

**No Hobo is an Island:
Power and Political Culture in the Federal Work
Relief Camps in British Columbia, 1932-1935**

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the political experience of men in the Department of National Defence's work relief camps in British Columbia from 1932 to 1935, when single, homeless, unemployed, and physically fit men accessed government unemployment relief living and working according to the administration's policies. In these camps the men found a government administration eager to teach them work discipline, a collection of charities and private groups that promoted an ideal of the working class man in troubled economic times, and organizers with the Relief Camp Workers' Union attempting to shape strikes that challenged government authority. In this thesis I argue that the unemployed vacillated between these different influences to challenge the government's palliative relief while also ensuring that they maintained access to relief for as long as possible. This was accomplished by shaping multi-faceted relationships with the government, the union, private charities, and fellow campers.

Keywords: Canada; Depression; Homelessness; Work Relief Camps, 1932-1936; Protest; Unemployment Relief

*For Alice Siekawitch,
who teaches me everything worth knowing.*

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I never expected to make it into the graduate program at Simon Fraser University, but when I read the acceptance e-mail I danced and jumped in my bedroom. It was 4 a.m. and I had to find ways to let out the excitement without making much noise. But from the moment I shared the news with my parents they have been encouraging and interested in my work, and generous with their time and hearts. This is particularly true of my parents, Janice Siekawitch and Ed Adolph, my brother, Keith Adolph, and my grandmother, Alice Siekawitch. Taking this step in my personal and academic development would not have been possible without their support and enthusiasm.

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List of Acronyms

DND	Department of National Defence
NUWA	National Unemployed Workers' Association
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
RCWU	Relief Camp Workers' Union
WUL	Workers' Unity League
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
COV	City of Vancouver Archives
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
UBC	University of British Columbia Special Collections
BCA	British Columbia Provincial Archives

Introduction

At the start of June 1935 hundreds of men striking from work relief camps in British Columbia boarded trains in Vancouver to begin the On-To-Ottawa Trek. The Trek, a cross-country pilgrimage to the nation's capital, aimed to pressure the federal government into changing unemployment relief policy. The federal government was alarmed by such direct action. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett directed the RCMP to stop the trekkers from continuing east of Regina, Saskatchewan. On 1 July 1935, the notorious Dominion Day Riot erupted in Market Square. Afterwards the federal government agreed to send the men back to their "homes". Just where these homes were located was anybody's guess. The federal government established the work relief camps to deal with the crisis of single, unemployed, homeless men who were physically fit for labor but wandered the country in search of employment. If these men had a home, they wouldn't have been in the camps or held in Regina by the RCMP. Nonetheless, most returned to the Vancouver region and applied for reentry to the work camps.

In an effort to reduce the number of Communists in the camps, each applicant's personal history was investigated by relief officers. The investigation into A.G. Brown, camper number 275642, revealed a complicated history. On 23 July 1935, investigator J.W. Smith wrote to the Unemployment Relief Branch Investigation Department that Brown "was in relief camps for 5 months up to April 4, 1935 when he left with the strikers." The report continued:

[He] came to Vancouver and lived on strike relief up to May 8, 1935 when he was again accepted for camps and drew 4 weeks' emergency B & M [bedding and meals] here pending returning to camp. After drawing his

last issue, May 29, 1935, he rejoined the strikers and went to Regina with them.¹

Sadly, beyond the few documents connected to this investigation, Brown's individual experience has been lost to posterity. His name does not appear next to Syd Thompson or Ronald Liversedge, who became two of the great relief camp storytellers. Nor is it alongside "Slim" Evans, George Kelly, and Matt Shaw in the Department of National Defence's list of notable Communists. Nonetheless, Smith's report reveals something fascinating about the rank-and-file campers and how they balanced the social demands for protest and an economic dependence upon relief.

However, the dramatic On-To-Ottawa Trek has long overshadowed the work relief camps both in public conscience and historical study. Indeed, many historians have treated the camps simply as a precursor to the Trek, and have focused solely on the organizing in the camps that led to the Trek. Ronald Liversedge, a Communist Party activist, Relief Camp Workers' Union organizer, and Trekker, holds that the men in the camps "assumed the right to fight against subjection, and calmly refused to be intimidated," and, as a result, the camps were regularly marked by protests led by union members and supported by campers.² According to Bill Waiser these men "grew increasingly despondent and distraught – perfect targets for the Communist Party of Canada, which quickly moved to take advantage of the men's vulnerability...."³ Lorne Brown explores how the union organized within the camps, but does not examine the campers who did not join the union or go on the Trek.⁴ As a result of works focusing on the union's efforts, A.G. Brown and others who did not become consistent class warriors in solidarity with the union, yet still protested the camps and mediated their camp experience, have been ignored by historical study. These campers accounted for the majority of men in the camps.

¹ "Investigative Report from 'J.W. Smith' to Hamilton Hall," 23 July 1935. BCA: GR1222, Box 136, File 4.

² Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On To Ottawa Trek: With Documents Related to the Vancouver Strike and the On To Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), 39.

³ Bill Waiser, *All Hell Can't Stop Us*, 35-36.

⁴ Lorne Brown, *When Freedom Was Lost: the Unemployed, the Agitator, and the State* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987).

Existing histories of the work relief camps and the RCWU, including those of Waiser, Brown, and Liversedge, do not provide a framework that explains A.G. Brown's behaviour. His use of relief in the spring of 1935 is difficult to fit into the established camp narrative. Even though he opted to join the strike in early April 1935 and then to jump on a train to Ottawa with hundreds of his comrades in June, Brown's affiliation with the RCWU-led protest movement was not unremitting. As Smith's report reveals, in between these opportunities to dissent Brown drew on government-provided bedding and meals, and at one point he even applied to return to the camps. This kind of behaviour challenges narratives of assumed solidarity that pervade the myth of the Relief Camp Workers' Union. Indeed, it raises important questions about how the rank-and-file interacted with the union. Why leave the work relief camps with the union in the first place? And, after having left the camps, why stop participating in the April 1935 strike? And why join the strike again just as the Trek was departing for the nation's capital?

Exploring these questions can explain the political behaviour of work relief campers in a time of economic, political, and social upheaval. They speak to themes of compliance, attempted domination, protest, and dissent, all of which are central to this thesis. However, as Brown's personal experience is invisible outside this report, these themes must be explored more generally. This study focuses on the men who, beginning in 1932, were collected in federal work relief camps throughout southern British Columbia.⁵ Numbering in the thousands, these young, single, homeless, and unemployed men travelled across the country, stopping in cities and towns to collect relief from governments, charities, and the general public while avoiding charges for vagrancy. It was a hard life characterized by constant uncertainty and instability. Many of these men had lost their jobs as a result of the Depression or were unfortunate enough to have come of employable age while the economy was in dire straits. Though unemployment statistics have to be viewed critically, it is estimated that as many as

⁵ In British Columbia, the federal government adopted the work relief camp regime from the provincial government, who had begun constructing a relief camp system targeted at the same demographic in the autumn of 1931. This study does not include the provincially-administered years because of the many differences between administrative goals and policies. The transition between these two camp systems, though, is worthy of future analysis.

thirty percent of the Canadian working population was unemployed by 1933.⁶ No government or charity could afford to care for strange men drifting across the country when they were obliged to offer some measure of support to the residential unemployed.⁷ Indeed, many governments and charities were ill-prepared for the administration of relief on such a wide scale. Moreover, as Eric Strikwerda reminds us, many saw the unemployed as “aberrations” because they challenged the values of “prosperity and progress, stable growth, industriousness, and efficiency.”⁸ Surely, it was assumed, offering comprehensive support to an unwanted problem would only encourage that problem to grow. Nonetheless, in 1932 Bennett’s federal government established the federal work relief camp system in response to nation-wide demands from provincial and municipal governments for greater federal participation in the unemployment relief crisis. In particular, they wanted the federal government to help solve the challenges posed by the homeless young men that were moving between urban centres, demanding emergency relief, and potentially disrupting a fragile local stability.⁹

Historians, aided by testimonies from campers, have revealed a great deal about these camps. Conditions inside were difficult. Regimented schedules, challenging work, limited resources, poor pay, poor health care, bad housing, and economic entrapment have all received a considerable amount of attention. For example, John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager point out that campers “grumbled about meat ‘doped with salt petre’ and ‘bedbugs too fresh and eggs not fresh enough’”, that they worked “without dignity,” and that “after work there was nothing to fill the hours.”¹⁰ Historians have also,

⁶ Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 1.

⁷ The best monograph currently available on municipal relief for the unemployed during the Depression is Eric Strikwerda’s *The Wages of Relief: Cities and the Unemployed in Prairie Canada 1929-39* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2013). The first half of the book, focusing on what he calls the “City Relief Machines”, is of particular value in understanding the precarious position in which the transient unemployed found themselves when they were in need of relief.

⁸ Eric Strikwerda, *The Wages of Relief*, 13.

⁹ Lorne Brown, *When Freedom Was Lost*, 47. For an extensive history of municipal relief in Canada during the Depression read Eric Strikwerda’s *The Wages of Relief* or John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager’s *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1985). Both provide extensive context on the history of relief structures available to the unemployed prior to the structuring of the work relief camp system.

¹⁰ John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939*, 268-269.

quite rightly, been attentive to the development of protest in the camps. As previously mentioned, many protests were a response to these poor and grievous conditions. With the organization of the RCWU, many historians, such as Lorne Brown, and Allen Seager and John Herd Thompson, note that a pattern of serious disturbances emerged. As argued in Bill Waiser's recent study, "the men [were] essentially a captive -- and in many cases, receptive -- audience [for the Communists]."¹¹ Waiser continues:

Once the Communists gained an initial foothold in the camps, they did everything they could to encourage unrest and resentment. Granted, this work would not have been as successful if not for the general dissatisfaction of the men. But the Communists pushed the simmering discontent to another level by deliberately playing upon the government's failure to pay a living wage and the men's profound sense of disillusionment.¹²

In their own ways each of these historians has contributed to our understanding of the camps as sites of conflict between the working class, their presumed party, and the state. However, many of these analyses are hampered by a teleological view of labour protest in which the working class is destitute, in need of assistance, and is quick to accept it in formally organized class-based protest. None has managed to explain how the RCWU managed to become so successful other than assuming that the "Communist message undoubtedly struck home, if only because it offered hope - an answer - when no one else seemed to care."¹³ From this point on it is assumed that the union's actions were co-terminous with the agency of the unemployed. Obviously this was a multilayered matter.

Historians have largely assumed that the unemployed were dependent on Communist leadership to act in opposition to the government's policies. They have also removed any consideration of a broader social discourse from their analysis of protest organization in the camps.¹⁴ As a result political and social culture inside the camps, including a sophisticated exploration of the organization of the campers towards viewing

¹¹ Bill Waiser, *All Hell Can't Stop Us*, 36.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁴ See also Louise Gorman, "State Control and Social Resistance: The Case of the Department of National Defence Relief Camp Scheme in B.C." (master's thesis, University of British Columbia, 1982), Laurel S. MacDowell, "Relief Camp Workers in Ontario during the Great Depression of the 1930s" *Canadian Historical Review* 76, no. 2 (1995): 205-228.

protest as a legitimate means of sharing their concerns, is underexplored. As it stands, this mode of analysis has perhaps helped explain why campers chose to protest in a practical sense – if not a social sense – but has not offered an explanation of why they chose not to protest in a particular moment. However, the experience of campers has proven to be much more complicated than the simple conflict between Communist leadership of campers and the federal camp administration. In the camps, Communists competed with the government and private charities who also sought to organize campers towards different ends than the RCWU. Nobody has examined the work of organizing the men in the camps or the conflicts that resulted. But evidence of efforts to influence the behaviour and political culture of the unemployed is readily available. In fact, as Lorne Brown reminds us, the Relief Camp Workers' Union had encouraged the transient unemployed to protest for years prior to the On-To-Ottawa Trek.¹⁵ This organization effort allowed the union to organize impressive strikes in the work relief camps. As will be discussed in the following pages, despite the presence of an influential leadership campers frequently chose not to protest when the opportunity arose. This work will explore the relationships that made protest possible and examine those who opposed joining communist agitators in protesting relief administration to provide a larger picture of protest and resistance in the camps.

I take my lead for this approach from historical work on political and social movements that has argued focusing solely on conditions as the cause of protest leads to an inaccurate and flawed understanding of how and why people challenge those in power.¹⁶ Certainly this approach to understanding labour conflict owes much to E.P. Thompson's efforts to move towards a cultural perspective, particularly his insistence that class consciousness must be measured according to more subtle evidence than

¹⁵ Lorne Brown, *When Freedom Was Lost: the Unemployed, the Agitator, and the State* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987).

¹⁶ It isn't a stretch to see that this focus on conditions comes from the Industrial Relations approach to Labour History, which, though largely superseded by Cultural Marxism in the second half of the twentieth century, continued to be an influential explanation of how and why people behaved as they did in moments of unrest. The Industrial Relations approach looks to determine the direct causes of labour unrest. Methods emerging from the Cultural Marxist approach look to determine how unrest is made possible.

somebody's union membership.¹⁷ It also benefits from studies that have provided an ever-more-complicated perspective on worker behaviour and protest while being organized into a mass fighting force. For example, in *Cultures of Solidarity* Rick Fantasia offers a nuanced explanation for how and why labour unrest developed as a result of organizational know-how and a sudden shift in workplace relationships.¹⁸ Throughout this important work, the material conditions of employment in each of his case studies receive very little attention because Fantasia recognizes that poor conditions do not in and of themselves produce solidarity. Matt Perry's work on unemployment in France between 1921 and 1945 argues that protest "has an objective, material, structural, and real side as well as a discursive, constructed, ideological, invented one."¹⁹ In his study, he convincingly shows how unemployed protest moved in waves depending on many factors particular to the people, place, and moment of a given event even if material conditions did not change drastically. The determining factor, of course, was human agency; however, unlike the historians who have studied the work relief camps and the On-To-Ottawa Trek, Perry points out that the unemployed did not always use Communists as their *de facto* voice even though French Communists were extraordinarily active for the entire period of his study. Instead, the unemployed in France used a whole body of tactics to pressure the state and charities, which reveal a much more complicated set of relationships between the unemployed, the Communist Party, and the government. James Lorence, in his study of unemployment protest in Georgia during the Depression, found that the unemployed used the organizational expertise of Communist agitators to challenge federal government relief programs according to their own, non-Communist goals. He notes that structural racism in the provision of relief ensured that African-American families were less likely to be provided with federally-mandated standards of relief than white families. However, his finding that

¹⁷ As E.P. Thompson reminds us, using union membership as a means of exploring or explaining class is really an effort to prescribe class-consciousness "not as it is, but as it ought to be". He encourages us to instead remember that "class is a relationship, not a thing." Rick Fantasia, Matt Perry, and James Lorence have all seemingly employed a similar approach to understanding class in their work, and I endeavour to the same in my own. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963; Toronto: Penguin Books, 1991), 9-10. Citations refer to the Penguin edition.

