

**CONSTITUTING AUTHORITY:
POLICING WORKERS AND THE
CONSOLIDATION OF POLICE POWER
IN VANCOUVER, 1918-1939**

by

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B. A. Simon Fraser University 2004

**THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS**

In the
Department of
History

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

2007

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Abstract

Policing in Vancouver was transformed by the labour unrest of the interwar period, culminating in a campaign carried out by a new civic regime that assumed power in response to a general strike threat. Complicating the process was that police workers were considered unreliable for policing labour disputes, especially since they unionized under the threat of a general strike in 1918. The challenge of “constituting authority” was therefore to render the police a reliable instrument against working class unrest. This study traces the development of policing through the postwar spate of waterfront strikes to the 1930s anticommunist campaign that carried the struggle into the political arena. Even as police power was being consolidated in the municipal police institution, rank and file police were undermined by tactics long used against other workers, namely labour spies and police specials. Like other workers, police resisted, modifying the process of change as a result.

Keywords: anti-communism; general strike; industrial conflict; police power; police union; special constables; Vancouver Police Department

Subject Terms: Anti-communist movements – Canada – History – 20th century; Industrial relations – British Columbia – Vancouver – History – 20th century; Labor unions – Police – British Columbia; Police power – Canada; Vancouver (B.C.) – History – 20th century; Vancouver (B.C.). Police Dept. – History; Police – British Columbia – Vancouver – History

Acknowledgements

Although research and writing tend to be solitary activities, the support, encouragement, and input of many people have helped make this thesis better than I alone could have managed. First, I would like to acknowledge my fellow students in the 800 level courses for creating the stimulating intellectual environment in which I began this journey. Michael Boudreau provided the generous encouragement to take the first step. My supervisor, Mark Leier, was exceedingly patient and enthusiastic throughout the entire process and gave consistently valuable feedback on my work. The many days I spent at the City of Vancouver Archives were both pleasant and productive thanks to the staff. Jeremy Duffin and others at the Vancouver Police Centennial Museum were exceptionally accommodating during my sometimes ill-timed research visits. Karen Ferguson and Robert A. J. McDonald of my examining committee enlivened my thesis defence with their challenging questions and astute comments. During two of several research tangents, I received thoughtful and prompt replies to my questions from Legion of Frontiersmen Geoffrey Pocock and B. W. Shandro and from Floyd Rudmin regarding War Plan RED. Of the friends who put up with my ramblings on this subject, Anton Pilipa and Irwin Oostindie not only endured the most, but also made insightful comments and asked stimulating questions. Last but certainly not least, a big thank you goes to my daughter Sophia for her patience during this process and for showing me what it means to be a model student.

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Introduction

Policing Politics, Policing History

Contrary to general belief [Stalin] holds no political position at all: he is in no political office at all in Russia, but is the head of the Communistic party, and the reason that the Communistic party in Russia recognizes no authority at all, religious or otherwise, is because if they do then some authority will be imposed upon them.

William J. Quinn, San Francisco Chief of Police, 1935

The police themselves wanted their affairs taken out of the shadowy realms of politics, because they never seemed to know half the time whether they were on the job or off, and naturally lost heart.

Canadian Police Gazette, June 1933



Figure 1: A Vancouver Police constable guards Spencer's Department Store in 1938. The windows were smashed by riotous unemployed demonstrators after they were brutally evicted by the RCMP from the post office, ending a month-long occupation in protest of government inaction on the unemployment crisis. (Image # 1287 courtesy Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections)

The war on terrorism has ushered in a new era in policing on the premise that intelligence failures allowed 9/11 and other terrorist attacks to happen.¹ The paradigm for the new era is “intelligence-led policing,” which promotes strong state intelligence networks globally and locally to help generate actionable intelligence that can guide police operations. The hope is that better inter-agency cooperation across jurisdictions and stronger links with non-state actors and communities will increase police effectiveness generally and help prevent further terrorist attacks specifically.² Intelligence-led policing, like counterterrorism generally, is not without its perils however, particularly in relation to civil liberties, and can be seen as part of the larger trend of conflating the state’s policing and military functions in the most recent phase in the evolution of the liberal democratic state.³

Permeating this discourse is a sense of novelty rooted in historical fiction. It assumes that local police have hitherto been relegated to a non-political “low policing”

¹ William M. Oliver, “The Fourth Era of Policing: Homeland Security,” *International Review of Law Computers and Technology* 20, nos. 1 and 2 (March-July 2006), 49-62.

² Edmund F. McGarrell, Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven Chermak, “Intelligence-Led Policing As a Framework for Responding to Terrorism,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23, no. 2 (May 2007), 142-158. The lineage of intelligence-led policing in Canada can be traced to changes made following the 1985 bombing of Air India flight 182 on the assumption that the RCMP might have procured better intelligence if they had had stronger ties to the Sikh community in Vancouver. The RCMP adopted a “community policing” model but later developed intelligence-led policing in response to the shortcomings of community policing. Willem de Lint, “Intelligence in Policing and Security: Reflections on Scholarship,” *Policing & Society* 16, no. 1 (March 2006), 2.

³ Jean-Paul Brodeur and Benoît Dupont, “Knowledge Workers or ‘Knowledge’ Workers?” *Policing & Society* 16, no. 1 (March 2006), 7-26; Stéphane Leman-Langlois and Jean-Paul Brodeur, “Terrorism Old and New: Counterterrorism in Canada,” *Police Practice and Research* 6, no. 2 (May 2005), 138; Sharon Pickering, “Border Terror: Policing, Forced Migration and Terrorism,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 16, no. 3 (October 2004), 211-226; and Peter Andreas and Richard Price, “From War Fighting to Crime Fighting: Transforming the American National Security State,” *International Studies Review* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 2001), 31-52.

role concerned with crime and disorder, whereas “high policing” has been left to federal agencies with a national security mandate.⁴ Rob Rothwell, the head of the Vancouver Police Department’s Counter Terrorist Unit, has remarked that “history has proven, over and over, that the most effective means of combating criminal activity or terrorist activity is at the community level.” His unit was created to “fill a gap” that national security agencies left at the “grassroots” by working closely with federal agencies and sharing intelligence accumulated by police in the normal course of duty.⁵ Rothwell’s historical insight suggests that a national security role for the city police is not a recent innovation, and perhaps also betrays his department’s institutional memory. As far back as 1935, Vancouver’s mayor described how police were confronting a “reign of terrorism” by agitators engaged in “an unceasing campaign of threat and intimidation [that is] part and parcel of the Communistic programme of creating disruption and disorder.”⁶ To combat Communism, and labour militancy generally, employers banded together with their political allies to erect a new civic regime with a mandate to mold the Vancouver police into a political police. The new police was very much intelligence-led,

⁴ Jean-Paul Brodeur, “High Policing and Low Policing: Remarks about the Policing of Political Activities,” *Social Problems* 30, no. 5 (June 1983), 507-520. The term “high policing” comes from the political *haute police* established in France under Louis XIV, and is characterized by reaching “out for potential threats in a systematic attempt to preserve the distribution of power in a given society.” Brodeur defines “low policing” as the “forceful reaction to *conspicuous* signs of disorder, whether or not of a criminal nature” (512-513, emphasis in original).

⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 6 June 2006.

⁶ City of Vancouver Archives (hereafter CVA), PAM 1935-9, G. G. McGeer, “Radio Speech by Mayor G. G. McGeer Over CKWX,” 8 September 1935.

following the chief constable's dictum that "intelligence, properly applied, is the basis of all good police work," whether fighting crime or Communism.⁷

This thesis examines how policing changed in interwar Vancouver. Specifically, it looks at how the police institution developed as a result of political conflicts involving labour, capital, and the state. A general strike scheme uncovered by labour spies on the waterfront served as a catalyst for change by provoking a counter-conspiracy to erect a new civic regime in Vancouver with the express purpose of combating the red menace. The centrepiece of the anticommunist program was the police force, which was endowed with greater autonomy, increased resources, and hundreds of special constables in a process of consolidating police power. Complicating this process was a paradox stemming from a belief forged in the labour upsurge that began in the final days of the First World War that rank and file members of the force could not be trusted to police their fellow workers in the event of a major class-based conflict. As a complement to the war on Communism, which aimed to increase state power locally, the police department was reorganized in a way that undermined the power of police as workers. The general strike failed in Vancouver while police reform succeeded, but the interrelationship of the two shaped developments in ways not envisioned by their respective architects.

Although this turbulent period in Vancouver's history is well-represented in Canadian historiography, the political role of the city police has not been adequately taken into account. Todd McCallum has commented that most histories of the

⁷ CVA, Vancouver Police Department (hereafter VPD), McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of W. W. Foster, 49-50.

depression are framed “primarily as a battle of ideas, between outdated Victorian moralists ... and modern welfare-state proponents,” adding that the challenge to the social order posed by unemployed militants “went well beyond that.”⁸ Certainly, 1930s protests of the unemployed and the groundswell of public sympathy for their plight in the face of government intransigence offered important lessons for the making of the welfare state after the Second World War. But the postwar Canadian state was not all unemployment insurance and health care; it was also a Cold War state, an “insecurity state” complete with political intrigue and a repressive security apparatus as a bulwark against Communist subversion.⁹ This state too has roots in depression-era Vancouver, although this part of the story has mostly lurked in the background of interwar histories.

