

conscription, with fines and imprisonment. Newspapers that published articles designed to persuade or influence the public against conscription were liable to suppression. Anyone who spoke publicly urging non-compliance with conscription was liable to imprisonment for one to five years.²⁶⁶ In this late war climate the *BC Federationist* was warned by Chief Censor Chalmers that it would be closed if it carried articles criticizing the *Military Service Act* or its implementation.²⁶⁷ The editors of labour papers such as the *BC Federationist* now had to walk a fine line of critically reporting events from a labour perspective, but also keeping the paper from being closed by the Canadian state. The Crown was quick to act against labour papers that wavered from that line: in August of 1918, W.E Pierce, newspaper editor of *The Week* in Victoria, BC was fined \$1000 for being found with a copy of his own newspaper which contained articles critical of conscription.²⁶⁸

In response to the repression and inspired by the success of the struggles against conscription Western labour activists met in Calgary for a Western Labour Conference to plan a collective strategy that would express a new radical approach. Outraged by the timid response to conscription by the TLC leadership at the recent Convention in Quebec City, many Western delegates called for “the severance of their affiliation with international unions, and that steps be taken to form an industrial organization of all workers.”²⁶⁹ They were inspired by a new vision of collective bargaining generated by initiatives inspired by industrial unionism and aimed to build labour organizations that would more effectively struggle against employers. They aimed to reorganize the labour movement -- to create new forms of organization designed to replace conservative craft unions linked to American international unions with Canadian industrial unions that would combine the spectrum of skilled and unskilled workers in one union in one work

²⁶⁶ *Vancouver Daily Sun*, 12 July 1917, 1,7.

²⁶⁷ Dale McCartney, “A Crisis of Commitment: Socialist Internationalism in British Columbia,” 111. McCartney references his source as VTLC Fonds “Minutes of the Directors of BC Federationist, Box 22,” 86-87.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 August 1918, 5.

²⁶⁹ Quoted from Mark Leier, *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden*, 89.

site.²⁷⁰ This involved organizing the withdrawal of workers from TLC affiliated international and craft unions and shifting their affiliation to the new One Big Union (OBU).²⁷¹ This union federation was more militant and more willing to use the industrial weapon of the general strike. Support came from some of the largest unions in BC (with some of the biggest payrolls) in the sectors of shipbuilding and shipyards, mining, smelting, and forestry.²⁷² The Vancouver Trades and Labour Council enthusiastically endorsed the OBU and began an organizing drive that was ready to use the general strike weapon to win the 6 hour day for BC workers; however, organizing plans for the union were disrupted when the Winnipeg general strike broke out on May 15, 1919.²⁷³

Another consequence of the success of the anti-conscription movement was the second massive general strike launched in Vancouver by the labour movement in June 1919 in sympathy with the already launched Winnipeg general strike. Though its aims were focussed on gaining rights of labour in post-war society rather than opposition to conscription, this strike was a direct consequence of the work of the anti-conscription movement. It was led by the same organizations and activists as the first general strike with the same goals of defending and strengthening labour's power. Speaking for the BCFL the *BC Federationist* called it "a question of the rights of the workers to organize as they see fit and to carry on collective bargaining in organizations that are customary.... Through building trades councils, and metal trades councils"²⁷⁴ Vancouver's unionized workers, coordinated by the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council voted to join the sympathy strike by a count of 3305 to 2499. This was a vote of union members not unions, unlike the previous vote of forty-five unions. With a small majority of local support, the general strike was launched and steered by a local Central Strike Committee

²⁷⁰ Elaine Bernard, "The Long-Distance Feeling: History of the Telecommunications Workers Union," 105.

²⁷¹ Mikhail Bjorge, "The Worker's Revolt in Edmonton." *Active History*, 19 June 2019.

²⁷² Alan Seager and David Roth, "British Columbia and the Mining West: A Ghost of a Chance." in Craig Heron (ed) *Workers' Revolt*, 251.

²⁷³ Elaine Bernard, "The Long-Distance Feeling: History of the Telecommunications Workers Union," 106.