¹⁸ Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Actions, and Contemporary American Workers* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁹ Matt Perry, *Prisoners of Want: The Experience and Protest of the Unemployed in France, 1921-45* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 5.

African-Americans saw the New Deal, and the success of Communists in organizing this previously non-politicized demographic into a united mass movement, as an opportunity to challenge both the material and social dichotomy between the races, Lorence has shown how people can make use of outside efforts to formally organize them for their own purposes.²⁰ Perry and Lorence, unlike those who have studied the camps, highlight the ways in which the unemployed made use of Communist efforts for their own social and political purposes.

Both Perry and Lorence are speaking particularly to the challenges of the unemployed during the Depression. Nonetheless, neither of them managed to detach unemployment protest from an institutional history of the Communist Party in significant

²⁰ James Lorence, *The Unemployed People's Movement: Leftists, Liberals, and Labor in Georgia, 1929-1941* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 82.

ways.²¹ This is the same error that, in Bill Waiser's and Lorne Brown's work, allowed the organizations to act for the unemployed and permits their histories to focus on the organizational efforts of the Communist Party rather than the unemployed men that constituted the movement. In contrast, I place the unemployed themselves as the central characters of this history, making it as much a history of unemployment and the unemployed in the Depression as it is about how they were politicized in the camps. I do this by focusing on the many methods of dissent, protest, and compliance that the unemployed used in the camps to assert their autonomy. To establish exactly what the men in the camps were struggling to affirm their autonomy against I outline how the federal government, private charities, and Communists attempted to alter transient

²¹ No widely accepted argument about the institutional history of the Communist Party in North America during the 1930s exists, though most historians fall into one of two camps and a third perspective is emerging. The first argues that the Communist Party of Canada and the Communist movement in the United States was directed by leaders in the Soviet Union. An example of this approach can be found in Harvey Klehr's *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (Jackson, Tennessee: Basic Books, 1984). In the Canadian context, Ian Angus' study *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party in Canada* (Montreal: Vanguard Publications, 1981) contains a similar argument. The counter-argument is that Communists, including those connected to the Communist Party, worked independently of Soviet leadership in order to expand the Communist movement. James Lorence's study falls more closely in line with this argument as he suggests that the local conditions, including the local membership, greatly affected how Communists acted. Randi Stoch's *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928-1935* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009) and Robin Kelley's impressive study *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), which inspired much of Lorence's method, also argue for a localized understanding of North American communism. John Manley's study of communist organizational efforts among Canada's urban unemployed during the 1930s also reveals how local conditions, ranging from degrees of support to the state of local elections, shaped communist goals. "Starve, Be Damned!': Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929-39," *Canadian Historical Review* 79, 3 (September 1998). Stephen Endicott's recent study of the Workers' Unity League in Canada during the 1930s mixes both arguments together, revealing that the Communist Party of Canada was both an independent agent and subject to some of the global objectives coming out of the Soviet Union. Still, though, he recognizes that even the most stringent directives from Soviet leadership could not overcome stubborn and determined personalities organizing in Canada who could easily adapt new directives to fit long-standing goals. Stephen L. Endicott, *Raising The Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930-1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). Irving Abella also argues that, after the Third Period ended in 1935, local conditions affected the degree to which Communists could be involved in labour politics. Nonetheless, Abella balances both the local and international arguments by arguing that the drive to become more widely involved in labour politics was dependent upon a change of directives from Soviet leadership and the conclusion of the Third Period. *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, The Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-56* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973).

unemployed behaviour in the camps. During the Depression, governments and private charity organizations viewed the unemployed population with great alarm, fearing the degeneration of good working class men as they adapted to a transient lifestyle. This concern was layered in social, political, and economic anxieties. The government's solution, in partnership with many charities, was to construct relief policies that centered around work and discipline so that transient culture featured relationships, behaviours, and values which they deemed to be acceptable. For the government, this was achieved through the strict management and discipline of labour. Private charities focused on providing campers with recreational and educational opportunities. On the other hand, Communists used their organizational skills to encourage the development of a revolutionary working class. These institutional efforts to change the lifestyles of the transient unemployed in the camps are the topic of the first chapter of this thesis. The second chapter explores how the single, homeless, unemployed, and physically fit men who were admitted to the camps responded to these efforts to shape them. It focuses largely on the many ways in which campers dissented against government-imposed controls onto their lives and how they used Communist-led protest prudently in a high-risk environment. Through this approach, this thesis presents the unemployed as pragmatic actors in a social and political power contest between Communists, private relief organizations, and government relief agencies.

The sources that I present in this thesis are derived from the three main forms that framed the contemporary debate and have been instrumental in helping historians understand the work relief camps for eighty years. The first are government documents from Library and Archives Canada and the British Columbia Archives. The second is a large body of pamphlets, organizational documents, and literature produced by the Workers' Unity League and the Relief Camp Workers' Union, including dozens of copies of *The Relief Camp Worker*, a newssheet put out by the RCWU headquarters in Vancouver. For the purposes of this study, the noteworthy limitation of these sources is that only those protests in which campers refused to work, or which resulted in a dismissal of strikers, or which included acts of violence against camp property, are visible in these records. As a result many forms of protest that surely existed are not represented. Nonetheless, these two bodies of documents have been useful in discovering the structural and social ways that the government, private charities, and the Communists hoped to change and control the unemployed. Ronald Liversedge's memoir

Recollections of the On-To-Ottawa Trek and oral history interviews of campers and RCWU organizers from the British Columbia Archives form my third major body of evidence. These interviews were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by various historical projects commemorating the work relief camps, the On-To-Ottawa Trek, and the Depression.²² Most of the interviews are with men heavily involved in the Relief Camp Workers' Union's organization of protest inside the camps, and many include descriptions of the social and political environment in which they attempted to organize campers. I use these sources to develop a carefully generalized discussion of political culture in the camps.²³

Through my research, I have found that campers did not spontaneously rally behind the RCWU when they came to the camps. Moreover, when the men in the camps did rally behind the union it was with less excitement than historians have assumed. As will be shown in this thesis, transients protested the camps while they also complied with the demands of the government, suggesting that the camps were far too complicated to be simplified to a constant, direct conflict between the RCWU and government relief policy. Indeed, the efforts of authorities other than the government to influence life in the camps expanded the possibilities for protest and dissent beyond the leadership of the RCWU. In retrospect it is not surprising that the camps were chaotic and pulsing with potential trajectories, but in reading the primary documents the tenuous trajectory between the camps and the RCWU-led walkout of April 1935 - and the resulting On-To-Ottawa Trek - becomes clear.

²² The creators of these oral history interviews, along with the interviewers, are many. Several, including Syd Thompson's interview (which features prominently in the fourth chapter), were conducted by the Labour History Association, with Colleen Bostwick acting as interviewer. James "Red" Walsh's interview was conducted prior to 1974 by John Hodgins of Reynoldston Research and Studies. The interview of John Kelly, conducted by Richard Bell, was done by the West Kootenay Culture Centre under the Government of Canada CCDP grant. Frank Mottishaw's, conducted prior to 1976 by Lois Dick, was sponsored by the West Coast Medical History Society.

²³ In the 1930s, the field of academic sociology was in its fledgling years in Canada. As a result, there is no contemporary study that provides a broad understanding of any of the relevant groups in this study, and, if there were such a study it would come with its own body of limitations and challenges. In 1985, a sociology thesis was presented by Louise Gorman at the University of British Columbia on the topic of the camps in BC. The thesis, while fascinating for its analysis, added little to the ongoing historical debate about protest in the camps. Louise Gorman, *State Control and Social Resistance*.

Ultimately, this thesis explores the patterns of behaviours that developed in the work relief camps, and the power contests that made them possible. A more nuanced understanding of political culture in the camps can help us make sense of how transient dissent, protest, and compliance made the remarkable event of the Trek possible. Moreover, it will help us understand A.G. Brown's adaptability to relief mechanisms in April 1935 both as an individual and as a man captured in the political culture of a particular moment. In the work relief camps the transient unemployed population seeking relief from the government, private relief organizations, and communist organizations adapted lifestyles that allowed them to use the relief mechanisms that were available to them as much as possible. This thesis argues that the unemployed in the camps exhibited the behaviour that those who held power over them desired to see. They variously adopted public transcripts of anger, submission, and placidity to control the relief that they received to the best of their abilities.²⁴ Transients in the work relief camps varied their conduct, taking some opportunities to resist through protest and others to display compliance with the government and their private allies.

²⁴ James C. Scott defines public transcripts as "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate." He also notes that rituals of subordination, or the communication of subordination by the less powerful to the more powerful, "may be deployed both for purposes of manipulation and concealment." James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2, 35.

Chapter 1.

Plenty of Cooks in the Kitchen: Forging Political Culture in the Work Relief Camps

Once the work relief camps were initially established by the provincial government in late 1931, many of the unemployed men who wandered Vancouver streets looking for work and charity were moved to camps in the British Columbian hinterland. In 1932 and 1933, the Department of National Defence took over the camps and structured transient life to produce disciplined labourers who recognized the inherent value of work. Private organizations supported these efforts, but with the added goal of bringing hope and pleasure into camp life through education and recreational entertainment. Communists, through the Relief Camp Workers' Union, tried to convince the unemployed in the camps to openly challenge the DND's administration of relief, thereby making the camps a training ground for a body of protesting men that followed their leadership. Ultimately, as this chapter shows, public and private unemployment relief agencies, and Communist organizers working in the camps all provided assistance to the homeless to reform their behaviour and encourage particular ideals of labour, economics, and society. For each organization the camps provided an opportunity to shape the unemployed man according to their ideal image. None of them took such a heavy responsibility lightly.

When the federal government took over the administration of work relief camps in British Columbia they became the primary providers of transient relief for thousands of young men. They promoted themselves as saviours of the poor who were working in the best interests of all Canadians, including those who had become economically disenfranchised by the Depression. The focus of this care, though, was directed towards very particular goals in changing unemployed men. A speech given at the 1934 Annual Meeting of the Engineering Institute of Canada noted that the camps improved "the mental and physical condition of the single homeless unemployed by freeing them from

the demoralizing effects of enforced idleness and providing them with wholesome food, adequate clothing, comfortable accommodation and, most important, with useful work to do.”²⁵ The central purpose of the work relief camp scheme was to “restore and maintain the morale of the men until they [could] be absorbed in normal employment when industry revives.”²⁶ According to a 1933 report, which favourably compared the Civilian Conservation Corps in the United States with the Work Relief Camps, the camps ensured young transient men were no longer “schooled in the habits of idleness and taught to get along without work”²⁷:

The plan sought to attain a dual purpose; the one moral, the other economic. In the moral sphere it was considered that the subject requiring treatment was the state of mind of the individual. It was hoped that once set free from the demoralizing effect of compulsory idleness, the mental attitude would react to the influence of steady work, wholesome food and congenial surroundings. To encourage this reaction officers in charge of projects were to be made responsible not only for works but for the mental, physical and vocational care of the men placed under their supervision. Educational classes and organized recreation were to be embodied in the scheme and every opportunity given to tradesmen and helpers to work at their respective trades and so maintain their manual efficiency pending their return to normal work.²⁸

²⁵ “Paper for Delivery Before the Annual Meeting of the Engineering Institute of Canada.” LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3186, File Unemployment Relief Press Reports.

²⁶ *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, pg. 5. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

²⁷ This report, whose author is unnamed, makes several comparisons between how the Work Relief Camp system in Canada compared with the Civilian Conservation Corps in the United States. The comparisons are entirely focused on the administrative and economic structures that supported the camps, including a brief exploration of the hierarchical nature of the camps in the United States, a discussion of who had access to the camps in the United States as compared to in Canada, and an explanation of the remuneration and expense of the camps in Canada as compared to the American relief system. Ultimately, the article argues that though the two relief schemes appear to be similar they were, in fact, very different, which made a comparison between the two difficult. It does, though, attempt to paint the Canadian scheme as more humanitarian in intention as it supported other relief mechanisms rather than acted as the primary relief scheme available to unemployed men. “Memorandum on the Department of National Defence Unemployment Relief Scheme with Some Observations Concerning the United States Civilian Conservation Corps,” September 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 2953, File Unemployed Relief HQ 1376-10 (Vol.2).

²⁸ Ibid.