Protest histories are replete with police in this period, both because of the dramatic clashes between police and demonstrators and because police records have been an important primary source in reconstructing those events. Only rarely and provisionally, however, are the police posited as more than an appendage of the “political and legal establishment,” as Lita-Rose Betcherman put it in the subtitle of her book on the Communist Party. In Betcherman’s account of the unemployed protests at the dawn of the depression in Vancouver, the chief constable is the face of constituted authority only because the mayor regarded “demonstrations of the unemployed as problems of

⁸ Todd McCallum, “‘Still Raining, Market Still Rotten’: Homeless Men and the Early Years of the Great Depression in Vancouver” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 2004), 138.

⁹ Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

law enforcement ... a matter entirely for the Chief of Police.”¹⁰ The police here are invested with political agency only because elected officials abdicated responsibility for addressing the unemployment crisis, a persistent theme in depression-era histories. Todd McCallum’s study on hoboes is a more recent work that covers the same events in Vancouver, but which treats the police with more nuance in the response to the unrest. Individually and as an institution, the chief and his subordinates were political actors and not simply a blunt politico-legal instrument of last resort.¹¹ Still, while McCallum uses a lens less inhibited by formal conceptions of political power in his study of hoboes, the police are incidental and therefore the institution is not problematized. As Betcherman’s use of the term “establishment” suggests, the police are a *fait accompli* in depression narratives.

In the politically charged interwar years, the police functioned as more than an instrument of politics, capitalism, or the law, despite their mandate and the dogged efforts of reformers and police executives to render them as such. As an institution, the police department can be understood as an executive branch of municipal government, through which consequential and contentious policies and strategies were developed and implemented.¹² The police were, and remain, “inherently and inescapably political,” unless “politics” is narrowly defined to mean the partisan or electoral varieties. When

¹⁰ Lita-Rose Betcherman, *The Little Band: The Clashes between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishment in Canada, 1928-1932* (Ottawa: Deneau, n. d. [1982]), 89-90.

¹¹ McCallum, “Still Raining,” chapter four.

¹² On the executive power of the police, see David Bright, “Technology and Law Enforcement: The Transformation of the Calgary Police Force, 1900-1940,” *Urban History Review/Revue d’histoire urbaine* XXXIII, no. 2 (Spring 2005), 30; and Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), chapter five.

understood as an institution of political administration that exercises state power, to borrow a definition from Mark Neocleous, “it is impossible to see the police in liberal democracies as somehow ‘depoliticized.’”¹³

Another political dimension can be seen within the police institution. Most police were employees with interests distinct from and in contradiction to those of their bosses, despite the rigid discipline and hierarchy of the job and the tendency of police to hold conservative views and close ranks in the face of public scrutiny. Police workers were not immune from the labour upsurge in this period and so unionized in Vancouver and other cities, which instilled the police department with an acute in-house political dynamic, a tension over the governance of the organization. Perhaps more significant is that this dynamic, as we shall see, set limits on how the police instrument could be wielded in the exercise of state power. With a few exceptions, police unionism in Canadian historiography is confined to passing references listing the police as but one of the many disgruntled occupational groups looking for better conditions in the postwar labour revolt.¹⁴ The police, however, were singled out for special treatment in the anti-labour backlash because of their ambiguous position *vis-à-vis* labour and capital. Geoffrey Ewan notes that in Montreal, “the police union bore the brunt of an anti-union assault that was fuelled by business leaders who feared that unionized police would sympathize

¹³ Neocleous, *Fabrication*, 117.

¹⁴ See, for example, David Bright, *The Limits of Labour: Class Formation and the Labour Movement in Calgary, 1883-1929* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), 112. The exceptions are Jacques Rouillard and Henri Goulet, *Solidarité et détermination. Histoire de la Fraternité des policiers et des policières de la Communauté urbaine de Montréal* (Montreal: Boréal, 1999); Greg Marquis, “Police Unionism in Early Twentieth-century Toronto,” *Ontario History* LXXXI, no. 2 (June 1989), 109-128; and Barbara Ann Suzon Fleury, “The Historical Development of Police Unionism: Three Case Studies from British Columbia” (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1988).

with other workers during industrial disputes.”¹⁵ During the Winnipeg General Strike, the entire police force was simply fired, even though they did not join the strike. The unionization of city police forces was also a saving grace for Canada’s famous Mounties. The Royal North West Mounted Police escaped oblivion in the scramble to ensure there was an adequate and non-unionized police force that could “meet any civil disturbance” in the post-frontier west, namely “strikes, lockouts or labour disturbances,” and so were reconstituted as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1920.¹⁶ Clearly, the city police were a critical element in the labour revolt, and would seem to merit more than the meagre attention allotted by historians in this and subsequent periods of labour unrest. Just as labour histories have consistently shown that employees were not the passive tools employers may have wanted them to be, police workers actively participated in the conflicts in which they were at the centre.

Greg Marquis has observed that Canadian social historians, particularly those influenced by Marxism, have tended to emphasize the class instrumentality of the police in studies structured around class relations.¹⁷ Although most police were working class by any measure, they were also a component of the capitalist state. Police work

¹⁵ Geoffrey Ewan, “Quebec: Class and Ethnicity,” in *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925*, ed. Craig Heron, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 118.

¹⁶ S. W. Horrall, “The Royal North-West Mounted Police and Labour Unrest in Western Canada, 1919,” in *Lawful Authority: Readings in the History of Criminal Justice in Canada*, ed. R. C. MacLeod, (Toronto: Copp, Clark, Pitman, 1988), 134-135; and Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 18, vol. 1003, file “Personnel,” Order-in-Council of 7 October 1918, P. C. 2213, quoted in Steve Hewitt, *Riding to the Rescue: The Transformation of the RCMP in Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1914-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 24. One of the legacies of this period is that Mounties are still denied the right to unionize, despite a protracted rank and file campaign to gain that right.

¹⁷ Greg Marquis, “Towards a Canadian Police Historiography,” in *Law, Society, and the State: Essays in Modern Legal History*, eds. Louis A. Knafla and Susan W. S. Binnie (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 483-484.

routinely pitted them against other workers and therefore was not conducive to class solidarity. It is not surprising, then, that the history of police workers does not fit easily into more general working class histories. That said, the police are far from absent in Canadian labour historiography, but more typically appear as agents of the state mobilized in the service of capital than as workers. Marquis and others have criticized the class instrumentalist approach for focusing on this function to the exclusion of others because it results in a one-dimensional characterization of the police.¹⁸ Along with Marquis, John C. Weaver, in his study of the Hamilton police, accounts for a wide range of developments and activities of the city police as part of the evolving municipal landscape, in which the police are variously “working men in uniform,” “muscular mercenaries,” social workers, “human agents of civil order,” and reluctant accomplices in anti-vice campaigns.¹⁹ Similarly, Steve Hewitt has fruitfully applied a social historical

¹⁸ Greg Marquis, “Power from the Street: The Canadian Municipal Police,” in *Police Powers in Canada: The Evolution and Practice of Authority*, eds. R. C. MacLeod and David Schneiderman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 25. The pioneering “class instrumentalist” police histories in the US, Britain, and Canada respectively, are Sidney L. Harring, *Policing a Class Society: The Experience of American Cities, 1865-1915* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983); Tony Bunyan, *The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain* (London: Julian Friedmann, 1976); and Lorne Brown and Carolyn Brown, *An Unauthorized History of the RCMP* (Toronto: James Lewis & Samuel, 1973). An oft-cited study that critiques both the class instrumentalist, or revisionist, approach and earlier Whiggish police histories is Robert Reiner, *The Politics of the Police* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), chapter one.

¹⁹ John C. Weaver, *Crimes, Constables, and Courts: Order and Transgression in a Canadian City, 1816-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995); Greg Marquis, “Working Men in Uniform: The Early Twentieth-century Toronto Police,” *Histoire sociale – Social History* XX, no. 40 (November 1987), 259-277 and “Vancouver Vice: The Police and the Negotiation of Morality, 1904-1935,” in *Essays in the History of Canadian Law, Volume VI: British Columbia and the Yukon*, eds. Hamar Foster and John McLaren (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 242-273.

approach to the RCMP, resulting in a richly textured narrative of a pivotal moment in Mountie history.²⁰

Historians of labour and the left, among others, have necessarily relied on the police because extant police records offer a privileged glimpse into important historical events, groups and movements under surveillance, and the relationship of the state to society.²¹ Much of this literature, pioneered by Gregory S. Kealey, is as concerned with what police surveillance tells us about the state as it is with what was captured in the police gaze.²² These histories present a great deal of complexity and ambiguity within the RCMP, particularly in studies of the spies who did not fit the Mountie archetype in terms of physical stature, ethnicity, class, or “moral character.”²³ Marquis’ criticism of

²⁰ Hewitt, *Riding to the Rescue*.