²⁷⁴ *BC Federationist*, 6 June 1919, 1. See also *The Vancouver Daily World*, 17 June 1919. "Central Strike Committee issues statement on why strike was declared." 11. The article explains that that employers in Winnipeg refused to bargain with the Building Trades and Metal Trades Council and that because this issue affects workers everywhere and that upon these issues the strike was declared.

of delegates from twenty-four member unions. The Vancouver strike leaders put forward their own local demands in the general strike. They wanted support for the grievances of local postal workers; reinstatement of workers fired by the Federal government after the strike; pensions and a promised \$2,000 gratuity to returned soldiers and their dependents; a reduction of work to the 6-hour day; and an affirmation of the right of workers to form unions and have the right to collective bargaining.²⁷⁵ These were not radical demands, or signs of a “red revolution” as opponents of the strike proclaimed. Though these demands challenged the capitalist order, they did not compromise it, and could easily be contained within it. In fact, the demands would become part of the normal industrial relations framework in later decades.

As in 1918, the labour forces of the general strike in Vancouver dominated the downtown core of the city but this time for much of the month of June. During this brief period, it could be argued that workers in Vancouver “appropriated” key sections of the city transforming “dominated spaces” into the public sphere. As in the August 1918 general strike, a visible part of the 1919 Vancouver general strike had been the 1200 street railway workers who walked off the job and shut down the street transportation lines in Greater Vancouver (see map of Vancouver Street railway lines affected below) for the strike period of a better part of a month.

²⁷⁵ Quoted from Allan Seager and David Roth, “British Columbia and the Mining West: A Ghost of a Chance,” in Craig Heron, (ed) *Workers’ Revolt 1917-1925*, 254-5.