In this report the DND combined humanitarian concerns for the transient unemployed with the wider socio-economic goals that were central to the camp project. Of particular importance was the “treatment of a ‘state of mind’ diseased by the demoralizing effect of compulsory idleness.”²⁹ Discourse of this sort implied that the transient unemployed were lazy, their habits were potentially toxic to their character, and their presence disrupted a well-established Canadian social order that focused upon work in and compliance with the capitalist system. The combination of disciplined work, good food, and a “congenial” environment was the government’s panacea for this pressing crisis of morale among the laboring class.³⁰

The government’s goals were not out of step with those noted in E.P. Thompson’s article “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism.” Here, speaking of the introduction of the clock and watches in eighteenth century Britain, Thompson noted that “in mature capitalist society...it is offensive for the labour force merely to ‘pass the time.’”³¹ For R.B. Bennett’s federal government in 1930, concerned with economic recovery, the threat that the working class may learn how to “get along without work” while unemployed demanded a dramatic shift in relief policy.³² Thompson continues, noting that “new labour habits” and “new time-discipline” were formed in the eighteenth century “by the division of labour; the supervision of labour; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings; [and] the suppression of fairs and sports.”³³ Thompson argues that labour, the space in which it takes place, the process by which it is measured, and the methods used to coerce efficiency and construct compliance were all ordered in a new way to support a particular vision of society that benefitted businesses and altered how the laboring class organized their day. The camps were similar insofar as they promised to prevent transients from succumbing to the vagaries of homelessness, ensured that campers maintained their labour skills, their work ethic was guarded, and their moral state improved, all the while constructing

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ E.P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism”, in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1991): 394-395.

³² “Memorandum on the Department of National Defence Unemployment Relief Scheme with Some Observations Concerning the United States Civilian Conservation Corps,” September 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 2953, File Unemployed Relief HQ 1376-10 (Vol.2).

³³ Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism”, 394-395.

valuable recreational and transportation infrastructure that was “to the general advantage of Canada.”³⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly given the name of the work relief camps, labour was centrally important in how the unemployed were reconstructed into the ideal, working-class Canadian.

Not all of the unemployed were eligible for the work relief camps, though. Rather, the camps were limited to “youth, 18 years or over, who [were] homeless, single, unemployed, and in need of relief, if found physically fit...”³⁵ “Youth” were also defined as male, ensuring that unemployed women who otherwise fit the criteria had to find relief elsewhere.³⁶ However, if a man qualified and an officer of the Employment Service of Canada suggested he go to the camps, he was compelled to go or threatened with the forfeiture of any further government relief. In August of 1933 a circular memo was sent to all relief officers pointing out “that in the case of any men refusing to accept the opportunity of relief as offered in the camps, they will immediately render themselves ineligible for relief outside of such camps, and such men should be informed that no further relief will be available to them.”³⁷ The same memo outlined that:

After completing the application form, these men will be required to be medically examined as to physical fitness for such camps in accordance with the regulations....

I. Men to be free from infectious or contagious diseases;

³⁴ *Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployed Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1933), 1. LAC: RG 24 Vol. 2954, File: Unemployment Relief Policy and Instruction Vol. 2.

³⁵ “Letter from to W.A. Gordon, Minister of Labour,” 7 August 1933. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2044, File Administration Board BC, Care of Single Homeless, June 27, 1933-Aug. 31, 1933, Third Section Y1-8-6

³⁶ Very little research has been conducted into the forms of relief available to single women who were homeless. Perhaps the most comprehensive study of relief available to women during the Depression is Lara Campbell’s work, though it suggests that what little relief that was available to women was only available to them if they were dependents. Ronald Liversedge suggests that women who lived in Vancouver’s Hobo Jungles were denied any form of municipal relief and that relief officers encouraged these women to prostitute themselves to sustain themselves. Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On To Ottawa Trek*, 24; Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens*.

³⁷ *Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployed Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1933), 11. LAC: RG 24 Vol. 2954, File: Unemployment Relief Policy and Instruction Vol. 2.

II. Men to be free from hernia, lung, or heart trouble, and other disabilities which might render them unfit for strenuous manual labour.³⁸

Thus, the men who applied to the camps were forced to immediately surrender to a medical examiner responsible for determining whether they were suited for hard labour. This, combined with coercive restrictions on transient relief, placed transients in a doubly subservient position. First, the transient unemployed were compelled into accepting an offer to apply for the camps, and, second, they were forced to complete an application form and go through a medical examination which determined whether they would receive further federal relief.³⁹ These measures ensured that, once in the camps, transient men would be capable of doing the “strenuous manual labour” that was demanded of them.⁴⁰

Camps varied depending on their construction date, how many men they held, what kind of work they were doing, the local administrator in charge of the camp, and the foreman responsible for the work project. However, the policies that outlined the material and labour conditions in the camps were consistent throughout Canada.⁴¹ The housing was similar to a military barracks. Wherever permanent structures were not thought to be necessary campers built long, tar-paper shacks with rows of beds and an oven for heating in the winter.⁴² Depending on the season, men wore standard uniforms issued

³⁸ “Circular to All Government Agents Re: ‘The Relief Act 1933’, Homeless, Single, Unemployed Men. Re: Camp Enrollment,” 29 July 1933. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2044, File Administration Board BC, Care of Single Homeless, June 27, 1933-Aug. 31, 1933, Third Section Y1-8-6

³⁹ No consistent relief policy was constructed for those men who did not pass the medical examination and were, therefore, barred from entering the camps. According to one report that responded to civilian outrage in Kelowna, they fell under the care of the Province of British Columbia and, according to tradition, the local municipality. “Correspondence Re: Care of Men Discharged and Denied Entry to Camps between Military District and Major-General,” February 1936. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3175, File Unemployment Relief Nahun, B.C.

⁴⁰ “Circular to All Government Agents Re: ‘The Relief Act 1933’, Homeless, Single, Unemployed Men. Re: Camp Enrollment,” 29 July 1933. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2044, File Administration Board BC, Care of Single Homeless, June 27, 1933-Aug. 31, 1933, Third Section Y1-8-6

⁴¹ The DND outlined these conditions in the *Policy And Instructions for the Administration of Unemployment Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men*, a manual provided to each camp and military district to ensure their smooth and consistent operation.

⁴² *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, p. 27. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

upon arrival in the camps.⁴³ Rations measured according to army standards kept campers fed, while food costs were kept at less than twenty cents per person per day to maintain the operational budget.⁴⁴ Some medical care was available to sick or injured campers, and a tobacco ration and an allowance of twenty cents for each day worked rounded out the relief provided.⁴⁵ This allowance was “not intended as a ‘wage’ and [was] given merely for the purpose of ensuring that the men [had] some funds for the purchase of small comforts and necessities” from the Canteen Store.⁴⁶

As outlined by the DND’s final report on the work relief camps, “in return for the food, shelter, clothing, care and cash allowance, the men [were] required to give eight hours work on each working day on the projects.”⁴⁷ As such, the camps were not merely holding centres for the unemployed during an economic crisis, but were spaces where relief was earned through disciplined work. Indeed, the shape of work in the camps was carefully regulated and controlled so that it fulfilled the DND’s goal of preparing the unemployed for re-employment. Campers were expected to work six days a week, eight hours a day, completing complicated skilled work and physically difficult tasks, such as constructing highways and emergency airport runways in the British Columbia interior. This work was measured according to scientific management of labour philosophies, which were most visible in monthly progress reports sent to the local military district and

⁴³ Contrary to man oral testimonies, these clothing issue was not standardized across the country but only within camps and, even then, articles of clothing issued to the relief personnel was intended to supplement the clothing they brought to the camps so that they could perform their duties and work through the season. *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, pp. 30-32. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

⁴⁴ *Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployed Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1933), 38. LAC: RG 24 Vol. 2954, File: Unemployment Relief Policy and Instruction Vol. 2.

⁴⁵ *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, pp. 18-21. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

⁴⁶ *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, pg. 5. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

then to the head office in Ottawa.⁴⁸ For example, the monthly report from Project 74 at Agassiz-Deroche for June 1933 noted that, between 16 June, when the camp was taken over from the provincial authorities, and 30 June, 500 cubic yards of solid rock had been taken away along with 1700 cubic yards of other materials, 3.5 acres of bush had been slashed, the camp had been cleaned up and buildings repaired, and the general maintenance of the highway, which it was their responsibility to extend, had been undertaken.⁴⁹ Since camp administrators had to provide the people sent to them with work, and because modern equipment was not used to complete projects, progress was generally quite slow. According to another report from Project 74 this was due to “skilled work being done by unskilled labour.”⁵⁰ Another report, from the Blair Rifle Range, Project 134, whose responsibility was to excavate 600 yards of hardpan, extend existing firing points, repair the road, and grade the land on the recreation site,⁵¹ noted that “the work on this Project [was] being carried out entirely by hand.”⁵² Mechanized equipment was rarely provided to campers even though it would have greatly improved the rate of project completion.

Project completion, however, was not the express goal of the work relief camp system. In a 1936 report on the work relief camps it was noted that “it [was] not anticipated that the actual work performed on various projects would be comparable to the return expected on similar works executed under normal conditions,” as the campers, working in unfamiliar trades and doing unfamiliar labour and whose “physical condition [had] fallen below par because of insufficient sustenance or inadequate care

⁴⁸ Each camp sent these monthly reports to the Department of National Defence headquarters in Ottawa, where they were compiled and stored. Oddly, despite the impressive projects that the campers started (and occasionally finished), no final report celebrating the accomplishments of the work relief camps was released to the public, and so the advances in infrastructure were largely unreported. This is, perhaps, a result of the pressures from the private construction industry, which was concerned that the work relief camps were used by local municipalities to construct and expand infrastructure, and who pressured the government into being very conservative in their expansion of relief projects.

⁴⁹ “Monthly Progress Report, U.E.R. Camp, Agassiz-Deroche Project No. 74,” 13 July, 1933. RG 24 Vol. 3143, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13-57 (vol. 1).

⁵⁰ “Monthly Progress Report, U.E.R. Camp, Agassiz-Deroche Project No. 74,” 12 December, 1934. RG 24 Vol. 3143, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13-57 (vol. 1).

⁵¹ “Monthly Progress Report, U.E.R. Project No. 134 Blair Rifle Range,” 14 February 1935. RG 24 Vol. 3176, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13-109 (vol.1)

⁵² “Monthly Progress Report U.E.R. Project No. 134, Blair Rifle Range,” 14 November 1934. RG 24 Vol. 3176, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13-109 (vol.1)

during periods of unemployment,” did not possess the physical strength or capacity one could expect from the ordinary labourer.⁵³ Historian Lorne Brown has suggested that the slow rate of progress was a conscious policy to extend project lifespans so that the unemployed could be occupied for as long as possible and new projects didn’t need to be funded.⁵⁴ His analysis, though, does not consider how the government constructed the camps to be educational spaces for vagrants who preferred transiency to labour. Progress on the projects was not systematically slowed just to hold the campers for a longer time length. Work itself was the central focus of how the federal government sought to intervene in transient lifestyles during the Depression. More specifically work that was prolonged and carefully controlled by the foreman and his gang members ensured that campers benefitted from and learned to appreciate the inherent moral value of work while learning to comply with the expectations of one’s superiors.

A general order sent to the British Columbia Provincial Police in May 1933 noted that “all men in camps will be required to perform the necessary fatigue duties within the camp, as ordered by the foreman.”⁵⁵ In addition to complying with the foreman’s work expectations, the fatigue duties included cleaning up the mess hall, the barracks, doing laundry, showering regularly, and shaving daily.⁵⁶ The order ended with two clauses for discharge:

(l) Any man refusing to obey the rules or regulations laid down for the camps must be notified by the foreman that in the event of his still continuing to disobey the rules he will be expelled from the camp, and that he will not be eligible for relief in other camps or districts.

⁵³ *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, pg. 5. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

⁵⁴ Lorne Brown, *When Freedom Was Lost*, 51-54. Brown connects the occupation of the unemployed in the camps with an effort to curtail the growth of communism among transients in the cities, which he argues was the central purpose of the work relief camp scheme.

⁵⁵ “British Columbia Police General Order No. 144,” 1 May 1933. BCA: MSS 2793, Box 3, File 3. *Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployed Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1933). LAC: RG 24 Vol. 2954, File: Unemployment Relief Policy and Instruction Vol. 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

(m) Any man who is being granted relief in the camp and who refuses to undertake work for either the Provincial Government or the Dominion Government for which he will receive wages shall be cut off relief....⁵⁷

Both of these regulations focused on preventing individuals from disrupting the established work routine in the camps. Hence the DND informed camp administrators and campers that refusal to work in the camps reflected noncompliance with the terms of relief agreed to in the application form.⁵⁸ The policy was clear: failure to comply with the local foreman's expectations, particularly those involving work, would result in one's dismissal and the denial of all relief offered by government agencies. The government thought that compliance with the wishes of camp authority would reform transients into an acquiescent, disciplined work force. Refusal to work threatened these goals.

Refusal to work efficiently was particularly concerning to government authorities because it had the potential to spread from one camper to the next, which further endangered the goals of the camp. Moreover, it could lead to collective action among the campers. Indeed, when the camps were run by the British Columbian provincial government from 1931 to 1933 their work goals were impeded by camper organization. In a report outlining the challenges facing the DND in adopting the BC camps from provincial authorities, it was noted that "a committee of the men" had taken over the management of many of the provincially-run camps and "the camp superintendent [had] not been allowed to function."⁵⁹ The report argued that the federal government would have to "put men to work who [had] been trained for twelve months in idleness and allowed to do about what they pleased," because of a failed government relief effort and the strength of these worker-organized camp committees.⁶⁰ The federal government, concerned about the risk of wide-scale work stoppages, argued that it was their

⁵⁷ "British Columbia Police General Order No. 144," 1 May 1933. BCA: MSS 2793, Box 3, File 3.

⁵⁸ On the application form to enter the camps the men agreed to a statement saying that they "promise and agree to comply with the rules governing the Camp." *Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployed Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1933), Appendix 1. LAC: RG 24 Vol. 2954, File: Unemployment Relief Policy and Instruction Vol. 2.

⁵⁹ "Report regarding Unemployment Relief," 24 May 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3040, File Unemployment Relief Road Projects, B.C.

⁶⁰ "Report regarding Unemployment Relief," 24 May 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3040, File Unemployment Relief Road Projects, B.C.

responsibility “to protect those who wish to benefit by the provision [of relief] which has been made, and to this end camp grievance committees or other organizations of like character [would] not be permitted.”⁶¹ Thus, the opportunity for communal camper involvement in determining work and living conditions in the camps was rejected so that the DND’s efforts to construct work discipline in the camps could not be challenged.