²¹ Examples include: Steve Hewitt, *Spying 101: The RCMP's Secret Activities at Canadian Universities, 1917-1997* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) and “‘While Unpleasant it is a Service to Humanity’: The RCMP’s War on Drugs in the Interwar Period,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 80-104; Allan Rowe, “The Surveillance of the Chinese in Canada during the Great War” (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2000); Michelle McBride, “From Indifference to Internment: An Examination of RCMP responses to Nazism and Fascism in Canada from 1934 to 1941 (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1997); Paul Axelrod, “Spying on the Young in Depression and War: Students, Youth Groups, and the RCMP, 1935-1942,” *Labour/Le Travail* 35 (Spring 1995), 43-63; and Michael Lonardo, “Under a Watchful Eye: A Case Study of Police Surveillance During the 1930s,” *Labour/Le Travail* 35 (Spring 1995), 11-41.

²² Gregory S. Kealey, “The Surveillance State: The Origins of Domestic Intelligence and Counter-Subversion in Canada, 1914-1921,” *Intelligence and National Security* 7, no. 3 (July 1992), 179-210; “The Early Years of State Surveillance of Labour and the Left in Canada: The Institutional Framework of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Security and Intelligence Apparatus, 1918-26,” *Intelligence and National Security* 8, no. 3 (July 1993), 129-148; “The Empire Strikes Back: The 19th Century Origins of the Canadian Secret Services,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* (2000), 1-12; and Gregory S. Kealey and Andy Parnaby, “The Origins of Political Policing in Canada: Class, Law, and the Burden of Empire,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 41, nos. 2-3 (2003), 211-239.

²³ Steve Hewitt, “Royal Canadian Mounted Spy: The Secret Life of John Leopold/Jack Esselwein,” *Intelligence and National Security* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 144-168; Gregory S. Kealey, “Spymasters, Spies and their Subjects: The RCMP and Canadian State Repression, 1914-1939,” in *Whose National Security? Canadian State Surveillance and the Creation of Enemies*, eds. Gary Kinsman, Dieter K. Buse, and Mercedes Steedman, 18-33 (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2000); Mark Leier, *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden, Revolutionary, Mystic, Labour Spy* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1999);

this surveillance focus is that these historians, “fascinated with security and intelligence,” have distorted police history by emphasizing an activity that occupied only a small proportion of RCMP resources, while “ignoring the more important operational history of the force.”²⁴ This may be valid in terms of providing a complete picture of the institution, but is misplaced both because political policing is disproportionately consequential compared with other aspects of police work, and because it is an area of the past that has been deliberately obscured in the historical record. On this point, British historian Bernard Porter notes that “one reason why there are so few historical certainties is that so many things in history are done secretly.”²⁵ Sources permitting, it would seem that reconstructing this secret history is a worthy priority for historians, especially when present-day security concerns demand a re-thinking of the relationship between politics and policing. One distortion that this literature does reinforce is that its singular focus on the RCMP seems to imply that local police have been unconcerned with security and intelligence, “duties exclusive to the RCMP since 1919.”²⁶ The historical evidence suggests otherwise.

The following study aims to build on this earlier work to fill part of the gap in our knowledge of policing history in Canada. It is also influenced by recent historiographical

and Gregory S. Kealey and Andy Parnaby, “How the Reds Got their Man: The Communist Party Unmasks an RCMP Spy,” *Labour/Le Travail* 40 (1997), 253-267.

²⁴ Greg Marquis, *Policing Canada's Century: A History of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 5.

²⁵ Bernard Porter, *Origins of the Vigilant State: The London Metropolitan Police Special Branch Before the First World War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), xi.

²⁶ Marquis, *Policing Canada's Century*, 5.

trends in that it recognizes structural boundaries as more permeable and porous than traditional conceptions allow. Police power, for instance, did not come into existence through an act of legislation, nor was it fully contained in a formal or single institution in the interwar period. It came in the form of private detectives, vigilantes, special constables, and company and regular police and moved between the private and public sectors, yet private police are almost always omitted from police histories.²⁷ Police power was also contested power, which partly influenced the forms it could take. At the same time, this thesis is very much concerned with formal political structures. Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo are correct that “the campaign against communism was an integral part of nation-building, concerned as it was in maintaining a particular set of values by eliminating those who professed different ones.”²⁸ The goal here is to map the path of police power in interwar Vancouver to illuminate the other half of the equation, in which anticommunism was also an integral part of state-building.²⁹

This study is divided into four chapters, each examining a phase in the interwar development of policing in Vancouver. It begins with the labour upsurge that followed the First World War and which found its sharpest expression on the waterfront.

²⁷ Private police have, however, been accounted for in labour and left histories. See, for example: Ward Churchill, “From the Pinkertons to the PATRIOT Act: The Trajectory of Political Policing in the United States, 1870 to the Present,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 1-72; Robert P. Weiss, “Private Detective Agencies and Labour Discipline in the United States, 1855-1946,” in *Social History of Crime, Policing, and Punishment*, ed. Robert P. Weiss (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999), 357-377; and Andrew Parnaby, “On the Hook: Welfare Capitalism on the Vancouver Waterfront, 1919-1939” (PhD diss., Memorial University, 2001), 49-51.

²⁸ Carolyn Strange and Tina Loo, *Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 134.

²⁹ This paragraph draws from Ian McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (2000), 617-645.

Waterfront employers in this period viewed the recently unionized city police as unreliable for quelling labour unrest both because they suspected the police rank and file of sympathizing with their fellow workers on the picket line and because police policy did not equate policing strikes with strikebreaking. “Police protection” during strikes, therefore, “had to be organized as though no such outside police force existed,” even though the city police provided their services during strikes and police authority was extended to private strikebreakers.³⁰ A “police question” was thus articulated during the labour revolt, but went unanswered for over a decade of relative labour calm. The second chapter picks up in the depression decade with the onset of the next crisis, in which Communist Party agitators stepped into a leadership role on the waterfront. Labour spy field reports are examined to show how they shaped employers’ analysis of the crisis that would inform the response. For the Shipping Federation, the body representing waterfront employers, these reports offered the insider’s view of Communist agitation that provided the key to understanding the nature of the threat, which was to culminate in another general strike. That key was the Communists’ leadership and organizational structure, the workings of which exposed the weaknesses of the Shipping Federation’s own leadership. Even with their inferior numbers and resources, the Communists were proving worthy opponents in the eyes of employers, who reevaluated their own organizational structure on the waterfront against that of their Communist challengers and made adjustments accordingly.

³⁰ CVA, Add. MSS 279, Shipping Federation, Business files (hereafter SF), Loc. 521-C-1, file 3, Inspector McGowan, CPR Department of Investigation to F. W. Peters, General Superintendent Canadian Pacific Railway B. C. District, 18 January 1924.

Just as Communists did not confine their activities to the worksite, employers extended their response from the waterfront into the realm of formal politics. Chapter three looks at how an ad hoc political machine was established to launch a campaign to oust the longstanding mayoral incumbent in the 1934 civic election. Policing was the decisive campaign issue, which was characterized as woefully ineffective due to weak political leadership and corruption. The campaign was so successful that it handed the fiery challenger, Gerry McGeer, not only the keys to the mayor's office, but a *carte blanche* mandate to reorganize the police department as well. His first act was to install a new police leadership and to purge the police force in preparation for the main event, the general strike scheduled for the spring of 1935, the subject of chapter four.

Although the new regime under Gerry McGeer was elected based on campaign rhetoric decrying vice crime and corruption, it soon became apparent that Communism was the number one policing problem in Vancouver. But rather than a straightforward battle between the blues and the reds – police and Communism – the events of 1935 included several unexpected twists that complicated the dual campaign to reform the police and smash Communism. Among these was the realization that Communism exerted less influence over militant protesters than previously imagined, indicating a problem with police intelligence. Another was that targeting the police rank and file as potentially disloyal undermined the effort to strengthen the police force. Although the Communist threat dissipated that year, the conflict engendered by the reorganization between police workers and management lingered until the end of the decade. Police power was consolidated in the city police institution in this process, but resistance from

the police union helped ensure that the new police force would not simply be a force of compliant strikebreakers.

Chapter One

Policing Workers, 1918-1923

And during that week of silence the Oligarchy was taught its lesson. And well it learned the lesson. The general strike was a warning. It should never occur again. The Oligarchy would see to that.