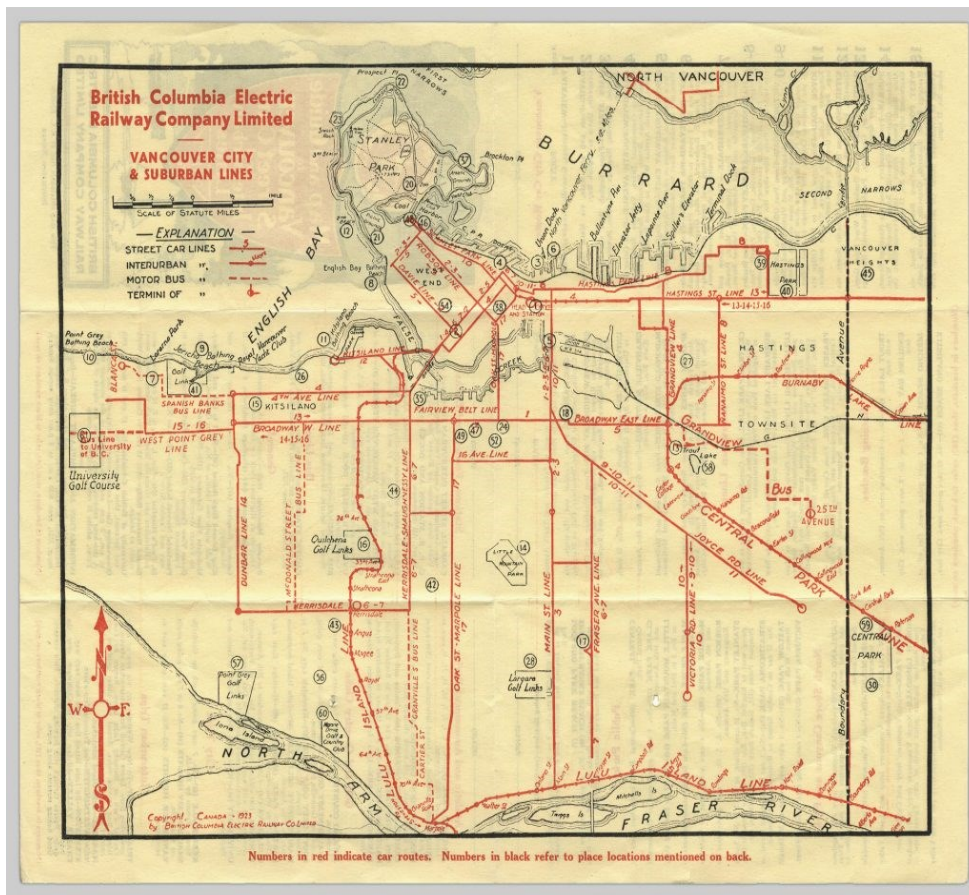


Figure 9. Map and Guide to Vancouver Streetcar and Interurban Lines, Vancouver City Archives- reference #AM 1594, BC Electric Railway Company, 1923.

In addition to the public transportation network, the telephone communication network was also shut down when the BC women telephone workers joined the strike on 15 June. These vital Vancouver transport and communication networks in the city were in a sense removed from the capitalist sphere by the strike. Rogers Sugar refinery workers in the large Downtown Eastside factory works, as well as carpenters, plumbers, and most civic workers, also joined the strike. The Vancouver docks and shipyards in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, and in North Vancouver were completely shut down as longshoremen and coastal shipyard workers joined the strike. Many factory and wood workers of various kinds in worksites on Granville Island and the shores of False Creek -- then heavily industrialized by lumber yards, shingle, cooper, and barrel making industries -- left work and joined the strike. Throughout the city, workers walked off the job for the next 2-4 weeks leading to vastly reduced economic production. There were large areas of

the city where work was shut down during the strike -- preventing production and profit making by capital.

The anti-conscription movement of 1918-1919 was a labour-led coalition constructed during the war whose leaders espoused socialist principles and also sought to exercise broader solidarity across ethnic and gender lines.²⁷⁶ Immigrant workers and women joined the labour struggles in this new period. The same labour organizations, labour union activists, and workers who had led the fight against conscription and for democratic workers' rights against the Borden government, later extended these struggles into a broader labour revolt. The movement has been characterized as a "syndicalist turn" by Martin Robin and David Bercuson, but the leaders of the revolt were mostly Socialist Party (SPC) members who did not endorse syndicalism any more than they endorsed the Labourist strategy of electing labour members to Parliament. Labour historians have argued that the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council and the BC Federation of Labour, which worked closely together, had many differences with the syndicalism of the IWW.²⁷⁷ The best explanation of the political orientation of the workers strategy in the post war period is that the labour activists adopted the general strike tactics of syndicalists without necessarily endorsing their overall strategy. The activists took advantage of whatever tactics they thought would work pragmatically at the time to advance the power of the labour movement.

Labour had learned lessons from the experience of the anti-conscription movement which proved useful in the labour revolt. The use of returned soldiers to break up meetings or attempt to destroy the movement by intimidation no doubt had a discouraging effect on labour. This proved to be a favoured tactic used by the Borden government, right wing politicians, and Citizens Committees across the country to crush the movement. Charges of 'treason' and 'cowardice' had been used as a weapon by these groups to beat down the anti-conscription movement since the beginning of the war. In response, labour leaders actively courted returned men, seeking to find common ground

²⁷⁶ Dale McCartney, "Crisis of Commitment: Socialist Internationalism," 117.

²⁷⁷ Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The IWW in British Columbia*, 57-58, 90-91.

with those who were, in the main, working-class men who worked for wages from employers. Demobilized soldiers returned from the war often found little to show for years of service except unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. Many found the appeal of the resurgent labour movement aimed towards fellow workers struggling against capitalism compelling. During the 1919 general strike, the Vancouver strike committee found it highly effective to incorporate demands by returned soldiers for the \$2000 war service gratuity the government had promised but not delivered. The strategy appealed to many returned soldiers who were unemployed, impoverished, and ignored by the government. Some returned soldiers became increasingly unwilling to be used as pawns by local business interests to attack the labour movement. Some chapters of the Great War Veterans Association (GWVA) saw a common interest with other workers, broke with their officers and joined the supporters of the labour and the strikes. New pro-labour, pro-strike veterans' organizations arose in 1919 such as the "Ex-Soldiers and Sailors" who supported strike meetings in Vancouver.²⁷⁸ This reversal shows that many of the demobilized veterans who were the most aggressive in their attacks on the anti-conscription movement became in time supporters of labour struggles.