Furthermore, the DND believed that campers were not likely to protest without agitators pushing them to do so. This is visible in some of the reports about the growth of the Relief Camp Workers’ Union in British Columbia sent to the DND by spies working in the camps. In one report it was noted that “a reasonable amount of work [had] been carried out, falling at times when unrest, due to agitation [that] had unsettled [the campers].”⁶² Another noted that agitators had “gone from camp to camp breeding discontent and creating discord among the men. This...resulted in several disturbances, the chief of which was to delay the normal progress of the work in hand.”⁶³ In both of these reports the chief concern regarding Communist agitation was whether it affected the work. Thus, work and instilling a compliance with government policy that ensured the unemployed were working was the central concern of the DND administration. Consequently, Communist agitators attempting to form committees or unions were discharged for their refusal to comply with government regulations and, with greater concern, for disrupting efforts to instill work discipline in campers.⁶⁴

Private relief organizations, largely led by Christian organizations, had, like the government, provided various forms of relief to the unemployed in Vancouver for decades. However, this responsibility, broadly or more specifically guided by the precepts of the social gospel movement, became more complicated as the Depression lengthened and deepened and the number of men settling down in Vancouver

⁶¹ *Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployed Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1933), 78. LAC: RG 24 Vol. 2954, File: Unemployment Relief Policy and Instruction Vol. 2.

⁶² *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, p. 9. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

⁶³ *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployed Relief Scheme for Single Homeless Men from Inception (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*, p. 8. LAC: RG 25 Vol. 1747, File: 488.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

increased.⁶⁵ Reverend Andrew Roddan, perhaps the most well-known of the social gospel reformers working in the Lower Mainland, had considerable sympathy for the unemployed. Based on his years of working with the unemployed in Vancouver's Hobo Jungles, he was deeply concerned with how unemployed men were being drawn towards a less productive lifestyle that was dependent on relief and which was vulnerable to the spectre of communism.⁶⁶ Like the government, most private organizations also wanted the unemployed to earn their keep while on relief.⁶⁷ In this way they agreed with the DND's goals. As relief was moved from the cities to the camps the Vancouver Young Men's Christian Association, in a letter to Archbishop DePencier, suggested that church officials could urge transients "to initiate work in harmony with the general plan [of relief]."⁶⁸ Private organizations, no longer responsible for feeding or clothing transients in the cities, could now focus on improving morale in the camps. In Vancouver the military district director, George Spry, often attended meetings for church conferences to explain the relief camp mission and allow churches to share their concerns over camp policy. In these meetings, church leadership argued that the camps

⁶⁵ In the final decades of the nineteenth century, the social gospel movement grew as an effort in changing how the church related to the world in which it was situated. Andrew Hunt defines the social gospel movement as one which solved the "task of instilling piety, purity, and probity [by] addressing the ... social and economic conditions under which the population lived." In his study of social surveys, Hunt argues that the "list of symptoms of immorality reveal[ed] the interconnections within a diverse range of moral and social conditions: drinking, gambling, Sabbath desecration, vice, alien races and tongues, housing, sanitation, education and recreation. The environment of the masses, especially in the expanding urban areas, had to be improved if they were to be Christianized and Canadianized." Alan Hunt, "Measuring Morals: The Beginnings of the Social Survey Movement in Canada, 1913-1917", *Social History/Histoire Sociale*, Vol. 35, No. 69 (2002), 172.

⁶⁶ Andrew Roddan's relief efforts in Vancouver's Gastown district is perhaps the most well documented of all private charities due to his public relations campaigns and funding drives, which included the release of two books, several speeches, and some articles published in local newspapers. Todd McCallum has also released an article about Andrew Roddan's efforts, which complements the research conducted by John Douglas Belshaw in the 1980s quite well. John Belshaw, *The Administration of Relief to the Unemployed in Vancouver During the Great Depression* (master's thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1982); Todd McCallum, "The Reverend and the Tramp, Vancouver, 1931: Andrew Roddan's God in the Jungles", *BC Studies* 147 (Autumn 2005): 51-88; Andrew Roddan, *Vancouver's Hoboes* (Vancouver: Subway Books, 2005).

⁶⁷ "Letter from Charles Shofield, Bishop of British Columbia, to Honourable T.D. Pattullo, Premier of BC," 11 May 1935. BCA: GR 1222, Box 136, File 4.

⁶⁸ "Letter from Stanley Brent, Provisional Chairman The Vancouver City Young Men's Christian Association, to Archbishop DePencier, Archbishop of Westminster and Columbia," 30 Sept, 1931. COV: MSS 362, Box 551-D-5, File Relief and Employment 1931-1935.

were “demoralizing,” “crushing initiative,” “wasting manhood,” “ruining self-respect,” and were “breeding grounds for disruptive and subversive movements.”⁶⁹ In a letter to the Department of National Defence, the National Council of the Young Men’s Christian Associations of Canada noted that they were “greatly concerned about the situation in which young men find themselves today, and are on record specifically with relation to the camps as desirous of assisting the Government in the development of a program with educational, recreational, and religious objectives.”⁷⁰ The letter invited the DND to use the YMCA to shape new and necessary services for campers. Private charities clearly saw partnerships with the local military district as a means of complementing the material and work relief that the camps provided while supplementing it with extra provisions that improved the quality of care.

Both the DND and private organizations expected that fostering a positive outlook would be a challenge in the work relief camps. The DND noted in a 1933 report that keeping the men “contented” and “occupied”⁷¹ was a priority. After all, it was “the men who have nothing to take up their interest who cause trouble.”⁷² The report noted that “the systematic collection and steady flow of recreational comforts to the camps [was] imperative.”⁷³ To fill this need, the policy manual suggested that district superintendents make partnerships with local clubs and organizations which could offer financial and material support through donating money, old books, or other recreational supplies. Private relief organizations, particularly church-based associations, were most obliging to this call for help. The Church Co-Operative Camp Council, a new inter-denominational body organized to help with the camps and DND administration in the Lower Mainland, partnered to provide the camps with recreational materials.⁷⁴ A.B. Carey, a Social Camp Worker employed by the council, reported in October 1933 that he

⁶⁹ “Letter from Charles Shofield, Bishop of British Columbia, to Honourable T.D. Pattullo, Premier of BC,” 11 May 1935. BCA: GR 1222, Box 136, File 4.

⁷⁰ “Letter from R.E.G. Davis, Secretary, Personnel Division of The National Council of Young Men’s Christian Associations of Canada to Captain F.F. Worthington, Military Headquarters,” 5 July 1935. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3034, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-77.

⁷¹ “Unemployment Relief Camps Recreational Comforts Instructions,” January 1934. RG 24, Vol. 3034, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-77.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “Report by A.B. Carey, Social Camp Worker for the Church Cooperative Camp Council to 4170,” October 1933. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2044, File Y1-8-9 B.C. Care of Single Homeless-Fourth Section Sept. 1, 1933-June 1935.

had made “personal contact in all Camps visited, which I hope may have been of value.”⁷⁵ Carey had surveyed the needs of the camps to assess how the Church Co-Operative Camp Council could support both campers and the government. He spent the summer establishing networks for collecting donations in Vancouver, and setting up “working committees” in the interior “which were to be utilized for the increased supply of books and magazines for the men in the camps.”⁷⁶ His efforts proved quite successful. Through to 30 September 1933 he had personally delivered 40 200 magazines, 1,815 books, 21 gramophones, 1,555 records, 357 decks of playing cards, 1 radio, a dozen fishing outfits, and dozens of softballs, baseball gloves, and footballs.

These materials, intended to provide campers with relief from the mundane Sundays and evenings of camp life, led to new social events for the campers. Teams for all sorts of sports were soon organized and tournaments between nearby camps took place on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. Softball, football, baseball, and bridge games and tournaments were common weekend events covered in local newspapers, such as the *Nelson Daily News*.⁷⁷ These recreational materials seemed to be so successful that the Vancouver Council of Social Agencies suggested that the acquisition of recreational materials become a central feature of camp relief in April 1934.⁷⁸ In the interest of saving costs they even suggested that campers could build recreational materials out of supplies provided by the government. This would allow campers to develop new skills that might be valuable once the economy improved.⁷⁹ Through these recreational materials, churches and the secular charitable organizations with which they partnered hoped to guard “the morale of young and old.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Report by A.B. Carey, Social Camp Worker for the Church CoOperative Camp Council,” October 1933. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2044, Y1-8-9 B.C. Care of Single Homeless-Fourth Section Sept. 1, 1933-June 1935.

⁷⁷ “East-West Softball a Snappy Exhibition,” *Nelson Daily News*, March 27, 1934. “Camp now Plans Bridge Tourney,” *Nelson Daily News*, April 4, 1934, “Longbeach Camp has Sport Plans,” *Nelson Daily News*, March 10, 1934. 5392, 5405

⁷⁸ “Report from A.B. Carey to C.J. McNeely, Chairman Vancouver Council of Social Agencies,” 18 April 1934. BCA: GR 429, Box 21, File Correspondence regarding unemployment administration.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ “Report from A.B. Carey to C.J. McNeely, Chairman Vancouver Council of Social Agencies,” 18 April 1934. BCA: GR 429, Box 21, File Correspondence regarding unemployment administration.

Secular organizations also sought to partner with the DND in expanding the scope of camp relief. For example, after a short tour of camps the Director of Technical Education for British Columbia, J. Kyle, noted he was “surprised not only at the attitude of the majority of those with whom he conversed, but also at the amount of valuable work being carried out for the Province by the men in the camps.”⁸¹ Kyle then suggested schools be established in the camps for men “interested in commercial and other forms of art” so that they may acquire new skills.⁸² The joint goals shared between secular organizations and the DND became educational in focus, providing opportunities for self-improvement in the camps so that the men might remain optimistic about their future opportunities. For example, campers near Princeton were treated with a first aid course taught by a local physician. It was reported in the *Princeton Star* that campers had “taken enthusiastically” to the course.⁸³ The local physician’s goal was to educate for employment and entertain transients by offering training during camp downtime.

Educational opportunities directed towards skill acquisition were well-aligned with the DND’s goals as they resulted in labourers who had more skills to offer the economy. Moreover, they were some of the most important means of preparing the unemployed in the camps for an improved economy. Many of these programs were directly applicable to the job opportunities that might come available to the working class. For example, in the largest educational program offered in the camps around the Lower Mainland and up the Fraser Valley the Vancouver Technical School offered campers correspondence educational programs that ranged from geology to motor mechanics, from mathematics to diesel engineering, and many more.⁸⁴ Campers could sign up for modules on various trades that would make them more competitive in a depressed job market and prepare them for re-employment. If campers completed their selected courses and displayed a standard of proficiency in an applied project they were given a certificate of

⁸¹ “Extract from a letter from the District Officer Commanding at Victoria, B.C., dated 14th November, 1934, regarding Educational measures at Unemployment Relief Camps,” 24 November 1934. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2255, File Unemployment Relief Camps – B.C. 1933-34.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ “First Aid Classes for Airport Lads,” *The Princeton Star* (Princeton, British Columbia), June 4, 1933.

⁸⁴ “Report Re: Correspondence Classes for Men in Unemployed Relief Camps,” 26 April 1934. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2255, File Unemployment Relief Camps – B.C. 1933-34.

qualification.⁸⁵ Out of a total enrolment of 912 students in the summer of 1934, two hundred and twenty-eight campers were given proficiency certificates. In the final report of the 1934 program, instructors were quick to note the quality of the programming and the enthusiasm with which the campers participated. It was suggested that the DND should revise future educational plans to provide a better equipped, more easily-accessed experience. Gordon Darling, the instructor of Elementary Engineering, reported that:

The worthwhileness of the course was certainly manifested in the work of these men. Some showed ability, while a few found a little difficulty in expressing themselves. But most showed earnestness of purpose, and a distinct desire to advance. There were expressions from time to time of sincere appreciation of the opportunity given for study.⁸⁶

Another instructor, L.W. Heaslip, who taught mathematics, argued that the potential to improve camper morale was reason enough to continue providing educational opportunities:

Most of the students had practical knowledge of some particular occupation, and were anxious to fit themselves for higher positions in those occupations when the opportunity occurs.

If the course gave courage and assurance to these students, we feel well repaid for the time and labour spent, and feel that such a mental occupation is just as essential as food and clothing.⁸⁷

As suggested by Heaslip, educational programming aimed at promoting faith in an individual's ability to be reabsorbed into a capitalist economy that rewarded those with valuable skills and knowledge. Of particular importance is this notion of "mental occupation" provided by the educational programming, which he argued was an essential feature of effective relief. According to Heaslip, the programs stimulated the campers in a way that camp labour did not, distracted the unemployed from the challenges of camp life by providing them with a hope for future employment, and discouraged campers from participating in union-organized protest because it improved

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

the experience of relief.⁸⁸ Clearly, private relief organizations attempted to govern notions of labour, work, leisure, and self-improvement in a manner that complemented the goals of the federal government.

Heaslip's recommendation for educational programming in the camps was shaped by his knowledge of Communist efforts to alter the conduct and behaviour of the men in the camps. Communist organizations rallied the unemployed in the camps to contest the administrative process, material provisions, and capitalist ideals that were the philosophical foundations for federal relief policy.⁸⁹ In the camps it was most visible in the Relief Camp Workers' Union, an arm of the Workers' Unity League, which was itself a construct of the Communist Party.⁹⁰ The Relief Camp Workers' Union had many goals: "province-wide, disciplined organizations, a continuous campaign for public support, and when this was achieved, the striking of all the camps, [and] the converging in Vancouver in a mass demand for a program of work and wages."⁹¹ The RCWU was hoping to transform the unemployed in the camps into a unionized, political body that was fighting for "proper relief, for proper shelter, for trade union wages...for Full and Free Unemployment Insurance and for the abolition of forced labour."⁹² However, their goals were more complicated than this. Communist organizers wanted to convince the unemployed to protest the government's palliative care, but they also wanted to use these protests to create an ethic that legitimized the authority of Communist leadership. To push for change in the political behaviour of the unemployed, the RCWU framed the camps in a narrative of human rights abuses that encouraged discontent, a belief in government negligence, and frustration over relief administration.