Jack London, *The Iron Heel*, 1908



Figure 2: Once the jewel of the Canadian Pacific Railway's fleet of luxury ocean liners and later a WWI merchant ship, the *RMS Empress of Japan* (c. 1921) was pulled out of retirement in 1923 to serve as one of three ships that housed over 1000 strikebreakers during the waterfront strike of that year. (Image # 3216 courtesy Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections)

“The police are the thread which sew the seams of society together and keep the ragged parts inside,” reads a 1911 article in *British Columbia Magazine* explaining the purpose of the Vancouver Police.¹ For a city still under construction, still being stitched together in 1911, this was an apt analogy. In contrast to other cities, Vancouver developed rapidly and the architects of the city were acutely aware that they were involved in the creation of a metropolitan centre ever since the Canadian Pacific Railway tagged the tiny settlement for its western terminus.² Local histories are peppered with examples of the police playing a pivotal role in this process, which supports Mark Neocleous’s argument that the historical role of police in liberal society has been less about law enforcement and order maintenance than the fabrication of a capitalist social order.³ From overseeing the chain gangs that built the original streets to periodically relocating the red light district, Vancouver police were kept busy configuring the nascent city and keeping the “ragged parts inside” their designated compartments.⁴

¹ *British Columbia Magazine*, June 1911.

² The best example of this awareness is perhaps Major J. S. Mathews, the city’s first archivist, who made it his life’s work to document the process. See: Todd McCallum, “The Great Depression’s First History? The Vancouver Archives of Major J. S. Matthews and the Writing of Hobo History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (March 2006), 79-107.

³ Neocleous, *Fabrication*. In Canada, “the typical policeman in the period 1850-1920 spent little time ‘fighting’ crime and almost no time detecting it.” Marquis, “Power from the Street,” 32. Examples of the social ordering of Vancouver along gender, class, and racial lines respectively include: Michaela Freund, “The Politics of Naming: Constructing Prostitutes and Regulating Women in Vancouver, 1939-1945,” in *Regulating Lives: Historical Essays on the State, Society, the Individual, and the Law*, eds. John McLaren, Robert Menzies, and Dorothy E. Chunn (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 231-258; Robert A. J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1996); and Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991).

⁴ Joe Swan, *A Century of Service: The Vancouver Police 1886-1986* (Vancouver: Vancouver Police Historical Society and Centennial Museum, 1986), 18; W. A. Barnes and R. F. Cook, eds., *City of*

The police were thus important to Vancouver's development, but the city police force was only one of several bodies engaged in this activity and therefore only represents part of Vancouver's policing story. Besides the city police, provincial and federal forces were active in Vancouver, as were the Canadian Pacific Railway's company police, including both railroad "bulls" guarding company property and the detectives in its Investigation Department.⁵ Private detective agencies also proliferated in Vancouver, with large American firms such as the Pinkerton's, Burns, and Thiel agencies operating alongside a plethora of local detectives-for-hire. The detective division of the city police department grew from an initial four members in 1901 to twenty-seven members by 1921, but it is unlikely that this was even a majority of detectives working in the city.⁶

Much of policing was an ad hoc affair performed by large numbers of special constables, or "specials," recruited as the need arose. From its inception when Vancouver's lone constable was joined by three subordinates sworn in as specials during the Great Fire of 1886, specials were the means by which the city police force increased its strength.⁷ The next expansion came after the provincial government determined that local authorities had "'strangely and persistently' refrained from enforcing the law" during the anti-Chinese unrest of 1887. Thirty-six special constables were sent from Victoria

Vancouver, B. C., Police Department (Vancouver: Vancouver Board of Police Commissioners, 1921), 9; and Daniel Francis, *L. D.: Mayor Louis Taylor and the Rise of Vancouver* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 93-96.

⁵ On railway policing, see Marquis, *Policing Canada's Century*, 134-139.

⁶ David John Young, "The Vancouver City Police Force, 1886-1914" (BA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1976), 50; and Barnes and Cook, *City of Vancouver*, 49-50.

⁷ Swan, *A Century of Service*, 15.

and temporarily relieved the four local police of duty. When the crisis subsided, the permanent force that remained had a newfound strength of fourteen members.⁸ More typical was the recruitment of specials by big business to assist in strikebreaking. Armed with guns and badges issued by the police department, these specials show that the line separating private and public policing was ill-defined, and reflects business leaders' distrust of the city police to adequately or reliably protect their interests.

Like other workers with low paying and demanding jobs during the "Canadian labour revolt," the police rank and file had much to gain by the improvement of labour conditions and so unionized in 1918, in Vancouver and several other cities.⁹

Remuneration allowed for little more than subsistence for Vancouver constables, their hours were long, and they were subjected to departmental rules even when not on duty.¹⁰ Unlike workers in other sectors, they were bound by an oath of duty, which extended to their private lives with regulations dictating where and how they were permitted to live. Consequently, turnover was high; out of twenty-two recruits hired in

⁸ Patricia E. Roy, "The Preservation of the Peace in Vancouver: The Aftermath of the Anti-Chinese Riot of 1887," in *Lawful Authority: Readings on the History of Criminal Justice in Canada*, ed. R. C. Macleod (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 126, 128.

⁹ On the labour revolt, see: Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); and Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), chapter nine. On police unionism in British Columbia, see Fleury, "The Historical Development."

¹⁰ Young, "The Vancouver City Police Force," 29-33. Board of Police Commissioners, City of Vancouver, *General Rules, Regulations and Instructions for the Government, Guidance and Information of the Vancouver Police Force* (Vancouver: News-Advertiser, 1910), 27-29.

1909 for example, thirteen had quit or were dismissed by the end of the year and another five were gone by 1911.¹¹

A city policeman's job therefore rivaled that of other unskilled workers in terms of onerous conditions and meager rewards, but with additional demands similar to those placed on military personnel.¹² In addition to the oath of duty, the police mandate to uphold law and order meant, in the ideal at least, rising above industrial disputes in order to quell whatever disturbances and lawlessness may arise.¹³ Police workers were clearly an awkward fit in both the camp of organized labour and as civil servants in a bourgeois capitalist state. Not surprisingly, the dynamic between capital and labour profoundly affected the outlook and strategies adopted by the police rank and file. When private police are added into this quagmire, it becomes apparent why the state of policing was viewed as unsatisfactory by most stakeholders of the period. Organized labour was skeptical about police unionism and hostile to strikebreaking private police while Vancouver's viscerally anti-union capitalists were suspicious of police workers' partial or potential identification with labour and resented having to bear much of their own policing costs as a result.¹⁴ Moreover, in its anti-Bolshevik interpretation of the postwar labour upsurge, big business viewed labour unrest as not simply an industrial problem,

¹¹ Young, "The Vancouver City Police Force," 33.

¹² Despite police aspirations to the contrary, policing was not considered skilled work in this period. Marquis, "Power from the Street," 37.

¹³ Marquis, "Police Unionism," 114.

¹⁴ Vancouver trade union leaders initially advised against the formation of a police union. *Vancouver Daily Province*, 18 June 1918.

but a political struggle and therefore properly a state responsibility. In this context, city police maintained a distance from industrial politics and resisted being pulled into the orbit of either capital or labour whenever possible, and instead tried to maneuver to their advantage between both worlds.

The most volatile theatre of industrial conflict involving scores of police was on Vancouver's waterfront, where the main employer was the Shipping Federation of British Columbia. This was an employer's association formed after the First World War by railway, stevedoring, and storage companies to manage commercial operations on Vancouver's increasingly busy waterfront, which ballooned from the port of a tiny mill town into a bustling international seaport in less than fifty years.¹⁵ British Columbia's industrialists in the timber, mining, and other export-dependent resource sectors also took an active interest in the waterfront because it was their "gateway" to global markets. Accordingly, they took the necessary steps to ensure Vancouver's port was developed so as to "compete with any port in the world for the commerce of an Empire."¹⁶ The opening of the Panama Canal secured a prominent place for British Columbia in Canada's international trade and spurred federal intervention with the appointment of the Vancouver Harbour Commission to oversee development of port infrastructure. Major capital investment was poured into the construction of port facilities, such as grain terminals and Ballantyne Pier, a large and technologically advanced

¹⁵ For the evolution of Vancouver's seaport to the mid-1930s, see Leah Stevens, "Rise of the Port of Vancouver," *Economic Geography* 12, no. 1 (January 1936), 61-70.

¹⁶ *British Columbia Magazine*, December 1911.

dock that opened in 1923 featuring steam-powered cranes.¹⁷ By 1935 the Shipping Federation could boast that seaport traffic was the largest industry in the province.¹⁸ For the captains of BC's industry then, the Shipping Federation was not just the manager of waterfront operations but the guardian of a vital economic organ and collective resource. As a representative of these economic interests, the Shipping Federation jealously guarded its dominion with an unyielding resolve to control waterfront operations.