The struggles against conscription during the war period molded and unified the labour movement and put it on a collision course with the Borden government. The cartoon below illustrates this conflict.

²⁷⁸ *BC Federationist*, 4 July 1919, "Ex- Service men condemn action," 1, "Returned Men and the Strike," 5. See also Elizabeth Ann Lees, "Problems of Pacification: Veterans Groups in Vancouver 1919-1922," MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby BC, Department of History, 1985, 34, 36, 39, 42-47.

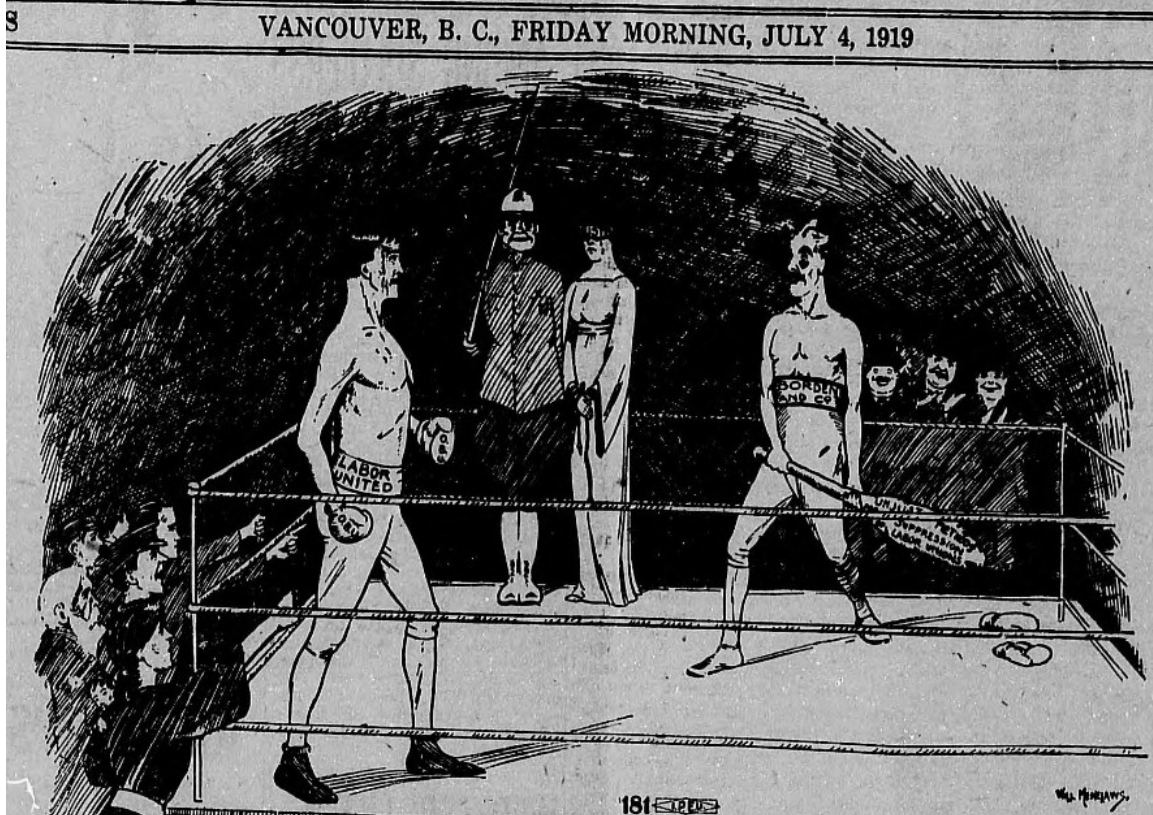


Figure 10. “Labor United Vs Borden” published in the *BC Federationist* 4 July 1919.