Traces of the RCWU's transformative goals are visible in *The Relief Camp Worker*, the RCWU's newsheet that was taken to camps by organizers leaving Vancouver along with extra copies of *The Unemployed Worker*, a newspaper published by the WUL in Vancouver to address the unemployed crisis. Historians Hal and Sean

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ John Manley, "'Starve Be Damned!': Communists and Canada's Urban Unemployed, 1929-1939", *Canadian Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (1998), 469.

⁹⁰ Stephen Endicott's work *Raising the Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930-1936* explores the relationship that developed between the various organizations. Stephen L. Endicott, *Raising The Workers' Flag*, 273.

⁹¹ Ibid., 38.

⁹² T.C. Sims, *Strike Strategy and Tactics* (Toronto: Workers' Unity League, 1934), 6.

Griffin have called these papers the “sparkplug for RCWU organization,”⁹³ and former camper Willis Shaparla noted that “the paper was the greatest single organizational force that the RCWU had.”⁹⁴ They are also the best available evidence for understanding the RCWU’s goals. In these publications the union interpreted conditions in the camps to support their narrative of human rights abuses and promote discontent. For example, in an October 1934 article, the RCWU noted that Relief Camp Workers have “many grievances to air”: “Have [the campers] not been framed and attacked by the ‘mounties’ and Provincials’: have they not been forced to live in SLAVE CAMPS under deplorable conditions, deprived of their civil rights and votes, and without a doubt, the most exploited section of workers in Canada? YES!”⁹⁵ The comics that were published in *The Relief Camp Worker* further simplified the complex discourse surrounding the camps into a memorable image. For example, in a satirical comic, Matt Shaw, the editor, depicted a camper holding a sign saying “All we want is food and our rights as citizens” as bricks, police batons, and sticks labeled “Law & Order,” “Royal Commissions,” and “Batons” are thrown at him.⁹⁶ Both the articles and the images aimed to persuade the campers to understand the conditions around them as products of systematic oppression against the working class and, specifically, the unemployed.

To further this goal, the RCWU framed the work relief camps as Slave Camps to highlight abject conditions in the camps and promote union formation as a means of improving relief. For example, in a report on the first provincial RCWU conference published in *The Relief Camp Worker* on 1 September 1934 an anonymous author noted that:

The Conference last[ed] seven hours and could have lasted longer in order to thoroughly discuss the problems confronting us. These problems[,] many of which are well known to all Camp Workers, could be boxed up in one main statement, mainly, that we are still in the Slave Camps, receiving 20 cents per day and “allowances” for working five and one-half days per week.⁹⁷

⁹³ Sean Griffin, ed. *Fighting Heritage: Highlights of the 1930s Struggle for Jobs and Militant Unionism in British Columbia* (Vancouver: Tribune Publisher, 1985), 26.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “Bennett Disenfranchises All Camp Workers,” *Relief Camp Worker*, October 31, 1934: 1.

⁹⁶ *Relief Camp Worker*, May 16, 1935: 2.

⁹⁷ “The Camp Worker Conference,” *The Relief Camp Worker*, September 1, 1934: 1

The union's effort to rebrand the work relief camps as "slave camps" encouraged discontent with the government's relief mechanisms because it placed the camps into a discourse of human dignity and civil rights. This contradicted the government's construction of its role as a benevolent authority offering relief to the needy unemployed out of concern and care and instead pushed the unemployed to challenge government negligence that systematically dehumanized the unemployed.

The central goal of the 1934 conference was establishing the union's mission statement to send to the membership. The minutes from the conference, printed in *The Relief Camp Worker* in September 1934, read:

Whereas: The Department of National Defence has shown quite clearly that its policy is of such a nature that if permitted to be completely carried out, will lead to the enslavement of the worker and their pauperization and to the lowering of the standards of living to a level hitherto undreamed of. Therefore be it resolved: That the Camp Workers Union, its delegates and members combat the attempts of the NDC by placing before the workers an organisational program for rallying the relief camp workers to militant struggle; for work at Trade Union rates of wages and for the recognition of their elected committees and unions.⁹⁸

This motion explicitly connected the slave camp narrative to the need to organize with the union so that campers could help themselves. Another article from November 1934 promoted union organization as a way to avoid pauperization and escape the slavery conditions that the government constructed by collectively improving their conditions: "Camp Workers! You cannot continue to ignore your Union, above all, you cannot remain unorganized. Every disorganized worker makes it easier for the bosses to attack you and reduce you to a more damnable living condition. They are looking forward to the near future when you will be driven into complete submission...."⁹⁹

Each edition of *The Relief Camp Worker* featured large sections dedicated to camper reports that union members had sent to Vancouver from various camps around BC. These reports highlighted the progress of unionization in various camps, but also discussed the grievous material, labour, and social conditions. One bulletin, from Camp 371 in Canoe, BC, reported that the camp foreman was a "Fascist Ape" who was "in his

⁹⁸ "The Camp Worker Conference," *The Relief Camp Worker*, September 1, 1934: 5

⁹⁹ "Camps Workers, Build Your Union – Your Only Weapon Against Capitalist Attacks," *Relief Camp Worker*, October 31, 1934: 4.

full glory when he [could] strut around with a uniform on and impress the young fellows.” Still, “the boys enjoy getting the Paper and any working class literature as it tends to offset the boloney that is peddled by this Fascist Ape.”¹⁰⁰ In the same issue, a report from White Rock described the camp as, “a mess of unsanitation hidden by shrubbery, [with] open smelling drains behind every hut. The grub varies; some meals you can stomach and others you can’t tackle.”¹⁰¹ The report from White Rock outlined some of the causes of discontent by providing evidence supporting the RCWU’s narrative of government neglect. It continued, “The request to turn in the mackinaws by the boss met with a 100% refusal from the men,”¹⁰² highlighting the potential to challenge the foremen collectively. Another from Cranbrook reported that:

There are quite a few changes in this district. The new camps are becoming stronger in organisation. The drive for unity is going fine and we hope to soon have a solid union in this district. We are boosting the literature in the camps and are planning a conference to take place in the near future, many active comrades are taking an interest in it.¹⁰³

This report, highlighting the desire of so many campers to become union members and agitators, promoted the RCWU as a responsible and respectable response to the control imposed on campers by the DND. As Willis Shaparla recalls, these reports were “a kind of invisible contact among all the men in the camps,”¹⁰⁴ making it possible to recognize that conditions were not particular to a certain camp, and offering campers a critical lens through which they could view their own camps. Indeed, camp reports reminded readers of the reasons for protest because they raised awareness for the RCWU’s material and political goals and incited action against the camp administration. In this way the *Relief Camp Worker* was an important fixture in constructing a more-than-local narrative of struggle that bound together dozens of isolated camps. Combined with the articles written by the unnamed editorial staff, the newspaper presented campers as victims who

¹⁰⁰ “Report: Camp 372, Canoe, BC,” *B.C. Relief Camp Worker*, June 1, 1934: 2.

¹⁰¹ “Report: Airport Camp, White Rock,” *B.C. Relief Camp Worker*, June 1, 1934: 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ “Bulletin: Cranbrook,” *B.C. Relief Camp Worker*, June 1, 1934: 2.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in *Fighting Heritage*, edited by Sean Griffin, 26.

had the potential to challenge the DND's abuse of power.¹⁰⁵ In doing so, the *Relief Camp Worker* was used to form class awareness that focused on conflict, protests, and strikes as the solution to their objectionable conditions. In essence, the RCWU used the *Relief Camp Worker* to argue that all campers were victims, but, if they joined the Relief Camp Workers' Union, none of them had to be.

According to Liversedge, the first priority for the RCWU in the camps was spreading selected writings and speeches by Marx, Lenin, and Stalin along with the newsheet, and holding general meetings to discuss work and living conditions in the camps.¹⁰⁶ These meetings were led by local union committees that were chaired and organized by a rotating body of RCWU organizers that promoted the union and shaped protests that would result in greater solidarity among campers. The efforts of these local committees to influence camper behaviour resulted in a more antagonistic relationship between unemployed labourers, the foremen, and the government. Indeed, these committees sparked many protests and disturbances that were small, "anarchistic actions"¹⁰⁷ directed towards particular material and social conditions in the local camp. Some points of conflict included food quality, housing, hours worked, and methods of local camp administration.

Between 1932 and 1935, these kinds of protests were common.¹⁰⁸ They were frequently short and peaceful, though the disruption to the established hierarchy in the

¹⁰⁵ In *Recollection of the On-To-Ottawa Trek*, Ronald Liversedge says that Matt Shaw is the editor. Shaw's name is most frequently found on the cartoons in each edition, though this does not mean he wrote the articles or edited the paper exclusively. Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On-To-Ottawa Trek*, 47.

¹⁰⁶ Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek: With Documents Related to the Vancouver Strike and the On to Ottawa Trek*, edited by Victor Hoar (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1973), 39.

¹⁰⁷ Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, 38.

¹⁰⁸ The full body of formal protest in the camps in British Columbia is massive. Those interested in reading some of the government reports on the protests would be directed to two sources. First, the Department of Labour's record of Labour Disruptions for British Columbia during the years 1931-1936 include some of the protests that took place in the camps. Other reports are found in the Department of National Defence's records. Of particular interest are volumes 3034, 4630 and 4630(2).

camps was troubling enough to warrant informing the DND's headquarters in Ottawa.¹⁰⁹ Often the local police were called to the camps to discharge the RCWU organizing committee.¹¹⁰ This resulted in a cycle of organization, protest, and discharge which allowed the RCWU to move organizers to different camps where they gained new members and encouraged campers to partake in more political action. Thus, the many protests that took place in the camps were organizational tools with which the RCWU furthered the narrative of discontent in the camps, acquired more followers, and encouraged campers to recognize the potential for an alternative authority in a carefully controlled environment.¹¹¹

As shown in this chapter, the goal for each of the private organizations, DND, and the RCWU organizers was to shape campers so that they would be hopeful or disciplined or frustrated, depending on their interests. The efforts and tactics of the RCWU tried to convince the transient unemployed in the camps to partake in protests that opposed the federal government's relief programs. Furthermore, at each opportunity the RCWU worked to position themselves as the legitimate authority through which complaints could be presented and strikes could be organized. However, refusing to work was not acceptable to the DND as it threatened the reformation project that was central to camp relief. Noncompliance with these ideals threatened the authority of the camp administration locally and endangered the camp's central goal of constructing a disciplined working class. Private relief organizations attempted to offer relief-from-relief by providing recreational equipment and educational opportunities that mitigated boredom in the camps and improved the morale of the men while also improving their chances of re-employment when the economy improved and there were new job

¹⁰⁹ Information that was sent to the Department of National Defence was carefully chosen as it moved from individual camps to the national level. Protests and disturbances in the camps were not all reported to the camp group superintendent by camp foremen, and superintendents chose which protests or disturbances justified notifying the Military District. The Military District offices further selected the events they passed up to the federal office in Ottawa.

¹¹⁰ Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, 39.

¹¹¹ In discussing a demonstration against management, Rick Fantasia noted that "a layer of deference and fearfulness in challenging authority was shed, or at least momentarily discarded, during the course of that evening. This did not take place in any linear, gradual fashion, it seems, but quite suddenly. For many, when the demon of their fears was confronted directly by enough bodies and voices for them to be assured of some success, timidity gave way to its opposite." Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity*, 145.

opportunities. The end result of these three different groups attempting to influence change was that the unemployed were caught in the crossfires of a political, economic, and social contest that produced a complicated power dynamic in the camps. The next chapter looks at how the campers made sense of this dynamic and behaved as a result.

Chapter 2.

Public Charges: Worker Ingenuity and Political Action in the Work Relief Camps

The DND, private relief providers, and Communist organizers were all active in the work relief camps, but were working towards different goals. As we have already seen, this made for complicated social dynamics that the men living in the camps had to negotiate. The risks of joining the RCWU were substantial, but over time the demoralizing effects of a rapidly changing political culture pushed more and more campers to openly challenge the DND. The result was a wide collection of behaviours and events that reveal campers protesting the DND's authority in a number of creative ways. At times this was in concert with the RCWU, and in other instances it was without the union's leadership. In some moments the political action was communal, and at other times it was individualized. Ultimately, opposition in the camps layered on top of each other, forging a general culture of dissent that was used to maintain a degree of autonomy from both the DND and the union while minimizing the risk of being black-listed from further relief. Thus, rather than the campers adopting the culture of protest that the RCWU attempted to shape in the camps, the RCWU-led camp protests were fragments of an already present culture of dissent. After the federal work relief camps expanded from 1932 to 1933, maintaining access to relief was as important to the campers as challenging the very conditions under which that relief was provided, and finding creative ways to dissent and use RCWU protests was one of the primary methods of balancing these two needs.

To the credit of union organizers working in the camps, they had a degree of success in reforming camper behaviour. Many campers adopted the "slave camp" rhetoric that the RCWU promoted through the *Relief Camp Worker*. In a particularly dramatic 1933 letter to the RCWU headquarters from "Princeton Air Port Slave Camp", a man signing as "I am the SLAVE" reported on the camp conditions:

We the workers and SLAVES have been always compelled to keep our mouths shut as expressing opinion on and etc. one day we got to-gether and have some discussion amongst ourselves on different problems, we decided that the grub is to[o] poore [sic] and not plenty for to exist on it, so we jumped the Cook and had him leave the Camp... we have the camp full of stools [police informers] and I may say that any worker who does come to this SLAVE Camp he should know that he is amongst the worst stool-pigeons that is in any Camps. I hope that this letter gets the workers press and published for other workers to know what we have to face in this so Called Princeton Slave Camp.¹¹²

As mentioned in the first chapter, many campers, like this letter's author, sent reports to *The Relief Camp Worker* to be published. This one, though, is particularly interesting given the conflict that it describes between the campers and the camp staff. It is clear that, in addition to adopting the language promoted by the RCWU, some campers at Princeton had organized together to change their camp. Thus, the RCWU's push to organize had caused significant change in the local political culture in this camp and made new kinds of action against the camp administration possible.