The economic importance of the waterfront also gave longshore workers a powerful bargaining chip because they could close this gateway to the world economy simply by withdrawing their labour, thus making industrial relations an exceptionally high stakes affair. Employers fought vociferously against attempts to organize an independent longshoremen's union and succeeded through the extensive use of strikebreakers. One example in particular illustrates the heightened class antagonism on the waterfront. When Vancouver's longshoremen struck in sympathy with the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919, middle class university and high school students were recruited as replacement workers. In a newspaper article entitled "Lads like the Longshore Life," the *Vancouver Daily Province* reported that the young strikebreakers proved that longshore work was not all that difficult and that, in contrast to the strikers, they brought a sense of sportsmanship and competition to the job and supposedly broke productivity records as a result. The boys laboured under "satisfactory" conditions at a high rate of pay and with

¹⁷ Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of Vancouver and the Lower Fraser Valley* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005), 114-115.

¹⁸ R. C. McCandless, "Vancouver's 'Red Menace' of 1935: The Waterfront Situation," *BC Studies* 22 (1974), 68.

food and accommodation provided aboard a CPR steamship docked in the harbour – far more than their striking counterparts received for the same work.¹⁹ This tactic was used by employers not just to counter the effects of the strike, but also to demoralize the strikers and cast doubt on the validity of their grievances.²⁰

The 1919 sympathy strike was not confined to the waterfront and the strikebreaking efforts of waterfront-based businessmen were not limited to port operations. J. E. Hall, a granary executive, put his leadership skills to work organizing the Vancouver Citizens' League to deal with what he claimed were "a few revolutionaries who attempted to run the country while 99¾ per cent of the citizens sat back and did nothing."²¹ Hall boasted that his group had an army of vigilant volunteers at its disposal that included 1000 returned soldiers, 5000 men for police work, and the Boy Scouts, who were to be used as messengers in case telephone operators walked out.²² The Citizens' League claimed that its main purpose was to coordinate volunteers to ensure that the basic necessities of life would remain available, but its primary objective was to break the strike. It was a more sophisticated response by local businessmen than the

¹⁹ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 24 June 1919.

²⁰ The most in depth examination of student strikebreaking is in Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 15-33. Also see: David F. Selvin, *A Terrible Anger: The 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 91.

²¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 11 June 1919. For J. E. Hall's involvement in the grain trade in Vancouver, see *Vancouver Sun*, 1 March 1938.

²² *Vancouver Sun*, 11 June 1919. It is not known if the Boy Scouts were actually used when there was a partial strike of operators; members of the Daughters of the Empire also offered their services as replacement "hello girls." Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest E. Winch and his Times* (Vancouver: Boag Foundation, 1960), 52.

one during the previous summer's general strike, when a mob of 300 returned soldiers was mobilized to ransack the Labour Temple and terrorize its occupants.²³ In the 1919 strike, hundreds of Citizens' League members were sworn in as special police constables, while the public was assured that the League was "usurping no government power," but simply "marshalling that strength upon which governments rest and placing it at the disposal of the duly constituted authorities."²⁴ The Vancouver Citizens' League thus presented itself not as a vigilante organization, but as a sort of surrogate state, firmly aligned behind Mayor Gale in response to the crisis.

A key "strength upon which governments rest" is the police. Despite its affiliation with the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC), the body that called the general strike, the police rank and file did not walk out in 1919 and instead continued providing police services under the mayor's authority.²⁵ Indeed, unlike other unions included on the strike committee's "exempt" list that voted against strike action, such as fire fighters, the police union did not even put the matter to a vote.²⁶ The police union's stance, however, is more complex than its *de facto* alliance with the Citizens' League suggests and reflects the union's own history.

²³ Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992), 119. Victor Midgely, president of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, was hung outside a second story window and forced to kiss the Union Jack by the mob.

²⁴ *Montreal Star*, 11 June 1919; and *Vancouver World*, 16 June 1919. Also see: Vancouver Citizens' League, *Report of the Activities of the Vancouver Citizens' League, Including a Brief History of Conditions and Events Connected with the June Strikes in Western Canada*. (Vancouver: n.p., 1919).

²⁵ Vancouver Citizens' League, *Report*.

²⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 3 June 1919.

The Vancouver Police Federal Association, Local 12, was itself a product of the Canadian labour revolt. Four men were fired from the force in the summer of 1918 after Chief McRae discovered that a union drive was underway. By that time, support for the union had already taken root in the rank and file. Mayor Gale was alarmed by the possibility that the police might strike if their right to unionize went unrecognized and if the dismissed organizers were not reinstated. If the police went out on strike, other civic employees would probably walk out in sympathy. Chief McRae however, remained adamant that no union would be tolerated while he was chief.²⁷ The mayor might have supported his chief if not for several other strikes that were looming on the horizon or already in progress. The prospect of losing police protection would be politically disastrous for Mayor Gale in an already volatile situation. Victor Midgely of the VTLC raised the stakes even further by hinting that a police walk out would lead not just to a sympathy strike by civic employees, but would precipitate a full blown general strike.²⁸ The federal government, meanwhile, had identified employers' refusal to recognize unions as a primary cause of labour unrest.²⁹ In the specific case of Vancouver's police, the federal Minister of Labour responded to a VTLC request for clarification on the right of police to unionize with a general statement requesting that employers refrain from denying workers' right to organize "in order that trouble might be minimized."³⁰ The

²⁷ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 18 June 1918.

²⁸ *Vancouver Sun*, 3 July 1918.

²⁹ Steeves, *Compassionate Rebel*, 50-51.

³⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 3 July 1918.

federal government's position likely worked in favour of a police union by allowing Mayor Gale to save face when he capitulated under the threat of a police strike and possible general strike. He deferred the matter to a vote of the police rank and file, who overwhelmingly supported the formation of a union.³¹ When Mayor Gale did face Canada's first general strike on 2 August 1918, he did so with a police force, albeit one that was now unionized.

Even though Vancouver's police were able to unionize under the threat of a general strike, the rank and file was not yet in a position of strength relative to management. All that was won was the right for their union to exist since, although it affiliated with the VTLC, it disavowed the right to strike "as a means of obtaining redress" or to "participate in sympathetic strikes."³² If the union felt indebted to the VTLC for helping it overcome initial opposition to a police union, it was equally indebted to Mayor Gale for overriding the authority of the chief constable. From these beginnings, the police union depended on alliances to overcome obstacles, and consequently refrained from cementing ties with either organized labour or capital. As an occupational category, police workers lacked a cohesive group identity, which can be seen in its straddling the opposing camps in industrial conflicts. According to historian Greg Marquis, the process of police unionization was itself a search for a group identity, and in

³¹ Swan, *A Century of Service*, 43-44.

³² These points were subsequently entrenched in the union's constitution. CVA, PAM 1931-75, Vancouver Police Federal Association, Local No. 12, "Constitution and By-Laws" [1931]. Collective bargaining between the wars was informal, consisting of the union lobbying the chief constable or the police board. Fleury, "The Historical Development," 52-53.

Vancouver, that search would be a long protracted struggle.³³ But even without the right to strike, unionization was a significant step forward and it is questionable whether such a right was considered important or even desirable by union members. Police workers typically looked more to a reliable system of promotion than worker solidarity to improve their lot.³⁴

The historical record shows that Vancouver city police workers were ambivalent to the aims and objectives of both the Citizens' League and the strike committee in 1919. For instance, the Citizens' League claimed that 158 police constables enlisted as volunteers with their organization, which likely reinforced the labour movement's skepticism towards police unionism.³⁵ In contrast, an undercover operative report submitted to the Royal North West Mounted Police suggests that the police union was not hostile to the strikers. Special Agent No. 33 reported that that the secretary of Vancouver's police union, P. C. 182, attended a meeting of striking longshoremen and advised them on how they could continue picketing the waterfront so long as martial law was not declared: "there was no way in which they could be stopped from picketing ... four of them could be in a bunch and the bunches 4 feet apart, and no one could say anything to them."³⁶ Agents 11 and 23 also reported towards the end of the strike that

³³ Marquis, "Police Unionism," 116.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁵ Vancouver Citizens' League, *Report*.

³⁶ British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), Canadian Department of Labour, Strike and Lockout files, 1907-1945, reel no. B7140 – GR 1695, LAC RG 27, v. 314, 190 C (hereafter Strike and Lockout files), "Re:- General Strike," report of Special Agent No. 33 to F. Horrigan, Superintendent Commanding "E" Division, Royal Northwest Mounted Police, 2 July 1919.

conversations with longshoremen indicated that civic employees, including fire fighters and police, might still walk out if the mayor did not reinstate workers who had been replaced with strikebreakers.³⁷ City police workers clearly saw their fortunes closely linked with other civic employees, suggesting that their commitment to the Citizens' League agenda was at best tenuous.