“Labor United Vs Borden” published in the *BC Federationist* 4 July 1919 illustrates this conflict.²⁷⁹ It expresses the perspective of the organized labour movement as it struggled to assert its collective bargaining rights in the face of the Borden government’s post war repression. In this cartoon, editors of the BC Federation of Labour newspaper saw the working class represented by the Labor United figure taking on the capitalists represented by Borden in a generalized labour revolt. Labour saw this as a class conflict under capitalism where the rules of the contest have been set capitalists and are not fair for labour. The bloodied “Labor United” figure bravely advances into the ring against “Borden and Co” wearing boxing gloves marked OBU and is cheered on by the workers in an unequal match against his opponent who carries a bat labelled “suppression of labor.” Any decision made by the “referees” represented by the figures of Justice who is clearly neither blind nor impartial and the RNWMP will no doubt be in Borden’s

²⁷⁹ *BC Federationist*, 4 July 1919, 1.

favour. This cartoon illustrates the BC Federation of Labour's view that labour was bravely advancing to secure its rights –opposition to conscription and then the right to collective bargaining -- and the Canadian government backed by the law, the courts, the police, and the army were used by Borden and his capitalist supporters to deny rights and justice to labour. In the real world of Canadian labour relations and politics, the general strikes called by labour had to struggle against being branded as “illegal;” their demands were seen as “seditious and revolutionary,” and their activists and leaders were deported, jailed, even killed. The editors of the *BC Federationist* knew that such a cartoon, if published before the end of the war, would have been deemed “seditious” by Chief Censor Chalmers and have led to the paper's closure under the *War Measures Act* or the September 1918 anti-democratic Order-in-Council passed by the Borden government during the war period. In the post-war labour struggles it is a fair representation of how the BC organized labour movement saw the class contradictions playing out.

The anti-conscription movement drew women workers into organized labour struggles who then joined the labour revolt and enthusiastically participated on many fronts. At the same time, provoked by the Canadian government's disrespect for workers and mismanagement of the war effort, recently organized Vancouver telephone workers, garment workers, and retail clerks -- and many unorganized workers -- joined the organized workers movement.²⁸⁰ Helena Gutteridge, who led the women laundry workers' strike in Vancouver in 1917, helped coalesce the labour movement around the struggle waged by women workers: women increasingly participated in labour organizing and enthusiastically participated in strikes. In particular, the struggle of the BC women telephone workers helped inspire the highpoint in morale of the Vancouver general strike of 1919. These women strikers demonstrated solidarity, risking the decertification of their union, by staying out on the picket lines into August 1919, longer than any other union in the strike.²⁸¹ Women's Labour Leagues and the massive mobilizations of unions organized

²⁸⁰ Tom Mitchell and James Naylor. “The Prairies: The Eye of the Storm,” Craig Heron (ed) *Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 185.

²⁸¹ Elaine Bernard, “The Long-Distance Feeling: History of the Telecommunications Workers Union,” PhD Thesis, Burnaby: BC: SFU History, 1988. While the union was broken after the strike it was soon reorganized. 120.

by newly organized women workers in telephone services, laundries, retail work and munitions showed that workers formerly viewed as and marginal to the organized labour movement by craft unionists and employers, provided a measure of hope for the potential for growth and inclusion of women in the labour movement.

The anti-conscription movement and the resulting labour revolt also had a transformative effect on the Methodist Church of Canada and other liberal Protestant religious formations who had been challenged by conscientious objectors and labour's industrial actions. The Methodist Church in Canada, Canada's largest Protestant denomination which had strongly supported the war effort and conscription, underwent an existential and internal political crisis at its 1918 Quadrennial Conference. After extensive debate, it was decided that the fruits of the peace should reflect "nothing less than a complete social reconstruction" of Canada.²⁸² The church was now strongly influenced by the anti-conscription ideas of the labour-allied social gospel activists such as Rev. J. S. Woodsworth, and Rev. William Ivens, who the church had thrown out for their anti-war activism during the war. After reflecting critically on their endorsement of the war the church concluded in 1918 that the needed social transformation must favour labour and peace rather than war; they now advocated for a more equitable society based on Christian principles of peace, equality, social justice, and socialism.²⁸³