This was clearly true of life in many camps. DND reports of camp disturbances in British Columbia numbered at least 184 by the spring of 1935, with a particularly active period beginning in October of 1934.¹¹³ Points of conflict between campers and camp administration in these smaller protests often included food quality, housing, hours worked, and camp administration. For example, Camp MacCauley on Vancouver Island saw two protests in November 1933. The first challenged the use of military food rations, and the second was a response to an assault in the camps "in which the men refused to go to work until the man who committed the assault was discharged."¹¹⁴ In an April 1934 protest near Squamish, a disturbance was caused by frustration over "the use of

¹¹² It is worth noting that his goal is to have this published. This was found in Arthur Evans' papers at the University of British Columbia, but the audience was the general unemployed population, discouraging them from coming to Princeton Air Port Slave Camp particularly, and generally characterizing the work relief camps as slave camps. "To the Camp Workers," 27 June, 1933. UBC: Arthur H. Evans fonds, Box 1, File 1

¹¹³ "Riots, Disturbances, Strikes, Demonstrations, etc. in Unemployment Relief Camps, Department of National Defence: From Commencement to 30-9-34", "Riots, Disturbances, Strikes, Demonstrations, etc. in Unemployment Relief Camps, Department of National Defence: From 1st October 1934 to 31st March 1935," LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3034, File Unemployment Relief HQ1376-11-49

¹¹⁴ "Letter Re: Unrest and Disturbances in Camps from E.C. Ashton, Major-General Military District No. 11, to the Secretary, Department of National Defence," 18 November 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol.2).

enamelware and a very considerable quantity was thrown into the sea by a large number of men acting in concert.” After this display of solidarity the campers “remained very militant and on one man refusing to go to work and being discharged about fifty men left the camp.”¹¹⁵ Protests such as these were often short and peaceful - usually spanning a single day – and constituted a brief delay to progress on the project. The DND pegged each of these protests to the RCWU’s reform efforts with good reason.¹¹⁶ The sheer number of organizers and discharged sympathizers is impressive. In April 1934, when approximately 7000 to 8000 workers lived in the camps, the Criminal Investigation Department in Victoria reported to the DND that “approximately 1000 had been evicted”¹¹⁷ for disrupting camp life. These numbers suggest that RCWU organizers and members were pervasive in the camps. In the same report it was noted that a “Relief Camp Workers’ Delegate” was asked by an undercover agent “whether he thought any of the camps would be out for [the] May Day demonstration, [to which] he replied that he thought fully 50 per cent of them would.”¹¹⁸ For the DND, the RCWU’s organizational activities threatened the orderly operation of the camps. For campers, the RCWU’s efforts forged a space where open protest was possible in the camps.

In the summer of 1934 the DND began inquiring about the organizational methods used by the RCWU. Out of this concern came a small but important collection of reports that detailed the RCWU’s organizational methods and how they could be combated by officials working in or near the camps. These reports often revealed the limits of RCWU influence in the camps. One such report, from October 1934, noted how two RCWU agitators, Knapton and Moore, attempted to organize a strike at Camp 345 near Saddle Rock. The foreman assured Knapton, Moore, and their followers that

¹¹⁵ “Letter from Major-General McNaughton to W. M. Dickson, Deputy Minister, Department of Labour,” 18 April 1934. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2255, File Unemployed Relief Camps – B.C. 1933-34.

¹¹⁶ The full body of formal protest in the camps in British Columbia is massive. Those interested in reading some of the government reports on the protests would be directed to two sources. First, the Department of Labour’s record of Labour Disruptions for British Columbia during the years 1931-1936 include some of the protests that took place in the camps. Other reports are found in the Department of National Defence’s records. Of particular interest are volumes 3034, 4630 and 4630(2).

¹¹⁷ “Extract from a report from the Criminal Investigation Department, Victoria, to the District Office Commanding, Victoria, dated 9th April, 1934,” 18 April 1934. LAC: RG 27, Vol. 2255, File Unemployed Relief Camps – B.C. 1933-34.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

the region superintendent, H. Irvine, would come the following day and hear complaints.

Upon arriving, Irvine:

went into each bunkhouse, and, picking men at random, two or three in each house, asked them if they had any complaints, especially regarding the cook and the food. Out of over 20 men interviewed, who had been resident in the Camp from 4 days to 2 years, they were all satisfied except two men, one of whom said the hotcakes were a bit tough, and the other said butter was only served twice per day.¹¹⁹

The report then outlined what transpired in the bunkhouse where Knapton and Moore resided. "Moore immediately said he was speaking for the men. I [Irvine] told him I could not receive complaints other than from each individual but he said that I would have to listen to complaints from these men as a whole, and that he would do the talking."¹²⁰ Irvine left the bunkhouse and had the foreman inform the campers that he would receive all individual complaints after dinner. Three were logged:

E. Lester – Complaint – wanted butter 3 times per day, admitted food was better than in former Camp. I [Irvine] told the Foreman if men wished, they could have the butter ration served three times a day instead of twice, but no increase in butter. Lester went away satisfied.

H. MacDonald said if the cook had an assistant, it would improve the meals. I told him an assistant cook would be put on the 1st of November – Satisfied.

E. Brunsson – Complaint – No cereal except oatmeal served and he was constipated. I told the foreman to give him bran – Satisfied.¹²¹

Afterwards, the foreman called the men out to work, but some fifteen or twenty demonstrated, led by Moore and Knapton. They were threatened with removal from the camps but again refused to work, "and 21 altogether... were discharged, having been in the Camp from three to eight days."¹²²

As with all RCWU attempts to forge disturbances in the camps, in this instance campers were forced to choose between work and protest, between complying with the

¹¹⁹ "Attention A.A. & Q.M.D.," 31 October 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol. 2)

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

government's individualized method of collecting complaints about the camps or joining Knapton and Moore against camp administration. Both the RCWU organizers and DND administrators pushed campers to behave as they wanted, and both had limited success. The result makes this protest difficult to classify as a triumph for either the union or the camp administration. Why join the protest and risk being discharged? Why refuse to join, even though the union agitators pushed so hard to legitimize protest? Why present complaints to Irvine in his office? Indeed, if, as many existing histories of the camps argue, organized protest had been successfully shaped by the RCWU, then what convinced so many men in Camp 345 not to join this protest or demand any change in relief administration? Clearly, the power dynamics in the camp that would have informed how the campers behaved were more complicated than simply obeying the DND or protesting under the leadership of the RCWU. What is paramount is the agency of the unemployed, who chose either to participate in protest or comply with the government's wishes.

An overwhelming amount of documentation from the DND about the RCWU-led strikes makes it easy to suggest that dissent in the camps was directed by and in support of the union.¹²³ However, many camp administrators concerned about preserving their employment, though reporting actions of dissent, may have used the union as a scapegoat to explain challenging labour relations in the camps.¹²⁴ An awareness of this possibility brings the face value of these reports into question and even challenges the myth that the union's presence in the camps was endemic. Indeed, hidden in the telegrams reporting strikes in the camps and the memos containing preparations to counter planned walk-outs are reports that question the union's strength and suggest that the RCWU struggled to gain support. For example, in a report about the attempted strike led by Knapton and Moore the camp superintendent reported that he could not "state if any of the men were actually prevented from working, but

¹²³ This approach is particularly visible in Lorne Brown, *When Freedom Was Lost*, Louise Gorman, "State Control and Social Resistance", Victor Howard, *We Were the Salt of the Earth*, Laurel MacDowell, "Relief Camp Workers in Ontario During the Great Depression of the 1930s," and Bill Waiser, *All Hell Can't Stop Us*.

¹²⁴ For some local camp administrators, the need to present the camps as carefully administered may have been seen as a means of ensuring the camps remained open, keeping them employed. For others, presenting the camps as chaotic, in a constant state of agitation, and continually on the edge of spilling beyond the control of the administration because of the union's organizational efforts may have done the same.

consider[ed] that some of the men who were discharged were intimidated” into joining the protest.¹²⁵ The report noted that “some of the younger men were evidently intimidated into joining the striking gang, and the men going to work were called ‘scabs’, and were the subject of other offensive remarks.”¹²⁶ In another report about a large, multi-camp walk-out to Vancouver in December 1934, which saw hundreds of unemployed men marching in the streets, W. Kier, Staff Sergeant Officer commanding a division of camps in the Fraser Valley, noted that “quite a large number” of the strikers had been “congregating in Vancouver over a period of months and some of them have certainly come from Interior points. The men from the Relief Camps in the Fraser Valley who left during [the December 1934 strike] were comparatively few...”¹²⁷ This report questioned whether most of the men participating in the walk-out were from the camps or were unemployed men in Vancouver. It is possible that these men had been ejected from the camps already and were not permitted to return, but no further information is provided. Another report, from 24 December, notes that the RCWU sent telegraphs to many camps on 21 December “with a view to obtaining information on the mood of the men” about the ongoing strike effort in Vancouver. The report noted that “the consensus of opinion of the Union organising group is that the call...will not have much effect above

¹²⁵ “Action of apparent Communist to break up the camp system of relief: Confidential Disturbance Report from Lieutenant Colonel C.B. Russell of Military District 11 to the British Columbia Attorney General,” 28 November 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol. 1).

¹²⁶ The term “scab” is a particularly important insult in the discourse surrounding the construction of working class action and solidarity as it attacks those who break through strike lines to continue working for the employer, thereby undermining efforts to pressure an employer to improve working conditions. R. Emmett Murray defines the term as “someone who takes a striker’s job, works behind a picket line, or refuses to go on strike with workers.” R. Emmett Murray, *The Lexicon of Labor*, 2nd ed. (New York: The New Press, 2010), 181. Quote comes from “Action of apparent Communist to break up the camp system of relief: Confidential Disturbance Report from Lieutenant Colonel C.B. Russell of Military District 11 to the British Columbia Attorney General,” 28 November 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol. 1).

¹²⁷ This may in part explain the demand to cancel the blacklist above all other RCWU demands to resolve the strikes. “Correspondence Re: ‘SECRET’ Agitators from W. Kier, Staff Sergeant Officer Commanding ‘E’ Division to The Commissioner Division 1 Headquarters,” 12 December 1934. BCA: GR 429, Box 21, File Correspondence regarding unemployment administration.

Hope or Boston Bar.”¹²⁸ Apparently it didn’t have support at either of these camps either; by Christmas Eve there had been no response.¹²⁹

In all of these reports government officials asserted that the union was weaker than they feared. Moreover, this was done in the face of disturbances in the camps that could have easily been attributed to the union’s ability to convert the unemployed. For example, in the above-mentioned reports about the Vancouver strike of December 1934, the solidarity of the union and its assumed membership was questioned despite the continuation of a month-long protest that numbered in the hundreds and saw a substantial amount of support from thousands of campers that remained on relief. One sympathy strike in the camps, orchestrated to coincide with a union delegates meeting with the premier in Victoria on 7 December 1934, numbered more than 2700 participants. The federal work relief camp system was in a state of crisis. Still, though, government officials argued that RCWU support was insubstantial. For DND administrators attempting to understand the threat for an uprising in the camps it mattered a great deal that, though 2700 campers supported the December walk-out’s goals on 7 December, they did not themselves leave the camps. Administration seems to have believed that campers occasionally supported the RCWU’s efforts by partaking in less risky protest that did not conform to the union’s ultimate goals.

The DND had plenty of reason to be skeptical of popular support for the RCWU. Labour spies, brought into the camps to gather information about the union so that the DND could prepare for any concerted action, reported that when protests were not taking place RCWU organizers were attempting to persuade campers to join them in protests. More often than not, though, no unusual or disruptive behavior was reported.¹³⁰ Indeed, even when the government anticipated large-scale walkouts, such as on 6

¹²⁸ “Secret Report Re: Relief Camps – British Columbia Strike Situation from J.W. Phillips, Assistant Commissioner, Commanding ‘E’ Division to The District Office Commanding Military District No. 11,” 24 December 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (vol. 1).

¹²⁹ “Secret Report Re: Relief Camps – British Columbia Strike Situation from J.W. Phillips, Assistant Commissioner, Commanding ‘E’ Division to The District Office Commanding Military District No. 11,” 24 December 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (vol. 1).

¹³⁰ “Correspondence Re: Police Surveillance in Camps between B.C. Attorney General and Commissioner of B.C. Police,” November 1934. BCA: GR 429, Box 21, File 1

March 1934, the absence of communal protest in the camps is striking.¹³¹ Even on 1 May 1934, May Day, when there were sizeable demonstrations by unions and their members in Vancouver, “there was no disturbance at any camp...with the exception of Project 108 when five men tried to cause trouble but failing to do so eventually pulled out of their own accord.”¹³² Another disturbance a month later saw an attempt to construct a protest in Camp 210 over the use of enamel plates in the camps. E.C. Ashton, Major General for the military district that covered most of British Columbia, suggested that the complaints resulted from “the chipping of enamel plates,” which became “unsanitary as well as unsightly.”¹³³ The protest at Camp 210, led by E. Turgeon, failed to gain traction and Turgeon was discharged with the assistance of the British Columbia Provincial Police. When the camp was called back to work after the meal, “15 other men refused to work unless Turgeon was reinstated. This was refused, and these 15 men attempted to prevent other men from going to work.”¹³⁴ Their strike was no more successful than Turgeon’s attempt, as the rest of the campers continued to work. Thus, contrary to many existing narratives of union organization in the camps, DND files reveal that RCWU agitation often failed to incite action.