Police loyalty was not put to the test in 1919, and even if violence had erupted outside of isolated incidents, reinforcements from the Royal North West Mounted Police division in Alberta and possibly the military, which was also monitoring the situation, would have likely been the intervening force called upon to restore order.³⁸ The presence of the federal forces and the watchful eyes of labour spies indicate that city police were not considered a safeguard against major disturbances. A preemptive law passed during the police unionization wave of 1918 had "slammed the door shut on police unionism in the federal sector," thus making the Mounties more suitable for quelling social unrest than municipal forces.³⁹ Even with the RNWMP and militia on hand however, the Vancouver Citizens' League still felt it necessary to recruit large numbers of

³⁷ BCA, Strike and Lockout files, "Re:- General Strike – Vancouver District," report of Special Agents Nos. 11 and 23 to RNWMP, 27 June 1919. Special Agents Nos. 11, 23, and 33 likely worked for the CPR's Investigation Department, which forwarded reports from their own labour spies to the RNWMP, some of which are contained in this collection. The RNWMP did have ten of its own special agents in Vancouver at the time, however. Kealey, "The Surveillance State," 203. Most of their names, operative numbers, and other details can be found in: Supt. F. Horrigan, "E" Division to Commissioner, RNWMP, 13 March 1919 and 4 April 1919, cited in Gregory S. Kealey, "The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Public Archives of Canada, and Access to Information: A Curious Tale," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 208-214.

³⁸ BCA, Strike and Lockout files, RNWP, report submitted by Agents 33 and 37, "Re: General Strike," 4 June 1919; and BCA, Strike and Lockout files, Unsigned report, Militia and Defence, Victoria, BC to Asst. Director Military Intelligence, Department of Militia and Defence, 7 July 1919.

³⁹ Kealey, "The Surveillance State," 191.

police specials under its own command rather than augment existing police forces with auxiliaries. It is also possible that the Mounties failed to provide reassurance during the 1919 sympathy strike, if a report by the officer commanding RNWMP “E” Division in Vancouver is any indication. “Everywhere the strikers lined the streets,” Superintendent Horrigan wrote to his boss. “Their glances bespeaking a sinister intent – depraved, vicious-looking men – the very dregs and refuse of the strikers, seeming to track our every move and action.”⁴⁰ Horrigan’s ominous description of Vancouver during the strike would have done more to inspire insecurity than confidence that federal or city police had the situation under control.

A later strike on the waterfront moved a Winnipeg General Strike veteran strikebreaker to offer advice and support to Vancouver’s mayor. “An old warhorse always smells the smoke of battle,” Chris Newton wrote. He described the organization formed in Winnipeg explicitly to break the 1919 strike:

We had a very effective body formed known as the “citizens’ committee” composed of British subjects, young men mostly, who took over and assisted the operation of the necessary city services. These men were ... past officers who had seen military duty overseas ... They were sworn as specials and besides maintaining order carried out the duties imposed on them by the central authority.⁴¹

The “central authority” during the Winnipeg strike was not the constituted authority delegated to the duly elected civic government, but rather the Committee of One Thousand, the group representing Winnipeg’s largest business interests and which was

⁴⁰ Supt. F. Horrigan, LAC, RG 18, Vol. 1931, Horrigan to Perry, 10 July 1919, quoted in Kealey, “The Surveillance State,” 200-201.

⁴¹ BCA, G. G. McGeer, correspondence as Mayor of Vancouver, Add. MSS 0009 (hereafter McGeer), Vol. 3, file 1, Chris H. Newton to G. G. McGeer, 27 May 1935.

the inspiration for the Vancouver Citizens' League. But unlike the unified anti-strike response in Vancouver, the authority of Winnipeg's mayor was clearly usurped by this group in order to ensure that the strike would be broken.⁴² Chris Newton was the deputy chief constable when the strike broke out but was promoted to the top post after the sitting chief constable and the rest of the men on the force were fired, even though they had pledged to continue policing for the duration of the strike. The chief was evidently not persistent enough in persuading his men to sign a pledge vowing to neither participate in a sympathetic strike nor belong to a union. Newton took over as the head of a much larger and better paid force of special police hired to crush the strike, and would remain Winnipeg's chief constable until 1934 when he retired to British Columbia.⁴³

According to Jack Kavanagh, a labour leader during the 1919 sympathy strike in Vancouver, the response of capital and the state to the Winnipeg strike represented a "drastic attempt to try and break the police union." This was because when police unions began to enter the fold of organized labour they effectively "removed a weapon from the employing class which they had formerly used," Kavanagh explained. "No

⁴² "I'm in a — of a fix," Winnipeg's Mayor Gray was quoted as saying in the *Toronto Star*. "The Citizens' Committee has thrown me overboard. The strikers are against me. Even my old friend Knox McGee has declared war on me because I refused to declare martial law." *Toronto Star*, 14 June 1919. For the argument that the Citizens' Committee of One Thousand became a "de facto agency of the government" over the municipal authorities, see Norman Penner, ed., *Winnipeg 1919: The Strikers' Own History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: James, Lewis, and Samuel, 1973), xv-xvi.

⁴³ BCA, McGeer, Vol. 3, file 1, Chris H. Newton to G. G. McGeer, 27 May 1935. Also see: Jack Walker, *The Great Canadian Seditious Trials: The Courts and the Winnipeg General Strike, 1919-1930*, ed. Duncan Fraser (Winnipeg: Legal Research Institute of the University of Manitoba and the Canadian Legal History Project, 2004), 24-37; Robert Hutchinson, *A Century of Service: A History of the Winnipeg Police Force, 1874-1974* (Winnipeg: City of Winnipeg Police Force, 1974), 52; and Penner, *Winnipeg*, xvi (the pledge can be found on pages 80-82).

longer was it possible for the policemen to be called in as ‘scab-herders.’”⁴⁴ Several police strikes in Canadian cities and especially ones in England and Boston the same year provoked similarly drastic responses that effectively broke those unions.⁴⁵ With Chris Newton’s help, Winnipeg’s police union was indeed smashed in 1919 and the rank and file there did not have a collective bargaining agent again until their athletic association took on that role in 1948.⁴⁶ Vancouver’s police union, unlike these other ill-fated unions, did survive the labour revolt into which it was born by skillfully negotiating the line separating labour from capital and the state. Although the union’s neutrality during the 1919 strike effectively mooted claims made during the 1918 debate that a unionized police force would preclude the existence of a “neutral organization to which all citizens can look for a guarantee of law and order,” neither did it situate the police squarely on the side of capital in its conflicts with labour.⁴⁷ On the contrary, the police union maintained its policy of neutrality in the next waterfront strike, which came in 1923. By then, the Shipping Federation had adopted an even more extreme anti-union position, making the policy of police neutrality unacceptable for its purposes.

Emboldened by a recent alliance with their fiercely anti-union American counterparts, the Shipping Federation set out to permanently crush independent

⁴⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 3 June 1919.

⁴⁵ See: Clive Emsley, *The English Police: A Political and Social History*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1996), 134-135; Francis Russell, *A City in Terror: The 1919 Boston Police Strike* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977); Marquis, “Police Unionism,”; and J. Castell Hopkins, *The Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 18, 1918, (Toronto: The Canadian Annual Review, Ltd., 1919), 330-336.

⁴⁶ Hutchinson, *A Century of Service*, 58.

⁴⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 7 July 1918.

unionism on the waterfront and used the strike “as the occasion to break the union.” It refused to recognize the International Longshoremen’s Association and instead shut down the union-run hiring hall and established a company union, the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers’ Association, which seemed to solve the worst of the Federation’s labour problems for the next decade.⁴⁸ The *Vancouver Daily Province* described the police presence on the waterfront that ensured a quick resolution to the strike in the Shipping Federation’s favour:

In all about 350 men, armed with shotguns or revolvers, are on duty. A very fast launch, manned by six armed men with riot guns and revolvers, all ex-soldiers who have seen action, accompanies every boatload of workmen to and from the jobs. The city police are evident at all points along the docks, the Canadian Pacific police are posted strongly along the company property and a strong body of specials are [sic] watching other piers.⁴⁹

The “workmen” under police protection once again included students from the University of British Columbia and local high schools among the 1000 or more replacement workers who were given luxury accommodation aboard the Canadian Pacific Railway’s ocean liner, the *Empress of Japan* and two other ships, the *Tilamook* and the *Cassiar* (see figure 2 on page 16).⁵⁰ The Federation’s specials numbered 122, with the rest comprised of CPR company police and specials and city police.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Andrew Yarmie, “The Right to Manage: Vancouver Employers’ Associations, 1900-1923,” *BC Studies* 90 (1991), 71.

⁴⁹ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 13 October 1923.