The Borden government and other Conservative provincial governments paid the political price for their support of conscription, their mismanagement of the war and the repression of the general strikes. Although it is hard to determine reasons for electoral results, the 1921 Federal election saw the Borden government not only thrown out of office but relegated to third party status in Parliament. Instead, voters chose William Lyon Mackenzie King, a labour relations specialist who led a Liberal party that presented itself as more conciliatory towards labour. Voters also chose for the first time an

²⁸² Daniel Francis, *Seeing Reds: The Red Scare of 1918-1919, Canada's first war on terror*, 16.

²⁸³ Michael Bliss, "The Methodist Church in Canada in World War One," *Canadian Historical Review* Volume 49, Number 3, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, September 1968), Bliss argues that the Methodist church began after the war to repent its support for the war effort and conscription, and instead support radical and socialist solutions to societies' problems. 229-231. See also Daniel Francis, *Seeing Reds: The Red Scare of 1918-19*, 16.

independent third party -- the Progressives, which was based in movements of workers and farmers. In addition, provincial governments that had been anti-labour and pursued pro-conscription policies were defeated in Ontario and Alberta, where United Farmer and Labour governments respectively, were elected. J.S. Woodsworth, a minister, longshoreman, anti-conscription activist in Vancouver and an imprisoned Winnipeg general strike leader became the newly elected Labour MP for Winnipeg and would in later years become the first leader of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) party which brought together labour, farmer, and socialist activists across Canada.

The Vancouver workers' revolt was part of a Canada-wide phenomena -- a class-based rising which drew its inspiration from the anti-conscription movement. It came into being in part because many influential groups in Canada, representing a significant part of the population led by the labour movement, increasingly confronted the mismanagement of the war, and targeted conscription and other repression as unacceptable. The effort required to bring together the movement against conscription acted as catalyst -- radicalizing a labour movement already struggling with crippling inflation, oppressive employers, and repressive governments. Yet the movement ended with a defeat for labour. In the aftermath of the strikes many labour unions were smashed: to return to work, formerly unionized workers had to sign "yellow dog" contracts promising never to join a union again. Nonetheless, militant struggles were remembered, and the radical tradition continued in Vancouver with the Longshoremen's strike of 1923, and the general strike of 1935 at Ballantyne Pier.

Throughout the strikes of 1918-19, no matter how the strikers articulated their aims either in terms of opposition to conscription, supporting collective bargaining rights or in seeking a broader, more democratic, economic order, they were always portrayed by opponents as planning a takeover of Canadian society first as pawns of German imperialists, then as a veil for an invasion by "enemy" aliens, and later as Bolshevik revolutionaries. While the strikes were looking for concrete reforms that did not fundamentally challenge the authority of the Canadian state, they were a militant rejection of, and resistance to, the power of capital in BC and Canada.

Though broken after the strikes the labour movement would re-emerge in the 1930s and 40s, a generation later, to take up the same struggles to advance workers' interests under capitalism: they continued the fight for the right to form unions and be recognized in collective bargaining. After a period of quiet, the labour movement rose again. In World War Two, a powerful industrial style union movement would emerge and win labour recognition and the right to bargain collectively. Confronted by an industrial union, the United Auto workers, in their militant strike against Ford in Windsor in 1943, the Canadian government intervened to propose the Rand Formula as a solution to the strike. This would allow unions to achieve the legal recognition and formal collective bargaining rights they had sought in the Vancouver and Winnipeg General Strikes. The settlement was, however, a two-edged sword: on the one hand it won rights to labour recognition that labour had struggled for generations to get, but this was at the cost of bringing labour into the fold of the bureaucracy of state and employer dominated industrial relations. The price paid then by the unions for legitimacy was to give up the rank-and-file use of the strike weapon, especially the sympathy and general strike, which had proved its power when it challenged capital and government in 1918 and 1919.

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