Speaking in 1978, Syd Thompspon, a camper who actively organized for the RCWU, suggested that when “the militants were still in the camps...everybody would get involved” in the disturbances organized by the union.¹³⁵ The DND report on Turgeon’s

¹³¹ A notice sent out to all of superintendents on 3 March 1934 anticipated that a one day protest strike intended to “show the strength of the radical organization” would take place. This protest, though, failed to garner substantial support from the rank and file. According to Provincial Police telegrams, two camps in Agassiz, numbering about 85 men each, partook in a one-day strike, and a camp at Shoreacres and Taghum laid down their tools. “Memo Re: Disturbances,” 3 March 1934. LAC: RG 24 Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol. 2), “British Columbia Police Radiogram to Commissioner BC Police,” 6 March 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol.2)

¹³² “Anticipated Disturbance Report from F.R.H. Proctor, Superintendent Group “B”, to Headquarters, Military District 11,” 7 May 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol. 1).

¹³³ “Memo Re: Issue of earthenware plates, cups, etc. to Relief Camps from E.C. Ashton, Major General, to The Secretary, Department of National Defence, Militia Service,” 2 December, 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3042, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13 (Vol. 5).

¹³⁴ “Disturbance Report from E.C. Ashton, Major General, Military District 11, to The Secretary, Department of National Defence, Militia Service,” 1 June 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol. 1).

¹³⁵ “Syd Thompson: Recollections of Years as a Labour Organizer: Part 1”, interviewed by Colleen Bostwick, 1978. BCA: T3529:0001

efforts to organize Camp 210 reveals otherwise, though it is likely that many successful protests resulted from local agitation led by RCWU members. Tellingly, Thompson recalled that many campers were “dragged” into the protests.¹³⁶ This suggests that campers were selective about which protests they became involved in. When campers did participate in RCWU-led protest it was with an awareness of changes in the DND’s discharging policy which, after the summer of 1933, began to focus almost exclusively on agitators and small numbers of sympathizers. This reduced “to as low a figure as possible the numbers of men necessarily discharged,”¹³⁷ keeping most men in the camps and not wandering around the country or crowding urban centers. For example, at Camp 209, near Jones Creek, 95 campers refused to dig telephone post holes for twenty cents a day on 8 August 1933. The foreman discharged five men.¹³⁸ In another instance, from 20-22 February 1934, a large strike saw 549 men refuse to work in Taghum, Longbeach, and Shoreacres camps. Only 27 “troublemakers” and “ringleaders” were discharged.¹³⁹ As a result of this change in policy the risk of being kicked out of the camps was not equally shared between campers recognized as agitators and those thought to be followers. This allowed campers to use the RCWU to convey some of their concerns over camp conditions, including complaints regarding “food, enamelware, and demand[s] that the cook be discharged,” or about the “cutlery, enamelware, soap issue, etc.,” while not necessarily adopting union demands.¹⁴⁰ If the difference between the number of protest participants and the number of participants who were discharged is any indication, campers used this technique to great effect. And in some instances participating in union-led disturbances tangibly improved conditions, such as in mid-

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ “Disturbance Report from Major J.F. Preston, Military District 11”, 6 March 1934. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 4630, File Unemployment Relief 18-34-1-1 (Vol.2)

¹³⁸ “Riots, Disturbances, Strikes, Demonstrations Etc. in Unemployed Relief Camps, Department of National Defence: From Commencement to 30-9-34,” Sheet 3. LAC: RG 24, Vol 3034, File Unemployed Relief HQ1376-11-49.

¹³⁹ “Riots, Disturbances, Strikes, Demonstrations Etc. in Unemployed Relief Camps, Department of National Defence: From Commencement to 31-3-34,” Sheet 11. LAC: RG 24, Vol 3034, File Unemployed Relief HQ1376-11-49.

¹⁴⁰ “Riots, Disturbances, Strikes, Demonstrations Etc.,” Sheet 7.

October 1934 near Rock Creek, when campers went on strike for three days until stoves were provided to heat their tents.¹⁴¹

There were many reasons to selectively participate in union-organized protest. According to Syd Thompson there was a fear of losing access to the stable relief offered in the camps by joining or organizing for the union.¹⁴² He further argued that some campers were more radical than others, saying the camps had “an element that [was] more rebellious and more militant and they always carr[ied] the ball.”¹⁴³ Steve Brodie, also an organizer for the RCWU, echoed this observation, noting that “most people were quite cowardly about the whole thing. They hoped somebody would be able to do something that would embarrass the authorities into...provid[ing] work, but in the meantime they covered all bases and [kept] a very low profile.”¹⁴⁴ Both Thompson and Brodie suggested that many campers sought to benefit from the risks taken by more radical union organizers. Maintaining a low profile in the camps and participating only in large protests were important methods of protecting against the risk of discharge.

Campers, witnessing the conflict between the RCWU and the DND supported by private relief organizations, were caught in the crossfires of a political discourse over how the unemployed were permitted to behave during an economic crisis. This permitted union organizers to have a degree of success in shaping protests in the camps, but also allowed campers to react to the union’s efforts, resulting in a variety of political and social beliefs which informed how campers interacted with the RCWU. For example, some campers thought the federal relief camps, though not ideal, were better than being homeless and unemployed in Canada’s urban centres, or in prison on vagrancy charges. One camper, interviewed by Barry Broadfoot for his collection *Ten Lost Years*, said that “You had to adjust. Say to yourself, ‘Well, I’m getting clothes and food and a roof over my head and it’s 15 below outside,’ and then you knew you were all right.”¹⁴⁵ Some campers went so far as to challenge agitators who attempted to shape protests and

¹⁴¹ “Riots, Disturbances, Strikes, Demonstrations Etc. in Unemployed Relief Camps, Department of National Defence: From 1st October 1934 to 31st March 1935,” Sheet 3. LAC: RG 24, Vol 3034, File Unemployed Relief HQ1376-11-49.

¹⁴² “Syd Thompson: Recollections of Years as a Labour Organizer: Part 1”

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ “Robert ‘Steve’ Brodie interview: [Smith, 1977],” interviewed by Howard H. Smith, 1977. BCA: T3944: 0078, Track 1.

¹⁴⁵ “They Weren’t All That Bad,” in Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years 1929-1939: Memories of Canadians Who Survived the Depression* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, Ltd., 1973), 99-100.

recruit new union members. One camper recalled how he responded to agitators as they attempted to organize in his camp:

The agitators used to come in. Clever fellows[,] but too clever. They'd say, "You're worse than galley slaves. You're scum, and Bennett wants you off the streets. You're buried here and buried things rot." I'd always talk back and the arguments I had, when they added up to the common sense of food and shelter, the boys usually went for them. I never saw an agitator thrown out bodily but when guys a month before had ridden in boxcars in 10 below zero through the Kicking Horse Pass and come just that far from freezing, a relief camp made a lot of sense.¹⁴⁶

Here, union organizers are presented as having been out of touch with the immediate concerns of transient campers, to whom a "relief camp made a lot of sense."¹⁴⁷ This camper remembers the camps as an effort to provide food, shelter, and clothing to transient unemployed men. For him, and to some of the others he worked with, the camps were acceptable provided campers adapted to the administration's policies.

Steve Brodie noted that, in addition to some campers thinking that the camps were a reasonable solution to the unemployment crisis, a large number of the transient and resident unemployed believed that the Royal Family would ensure that they were appropriately cared for.¹⁴⁸ With a tone of derision he said, "You'd be surprised how much Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David Windsor had to do with keeping the people in hope in spite of all their despair. It was amazing the number of people who thought that that would be help."¹⁴⁹ According to Brodie, royalism was alive and well among the unemployed; however, it was not the only barrier to union organization. He added that "... so many at that time had great faith that somehow the church wouldn't stand for very much more of the oppression and hunger of the country. The church, according to a lot of people, was sooner or later bound to take a militant stance...."¹⁵⁰ Importantly, faith placed in the church's lawfully-raised grievances against the camps or the Royal Family's inevitable intervention was faith not placed in the strikes and protests

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ "Robert 'Steve' Brodie interview: [Smith, 1977]," interviewed by Howard H. Smith, 1977. BCA: T3944: 0078, Track 1.

¹⁴⁹ "Robert 'Steve' Brodie interview: [Smith, 1977]," interviewed by Howard H. Smith, 1977. BCA: T3944: 0078, Track 1.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

orchestrated by the RCWU inside the camps. As Brodie recognized, this reduced the number of campers who were involved in the union.

Instead of joining the RCWU, some campers developed communal and individual methods of challenging relief camp administration. These informal modes of dissent were built into the camper lifestyle and reclaimed some control over camper lifestyles from government policies. Moreover, dissent against DND regulations was likely more pervasive than the documentary evidence suggests. What evidence exists hints at many different routes for dissent that layered on top of each other. One method, working slowly, was particularly prominent in camper memories. As John Kelly recalled in an interview from 1983:

Nobody would work. Now I don't mean by that they didn't do anything - but they did absolutely as little as possible. Maybe one wheelbarrow for an hour. And I remember for a while I was loading [a] truck and a car, oh there would be about twenty of us, with shovels and with picks, and we would never load, oh I think it was more than 12 truckloads, in a day. Which could be loaded by the number of men we had in a couple of hours easily. And of course this was a great frustration to the powers that be.¹⁵¹

This testimony of defiance reveals a desire to sabotage the goals of camp administration by reducing the rate at which work was completed, thereby providing campers with greater control over their work experience. Interestingly, working less efficiently did not work counter to the DND's desire to slow the completion of construction projects; it did, though, undermine efforts to instill work discipline into unemployed men.

The programming in the camps that was provided by private relief organizations also gave campers a chance to challenge the daily schedules that camp administration attempted to enforce. The arrival of reading libraries, sporting goods, and educational opportunities saw new efforts to expand personal time into work hours, often by lengthening the weekend so that relief camp teams could challenge neighbouring towns or camps in tournaments.¹⁵² These opportunities, though few and far between, constituted new challenges to the regime of control established by the schedule. One such weekend organized by the "Toc H", a charity in Nelson, saw the men employed at the Salmo airport camp take a full day of work off scheduled labor to enjoy a band

¹⁵¹ "John Kelly Interview." interviewed by Richard Bell, 1983. BCA: T4101:0001.

¹⁵² "Longbeach Camp has Sport Plans," *Nelson Daily News*, March 10, 1934.

concert, a horseshoe tournament, and a series of softball games with men from the nearby China Creek Camp, South Fork Camp, and a team from Nelson. In the report that ran in the *Nelson Daily News* a relief worker thanked all of those “who so kindly helped to give them such an enjoyable day,” even though much of the article explains how the men themselves had taken time off working on the camp project to construct temporary shelters for visitors, organize a menu, and prepare food for a larger-than-usual number.¹⁵³ Events like this allowed campers to shape social events that were neither work nor protest, but nonetheless dissented from the mandated camp routine. As such, when the opportunity presented itself recreational materials provided to the camps were occasionally used to renegotiate with camp administration how time was spent in the camps.

Some campers focused on maintaining control over where and how they lived rather than their schedule or work efficiency. They did this by using transiency to assert their autonomy from government policies of control and isolation. Ronald Liversedge noted that “from the very start of the slave camp system in B.C. the young unemployed men...absolutely refused to recognize the camps or their own association with the camps as having any permanency.”¹⁵⁴ He argues that the camps were “places to rest and recuperate”¹⁵⁵ between employment opportunities or adventures on the railways.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, the number of men who left the camps without approval from the foreman or because they would not comply with the demands of the administration is quite startling. In some camps upwards of 90 percent of the population was discharged or voluntarily left without proof of employment.¹⁵⁷ Government statistics on camp usage reveal a

¹⁵³ “Salmo Camp has a Band Concert,” *Nelson Daily News*, June 18, 1934.

¹⁵⁴ Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, 37.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵⁶ Indeed, the camps were used as a new manifestation of long-existing seasonal housing patterns for British Columbia’s working class. For more information about seasonal employment patterns for British Columbia’s working class, see John Belshaw, “The Unemployed in Vancouver: A Profile,” in *The Administration of Relief*, 22-51. See also Gordon Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934-74* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006)

¹⁵⁷ In the camp at Boston Bar, of the 1426 campers through its operation, 1370 opted to leave. In the Hope-Boston Bar corridor, 3370 of the 3751 campers on record “struck off”, though not in a strike or protest. “Total number of men taken on strength and total number struck off strength from commencement to 31 March, 1936,” in *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployment Relief Scheme for Single, Homeless Men from Inception of Scheme (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*. LAC: RG 25, Vol. 1747, Folder 488

seasonal trend in camp residency that peaked during the winter months and subsided as summer approached and seasonal access to resource extraction employment and agricultural labour opportunities opened up.¹⁵⁸ John Kelly's movement between the camps and other employment opportunities from 1931 to 1933 illustrates a transient use of the camps well:

I went into a relief camp...I guess that would be '31. '32 maybe. And then I got a job down in Slocan Valley where I was a farmer['s assistant], and I stayed until the fall, the late fall, living with [the farmer]. Then I spent my money living in Nelson, went broke and went back to the relief camp. That must have been '33 because the following summer I got a job at the Trail smelt[er] in June.¹⁵⁹

The camps were meant to be used only once, and so all campers "would have to register for relief under an alias to be shipped out [to the camps] again."¹⁶⁰ Moving between the camps, as Kelly and many others did, often required changing one's name and falsifying personal histories that allowed transients to confuse government records intended to prevent men from making excessive use of camp relief.¹⁶¹ Like Kelly, Syd Thompson moved between "many, many, many camps," an action he framed in the language of "fighting back."¹⁶² Given the limited relief opportunities available to transients once the DND established the work relief camps, leaving the camps levied the numerous challenges of transiency with the loss of control and independence in the camps. Add to this the intentional fabrication involved in changing one's names to extract relief from the camps numerous times and it is clear that many campers took greater control over how and when they could access the relief camps by breaching government policy.