⁵⁰ An editorial in the *Ubysey*, the University of British Columbia student newspaper, unconvincingly denied rumours that as many as 150 students worked as strike breakers, claiming that the actual number, “as far as we have been able to ascertain ... is very small, perhaps no more than a half dozen in all.” (*Ubysey*, 25 October 1923) The writer did not distinguish between strikebreakers performing longshore work and those hired as specials. Curiously, the paper published a spoof edition during the strike entitled the *Pleece Gassette*, which included a mock article reporting that specials had been employed by the student council to “suppress the freshies.” *Ubysey*, 20 December 1923. On the

The Shipping Federation's specials were coordinated by its Protection Committee under the direction of Colonel W. W. Foster, the general manager of Evans, Coleman & Evans, a major firm on the waterfront.⁵² Foster's specials were armed and issued badges by the Vancouver Police Department, giving legal authority to the Federation's strikebreaking efforts. That authority later became a point of contention for the Vancouver Police when certain specials failed to return their badges after the strike and made questionable use of their policing powers. The chief constable illustrated these concerns to Colonel Foster by citing a case of one special who

got into a dispute on Saturday night last over a girl, and without any reason pulled his gun and flashed his badge on a man. Mr. Mitchell was yesterday brought in by two of my officers, and the badge taken from him. It might be further stated that we have had other complaints recently of improper use having been made of badges issued to special constables, and I should be much obliged if you would give this matter your early attention and have all outstanding badges returned to this department.⁵³

Foster replied that he would do his utmost to fulfill the chief's request, but that unfortunately some of the specials had already left the city.⁵⁴ In another instance, a CPR special discharged his gun while, he claimed, running to break up a fight in an alleyway north of West Hastings Street. When the regular police arrived on the scene, he denied

luxury treatment enjoyed by the strikebreakers, see *Vancouver Daily Province*, 24 October 1923.

⁵¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 13 October 1923; and CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-1, file 3, correspondence between F. W. Peters, General Superintendent CPR, and Colonel W. W. Foster, January 1924.

⁵² *Vancouver World*, 7 November 1923.

⁵³ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-1, file 3, Chief Constable H. W. Long to Colonel W. W. Foster, 12 February 1924.

⁵⁴ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-1, file 3, Colonel W. W. Foster to Chief Constable H. W. Long, 16 February 1924.

firing his gun, but eventually confessed after witnesses confirmed shots were fired.⁵⁵

These examples suggest that the legitimacy invested in the badges issued to the specials would have done more to erode the authority of regular Vancouver Police constables than it would boost the status of the specials.

Other workers recognized that the only authority possessed by the specials was the coercive authority extended to them by the Federation – an authority accompanied by stigma, not legitimacy. In one example, an employee used the volatility created on the waterfront as leverage to negotiate a higher wage. The operator of the boat that carried the specials appealed to his employers that his job had become of “just as arduous and unpleasant a nature as those of the policemen he carried” and claimed that he could no longer “move around the town with safety without a policeman accompanying him.” He declined the Federation’s offer to swear him in as a special, but was nevertheless granted his wage increase on Colonel Foster’s recommendation. Despite having a job description suited to a special constable, the boat operator apparently did not want to be identified with the specials any more than necessary.⁵⁶

A related concern was expressed in a Vancouver-based police trade journal, the *Canadian Police Gazette*, in an article weighing the value of attaching volunteer auxiliaries to police departments:

⁵⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 20 October 1923.

⁵⁶ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-1, file 3, H. Bell-Irving to W. C. D. Crombie, 7 November 1923.

What psychological effect is this new force to have on the members of the regular force? Would it introduce that loathsome class distinction and resultant friction between the “Professional Policeman,” subjected to rigid discipline and dependent on the job for his living, and the “Amateur Detective,” who is independent of the job and not amenable to the same discipline? Are we to find, even amongst a specially selected body of men, some who will handle their newly acquired authority as a child will a new toy?⁵⁷

The causal link between police morale and occupational status conveyed by this writer was a major concern of the police union movement, which looked to professionalization as the way forward for police workers.⁵⁸ Clearly, the reputation earned by specials as inept and thuggish was not conducive to elevating the status of police work.⁵⁹ The image of specials as the hired guns of employers but invested with legal authority contradicted the ideal of professional objectivity. Regular police were not opposed to the use of specials in principle, but in practice, strikebreaking specials had an unwelcome effect on police aspirations to professionalism. The above quotation from the *Canadian Police Gazette* questions the wisdom of volunteer auxiliaries, but that article was part of a larger debate in which the *Gazette* ultimately favoured some type of police reserve force. Specials under control of the police department and subjected to the same discipline and

⁵⁷ *Canadian Police Gazette*, December 1931.

⁵⁸ Police unionism and professionalism are discussed in Marquis, “Police Unionism”; and Samuel Walker, *A Critical History of Police Reform: The Emergence of Professionalism* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1977).

⁵⁹ The labour movement obviously did not view specials favourably because of their role as strikebreakers, but the reputation of specials as unsavoury was not simply a reflection of group interest or ideological bias, and certainly was not limited to Vancouver. See, for example, David Bercuson, “The Winnipeg General Strike,” in *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada, 1919-1949*, ed. Irving Abella (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1975), 22-23; and Christopher Farman, *The General Strike, May 1926* (London: Panther, 1974).

held to the same standards as regular police would complement a police force without undermining the rank and file.

The neutrality of the police during the 1923 longshore strike was questioned by the Shipping Federation, which claimed that the police were clearly sympathetic to the strikers. Chief Constable Anderson pointed to the law that permitted picketing as the reason the police allowed strikers to picket the waterfront. At a meeting with the mayor and Shipping Federation representatives, the chief insisted that his police would clear the streets in ten minutes if not for this law.⁶⁰ The Federation representatives pledged to take steps “to see what could be done by the government in the matter of changing the law,” but remained unimpressed by police department claims of neutrality and argued that members of the force were helping identify strikebreakers to be targeted later for intimidation and violence. This was “wholly untrue,” rejoined the chief. “We have only our duty to do and have absolutely nothing to do with the merits or the demerits of the strike.” He pointed out that the force was “working to its utmost capacity,” which included two police boat patrols that were in the harbour twenty-four hours a day, and that he was not granting any leaves of absence for the duration of the strike.⁶¹ Most strike related violence, according to Anderson, was happening well away from the harbour in areas where police patrols had been reduced in order to supply men for waterfront duty, and furthermore, that violence was instigated by “unauthorized hotheads” who represented neither the majority of longshoremen nor the strike leaders.

⁶⁰ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 30 October 1923.

⁶¹ *Vancouver World*, 30 October 1923.

The minimal violence that did occur on the waterfront, he continued, was typically provoked by strikebreakers hurling insults at the strikers while crossing picket lines. In effect, the waterfront had become over-policed, resulting in other areas of the city being under-policed, and, Anderson argued a month into the strike, “now that the federation private forces are pretty well organized, we might be able to withdraw these men and utilize them elsewhere.”⁶²

Colonel W. W. Foster and other Shipping Federation representatives vehemently disagreed with Chief Anderson’s appraisal. In addition to providing several anecdotes to illustrate that the city police were siding with the strikers, they complained that the Federation was “getting more information from mounted policemen ‘working in the dark’” than from the city police. Not only did they feel greater cooperation should be forthcoming from the police department, including access to intelligence, but also that “every possible expenditure on additional police is amply justified in view of the situation confronting the city.” Taking the Shipping Federation’s side in this dispute was reasonable because Federation interests were “interests affecting the entire welfare of the city.” Federation executives also “waxed hot against interlopers who had no business in the dispute”:

Our fight is against the Red leaders who mislead these men ... There are hundreds of good sensible men who recognize they have been misled. But every little while some preacher gets up on a pulpit and encourages the men to believe in these leaders, enabling the Reds to say: “Stand pat, boys, we’ll beat these fellows yet.”⁶³

⁶² *Vancouver Daily Province*, 30 October 1923.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

In the Shipping Federation's line of argument, this was therefore a political dispute between the interests of the city and Bolshevik agitators. The implication was that not only should the city police be firmly committed to strikebreaking, but that the Shipping Federation was unfairly forced to fight a political battle that was more properly the responsibility of the state.

Shortly after the strike ended, Chief Anderson, possibly demoralized by his experiences in the strike, resigned as chief constable and requested to revert back to his former rank of inspector in charge of the Identification Squad.⁶⁴ The Shipping Federation lost the debate over the policing of the 1923 strike and in the final tally spent over \$100 000 of its own money crushing the strike and breaking the union.⁶⁵ The police rank and file apparently had far less lofty aspirations than the belligerents representing capital and labour, possibly reflecting a lack of consensus regarding the proper role of the police in labour disputes, and simply avoided jeopardizing their union.⁶⁶ In the end, the significance of the labour revolt for policing in Vancouver was that a "police question" was formulated, although no definitive answer followed. The question was decidedly political: should the police be independent of these conflicting forces and simply enforce the laws as written, as Chief Anderson argued? Or should their mandate be interpreted more broadly, based on the Shipping Federation's assertion that employers' interests were indistinct from the public interest, and police should therefore enforce an

⁶⁴ Swan, *A Century of Service*, 51.

⁶⁵ *Vancouver World*, 6 March 1924.