These communal and individual forms of dissent made it possible to challenge the government while not joining the union. They also provided the foundation upon

¹⁵⁸ Interestingly, the final report reveals that at no point following the commencement of the federal work relief plan did the camps operate at a full capacity on a national scale. "Graph – Showing Authorized Establishment and Actual Strength Since Commencement," in *Report on the Department of National Defence Unemployment Relief Scheme for Single, Homeless Men from Inception of Scheme (8 October, 1932) to 31 March, 1936*. LAC: RG 25, Vol. 1747, Folder 488.

¹⁵⁹ "John Kelly Interview."

¹⁶⁰ Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, 37.

¹⁶¹ "Syd Thompson: Recollections of Years as a Labour Organizer: Part 1"

¹⁶² Ibid.

which campers found opportunities to protest against the administration of the camps without the RCWU's leadership. These protests varied greatly in size, shape, and goals. Some events, like a camp walk-out from Deroche in early July 1933, closely resembled the actions promoted by the union but were not themselves led by union organizers. In this instance, 350 to 400 men working in the Deroche Camp Association refused to sign the heavily-revised agreement to work and live under the federal government's new camp regulations.¹⁶³ Other protests, like the 1933 protest at a camp near Cache Creek, bore no relationship to the union. In a letter dated 8 July 1933, Fred Tyler and five other campers wrote to the Minister of Lands in Victoria that they expected:

That for a long period ahead [they would] be public charges, receiving direct-relief and small sums of cash for public work, and that the ultimate ends of all governments, might be effected if an experiment was launched, provided for by dual agreement between Federal and Provincial administrations, aiding willing settlers, recruited from among unemployed-single men in BC, relief camps.¹⁶⁴

This model would have the provincial and federal governments finance a farm settlement program for transients. Tyler's proposal included the project's objective, its financial obligations, and suggestions on how it could be structured.¹⁶⁵ Ultimately the plan was rejected by both the federal and provincial governments.¹⁶⁶ Nonetheless, it communicated two important camper concerns: that the men were destitute and searching for ways to sustain themselves, and that the campers found living in the camps under the federal system objectionable. Moreover, it reveals that some campers were interested in constructing new modes of relief without becoming involved in a radical political organization.

¹⁶³ "The situation in regard to single men on relief in British Columbia and in the Vancouver district in particular," 3 July 1935. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3040, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13 (vol.1).

¹⁶⁴ "Letter from 'Fred Tyler', 'Frank March', 'John A Burgon', 'George Filmor', 'Albert Osgoode', 'E. Middlestone/Sharpe' to Minister of Lands, Government of British Columbia,' 8 July 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3041, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13 (vol.3).

¹⁶⁵ "Plan for Settlement of Single Unemployed Men Who Are Dominion Charges, on Home-Sites," 23 July 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3041, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13 (vol.3).

¹⁶⁶ Communications between the two authorities suggest the provincial government considered it a legitimate model for solving the unemployment challenge. "Correspondence Re: Settlement Plan for Single Men from Deputy Minister, Department of Lands to 'Fred Tyler'," 10 August 1933. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3041, File Unemployment Relief HQ 1376-11-13 (vol.3).

In a more dramatic incident of protest, in June 1934 campers at Camp 401 near Grindrod seized four barrels of fermenting fruit mixed with sugar and yeast from the kitchen staff. In a letter to the military district's head office the campers accused the kitchen staff of distilling some sort of alcohol, rationing food too harshly, changing standard meal protocols, and lying about the size of their food supplies. The campers also suggested that "besides inefficiencies on the part of the cook there [was] also some double dealing."¹⁶⁷ An RCMP report on the resulting disturbance highlighted the militancy of the men, who refused to turn over the buckets of fermenting fruit to police when asked to do so.¹⁶⁸ A short investigation concluded that one of the campers was responsible for the misused food rations. The campers, who had challenged the DND's authority and integrity, argued this was falsified to save the cook from being fired.¹⁶⁹ Neither the RCMP report nor the letter from the campers referenced the union's involvement. Thus, rather than be led by the union campers responded to a localized concern surrounding food rations and the discovery of their misappropriation with remarkable militancy to challenge the government's mismanagement of the relief camps.

Dissent in the camps had a substantial influence on how campers behaved and related to the administration, the union, and private charities in the camps because it allowed campers to assert their autonomy as separate from the camps and those attempting to influence them. In particular, it allowed campers to individually and communally challenge the DND's structures of absolute control over relief in the camps without endangering access to relief. As shown in this chapter, even if it limited how devotedly the campers followed the RCWU, the threat of being discharged from the camps did not limit the desire to change the camps or the conditions of relief. Indeed, the documentary evidence reveals that participating in union-led protests was merely one method of dissent available to campers.

In addition to the campers who participated in RCWU-led protests, those who expected members of the Royal Family or the church to step in and change the camps,

¹⁶⁷ "Disturbance Report from B.M. Bower-Smith, Constable BC Provincial Police to Vernon District, BC Provincial Police," June 1934. BCA: GR 429, Box 21, File 1 Correspondence regarding unemployment administration.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ "Disturbance Report from B.M. Bower-Smith, Constable BC Provincial Police to Vernon District, BC Provincial Police," June 1934. BCA: GR 429, Box 21, File 1 Correspondence regarding unemployment administration.

or who left the camps and risked hunger and vagrancy charges, reveal an abiding recognition that the camps were a poor method of providing relief. This includes those men who disagreed with the RCWU's efforts to alter the government's form of relief and still, despite their gratitude at having received relief, participated in the large, camp-wide protests that became more frequent towards the end of 1934. The men in the camps broke camp policies carefully, grasping at ways to establish control over their schedules, their work loads, and how they were expected to work, and challenging the state's authority when it was possible. The majority of these men were not revolutionaries attempting to change the camps according to communist ideals. Rather, they sided with the communists or fellow campers at times, at others chose not to participate in RCWU rallies, and often complied with the government's behavioural and social expectations while using private relief in the camps to mitigate their boredom. The campers survived as best they could, extracting material aid from the only system of government relief that offered them long-term support and using cautionary dissent to exploit the little-and-sometimes big-pockets of protest available to re-establish control over their bodies, their time, and their day-to-day experiences.

Conclusion

Carl Bergman, a camper living and working in Project 24 near Salmo, BC, shared his frustrations over the work relief camps in a letter to the federal Minister of Labour. The social and physical conditions of life in the camps are centrally important in this message. “The walls in the huts are full of cracks so you can see right through,”¹⁷⁰ he wrote. For warmth overnight the campers burned old water-soaked and frozen wood, and still the foreman came “in the huts giving us ‘hell’ for using to[o] much wood. He thrice has gone so far as come into this hut, closed the damper on the stove, [and] scolded us, though we have lain in our beds quivering by cold.”¹⁷¹ Bergman then challenged the minister to consider how camp conditions affected the campers: “Can you expect us to go out to work, when we do not have any rest and sleep during the night? Still we have to do it, if not we are discharged out of relief. Is it necessary to have our health ruined by a neglect as this[?] Is it any wonder we are displeased and radical opinions come in our heads?”¹⁷² The health of his fellow campers may have been Bergman’s main concern, but it is impossible to ignore how he connects it with both the developing radicalism in the camps and the measures of coercion used to extract labour from the unemployed. One final question, asking which is the better agitator in the camps, communists or camp conditions, squarely blames foremen and camp administrators for the movement towards protest and dissent in the camps.¹⁷³ His questions suggest that, for Bergman, protest and dissent were a sensible response to the poor treatment campers received at the hands of their foremen. Indeed, Bergman argues that direct action appears “to be the only means to receive justice....”¹⁷⁴ And yet

¹⁷⁰ Letter to Minister of Labour from Carl Bergman, 12 February 1936. LAC: RG 24, Vol. 3063, Unemployment Relief Kitchener, B.C. (Project 23)

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ The question is “It is spoken about agitators in the camps, but it is not a condition as this, foreman as McLean the best agitators you ever can find?” Ibid.

he assures the honorable minister that he was not an agitator – merely a camper sharing his personal concerns over the indignities his government had subjected him to.¹⁷⁵

Bergman's letter reminds us that political culture in the camps both resulted in and expressed many different behaviours from the campers. It takes issue with the material conditions in the camps, but also confronts the demand for compliance with government policy as outlined in the *Policy and Instructions for the Administration of Unemployment Relief Camps for Single, Homeless, Unemployed Men*. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of private charities to fill in the gaps in camp relief through recreational and educational opportunities, the unemployed in the camps faced the same, neglectful conditions day after day. The letter also alludes to the presence of Communists, who came into the camps to aggravate existing frustrations, induce protests, and provide a different vision of what relief and society could look like. Bergman's letter also reminds us that campers were not united but often agreed with each other. After all, he wasn't an agitator working with the RCWU even if he did challenge the government. The possibility for this kind of self-identification resulted from the conflict between private relief organizations, federal relief administration, and communist agitators, which produced a dynamic, shifting set of relationships between the unemployed and those trying to shape their beliefs and behaviours.

The conflict between relief providers and Communists made it less likely that the transient unemployed would be united by a single ideology or a particular mode of behaviour. However, it did allow the unemployed in the camps to construct a variety of potential public transcripts that variously communicated both compliance and dissent in the camps. The result was that both private relief agencies and Communists were confident that the unemployed in the camps were behaving according to their particular visions of ideal camper behaviour. However, in reality, campers acted carefully and intelligently to negotiate the conflict between those controlling relief and those dependent upon it. At times this required acting in solidarity with the union, and at others it demanded complying with the goals of the government and their privately funded partners. Camper duplicity, in part, explains how the Anglican Synod saw that "many of these men [in the camps] do not want ...to see the whole constitution of the camp

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

system changed and improved. Why? – because they would be out of a job... they feel that there is nothing for them to do but to grin and bear until some power greater [from] outside themselves will arise and have the system changed.”¹⁷⁶ On the other hand James “Red” Walsh, a prominent organizer in the camps, arguing that campers were prepared to unite to change the relief system, alleged that “there was no hesitation on the part of the men to join our organizations.”¹⁷⁷ Perceptions of the men, their actions, and their motives were complicated and inconsistent because the men were complicated and inconsistent.

The political behaviour of the campers was often equally complex as the conditions that surrounded them. RCWU protests were not the only method by which the transient population asserted their communal or individual autonomy. Rather, the solidarity that the state measured in the disruptive protests and strikes led by agitators must be seen as extraordinary episodes in the regular, day-to-day compliance exhibited by campers. Yes, in solidarity, many transients engaged in widespread protests in the camps. However, in solidarity, many of them chose not to leave the camps when the union asked them to and some, defying the union entirely, even continued to work according to the demands of their foremen when dozens of their peers struck off work. As historian Bryan D. Palmer suggests, working class culture is “too often depicted one-sidedly as struggle, rather than as both the site of forms of resistance and processes of accommodation.”¹⁷⁸ It is far too easy to see the camps only as sites of Communist resistance without recognizing the many ways in which unemployed campers accommodated the government’s demands. Indeed, despite being coerced to live in isolated, derelict camps to receive government relief the unemployed in the camps seemed to accommodate to the government’s wishes more often than not. As EP Thompson has written in his famous work “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century”, “It is the restraint, rather than the disorder, which is

¹⁷⁶ “Letter from Rt. Rev. Charles D. Schofield to T.D. Patullo,” 11 May 1935. BCA: GR 1222, Box 136, File 4

¹⁷⁷ Red Walsh, “On to Ottawa, 1935,” in *We Stood Together: First Hand Accounts of Dramatic Events in Canada’s Labour Past*, ed. Gloria Montero (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, 1979), 29.

¹⁷⁸ Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Publishers, 1992), 16.

remarkable.”¹⁷⁹ This tells us that the camps were not merely communities where Communists challenged the government and received a substantial amount of support from the unemployed, even though this did happen. Rather, accommodation was an essential tool used by the transient unemployed to extract relief from a government that had constructed a system upon which they were dependent and to which they had surrendered a great deal of autonomy.

Of course, this is not to say that the unemployed complied with all of the government’s wishes. It is not difficult to recognize that the unemployed were widely dissatisfied with the relief provided to single, homeless men during the relief camp program because it limited their mobility and subjected them to the government’s authority. Many resisted this new relationship by protesting, challenging, and leaving the camps. However, the opportunities to engage with politics in the camps went beyond the duel between the union and the government. Straddling the line between dissent and compliance in the camps took on many forms independently of the union. Campers dissented in ways that reduced the risks associated with open support for the RCWU but still allowed them to assert their autonomy from relief camp regulations. This is an important reversal of agency from the union to the unemployed. As shown in this thesis, sometimes campers acted within regulations, ensuring that they were not discharged, but did not fulfill their duties as their foremen demanded. Sometimes they abandoned the relative safety of the camps entirely, along with the developing conflict with the RCWU, in the hopes that a return to transiency would once again provide them with the opportunity to care for themselves. Aside from the rare occasion, political actions were never shared by all the occupants of a particular camp. Rather, despite the RCWU’s efforts to organize the men, dissent in the camps lacked the comprehensive cohesion that would have resulted from their leadership.

The complex power hierarchies in the camps demanded shifting between protest and compliance according to present demands and risks. Protest in the camps was much more complicated than the image that has been provided by historians thus far. Campers used a wide spectrum of dissenting behaviours to protect and assert their autonomy. Some of these behaviours show traces of the RCWU, but others reveal a

¹⁷⁹ EP Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Customs in Common* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1993), 229.

reluctance to partner with communist radicals. Others remain largely unclear in motive. This fluctuation of behaviour mediated the many risks associated with dissent in the camps but still allowed campers to be involved in the construction of their social and work environment. Indeed, campers altered their behaviour and acted in the space between the relief agencies and communist leaders, thereby confusing the absolute authority of the federal camp administration and the alternative authority of the RCWU and private relief agencies. Ultimately, it was because of the competition between private and public relief and Communist organizations that transient men were able to extract relief upon which they were dependent while also challenging the very foundations of that relief – the government's demands for compliance through surrendering autonomy and independence. For the unemployed labouring in the work relief camps, it was dangerous but also essential to bite the hands that fed them, even if it had to be done carefully.

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