⁶⁶ The first concession won by the police union was a day off every week for its members, but this was rolled back to two days per month because of the 1919 general strike. Swan, *A Century of Service*, 44.

unequivocally capitalist vision of order? Whether city police were to be an instrument of law or of the capitalist class remained undecided, in part because the establishment of a viable police union complicated the issue by casting doubt on whether the police would submit to a strictly instrumental role. In contrast to their private sector counterparts, the formation and survival of the police union indicates that city police had begun seeing themselves as something more than mercenaries. That something was perhaps still ill-defined in 1923, but the establishment of the union was an assertion that the rights of police workers needed to be accounted for in the constitution of authority.

The 1923 waterfront strike was followed by an extended period of relative calm, leaving the issue of policing industrial conflict unresolved for over a decade. Longshore workers stirred once again in the 1930s, this time under the leadership of Communist Party organizers. In some respects, that conflict seemed to pick up where this one left off and featured many of the same players. In 1935, J. E. Hall formed another Citizens' League, while Colonel Foster again headed a large body of special police constables, with the difference that specials this time were attached to the police department and he was the chief constable. Others crossed the floor in the interim, to be found on the opposite side of the 1930s conflicts. One of the 1923 replacement workers, Ivan Emery, converted to Marxism and emerged as one of the most militant union leaders. The lawyer who represented longshoremen in court cases arising from the 1923 strike, Gerry McGeer, was the mayor and chairman of the police board during the next strike. The 1935 conflict was not just history repeating itself, however. It was very much informed by lessons learned in these earlier strikes and as such, took on a much more political hue. It was framed as a struggle against Communism rather than labour, but again the police

were at the centre. The next chapter looks at a specific type of police used on the waterfront, the private detective or labour spy, and the catalyst for the 1935 conflicts. Intelligence reports received by the Shipping Federation in 1934 revealed a Communist-hatched plan for another general strike and served as the basis for the preemptive political course of action that followed. The gaze of the labour spy was an important manifestation of police power that had yet to find a home in the city police institution. As such, it was pivotal in shaping perceptions of labour unrest that again brought the project of constituting authority to the fore.

Chapter Two

Labour Spies and Communist Plots: Vancouver's Waterfront, 1934

The representatives of the Commune ... cannot be made shabbier than they really are. They are, in their days and nights of power, confessed thieves. They repudiate all relations with decent society – and decent society repudiates them – sneak in at your kitchen and filch from your larder when your back is turned, and steal from your hen-coop, or smoke-house, under cover of night, when honest men and women sleep ... Constituting the real and effective force in all riots, they swarm to the theatre of fresh troubles and hang about the purlieus of threatened cities, like unclean beasts and birds which sniff the scent of carrion in the air.

Allan Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives*, 1878



Figure 3: Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers' Association members and their families embark on their annual picnic to Bowen Island in 1934. Around this time, Communist members in the union were planning a general strike scheduled to begin on Vancouver's waterfront in the spring of 1935. (Image # 2763 courtesy Vancouver Public Library)

Despite the volatility of industrial relations on the waterfront in the interwar years, strikes were the exception rather than the norm. Specials were not normally present, although when strikes did erupt, their deployment was assured. Conversely, labour spies were commonplace, and surveillance was an ongoing policing technique intended to guarantee employers a strategic advantage in labour relations, whether during strikes, at the bargaining table, or in day-to-day operations. Large corporations like the Canadian Pacific Railway and other Shipping Federation members could defeat strikes relatively easily by hiring strikebreakers and armed specials, but the bottom line for business was profits, not industrial warfare, related though the two may have been. Spy reports kept employers up to date regarding any new organizing campaigns and allowed them to take preemptive measures such as blacklisting union agitators. When strikes did occur, employers worked to end them quickly and decisively, and for that, the services of private detectives were readily available.

The status of private detective agencies was plummeting in the interwar period. Since the field was pioneered by Allan Pinkerton in the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of detective agencies mushroomed throughout North America, with some of the larger and more successful agencies started by former Pinkerton agents. In addition to Pinkerton's, the Thiel Agency and Pinkerton's biggest competitor, the William J. Burns International Detective Agency, also operated in British Columbia, as did numerous small local agencies.¹ Two developments contributed to the decline of private detective

¹ Pinkerton's did not have an office in Vancouver, but rather sent detectives from Seattle and its other American offices for work in BC. David R. Williams, *Call in Pinkerton's: American Detectives at Work for Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1998), 77. A good history of Pinkerton's is Frank Morn, *The Eye that Never Sleeps: A History of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982). To indicate the proliferation of private detectives, Morn notes that New York

agencies. First was that the labour movement had grown in influence and managed to sway popular opinion against the use of private detective agencies in strikebreaking by exposing their unscrupulous tactics. The culmination of this in the United States was the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, which ushered in a new era of regulation for the industry after its findings were publicized in 1937.² A second development was that the policing function of private detectives was increasingly being assumed by public police agencies. In Canada, the most lucrative clients of private detectives were government agencies, with the British Columbia Provincial Police topping the list.³ Over time, police agencies developed their own investigation departments and surveillance capabilities, reducing their reliance on private agencies.⁴ A concomitant shift in public attitudes saw plainclothes police operatives become more palatable than their private sector counterparts. One way to view interwar police reform as suggested by these trends is that private sector police power was transferred to the public police and legitimized in

City had an estimated 150 licensed detectives by 1912 and Chicago had fifty-eight agencies in 1918 (Morn, *The Eye*, 169). Ten private detective agencies were operating in Vancouver in 1929. Eric Nicol, *Vancouver* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1970), 166. Allan Pinkerton's own labour views and a colourful (and coloured) account of his agency's anti-unionism can be found in Allan Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives* (New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., 1878). Pinkerton denied he was against organized labour, having a working class and Chartist background himself, but was unequivocally opposed to strikes, which, in the 1870s, he blamed on "refugees from the Paris Commune" and the large number of transient workers (Morn, *The Eye*, 85).

² For the role of detective agencies and strikebreakers in labour disputes, see Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*. For a contemporary exposé of labour spying in Canada, see Fred Rose, *Spying on Labour* (Toronto: New Era Publishers, n.d. [1939]). On the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, see Leo Huberman, *The Labor Spy Racket* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1937).

³ Williams, *Call in Pinkerton's*, 13.

⁴ The British Columbia Provincial Police, for example, established its Criminal Investigation Branch in the mid-1920s. P. H. Brown, *92 Years of Pride: 1858-1950, the British Columbia Provincial Police* (Vancouver: Royal Canadian Mounted Police Veterans Association, 1983), 12.

the process.⁵ This development was gradual and uneven however, and employers continued to seek out the advantages offered by private labour spies throughout the 1930s.⁶

This chapter uses spy reports prepared for the Shipping Federation by private operatives to explore how they helped to structure the changing perceptions of Federation executives that guided their political and labour strategies. These reports document the change on the waterfront that followed the arrival of the Workers' Unity League (WUL), the militant trade union arm of the Communist Party. The Shipping Federation became especially interested in the WUL after Communist organizers transformed the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers' Association from a company union into a militant union. The apparent ease with which the Communists subverted the union gave cause to the Shipping Federation to re-evaluate its own leadership structure, and even more so when the Communists' goal was revealed. The Federation learned from its spies that the WUL was attempting to engineer a general strike, which was to begin on Vancouver's waterfront and spread inland to other industries that had been penetrated by the WUL. General strikes were not new in Vancouver and longshoremen had been at the centre of earlier attempts. The difference this time, through the lens of intelligence reports, was that not only did local Communist organizers appear capable of orchestrating a general strike, but that they may have been

⁵ This process in the United States is the subject of Weiss, "Private Detective Agencies."

⁶ Labour spies were not just those supplied by detective agencies, but could also be informants already on the payroll. Jim Green describes an informant used by the Shipping Federation to monitor the Inland Boatmen's Union, known only as "the fink" to union members, who filed reports every other day for over a year between 1938 and 1939. It is not known when or even if the Shipping Federation discontinued the use of labour spies. Jim Green, *Against the Tide: The Story of the Canadian Seamen's Union* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1986), 120.

receiving support from abroad as well. Employers could make a plausible argument, one that would have seemed consistent with Communist propaganda, that if the general strike was allowed to reach fruition, it could be the first stage of a Bolshevik revolution.

The files of the Shipping Federation from this period show that private detective agencies viewed the Federation's labour troubles as a lucrative source of work.⁷ A file labeled "Police Protection" contains numerous letters from the William J. Burns, Thiel, British American Secret Service, BC Detective, and Roberts Investigation agencies, many attempting to solicit business from the Federation.⁸ By the 1930s, the Federation favoured Pratt Secret Services, a local agency operated by the former manager of Thiel Detective Services' Vancouver office, and later, J. G. Petrie's Civil and Personal Investigations, an agency run by a former Saskatoon police detective.⁹ Petrie was also an agent for Pacific Coast Creditors Ltd., suggesting that either his detective business was not full time or that it folded in the mid-1930s. Both scenarios illustrate the decline of this industry.¹⁰

An example that illustrates the kind of information valued by the Shipping Federation is found in a report submitted by C. E. Pratt, then the manager of the Thiel office in Vancouver, in the spring following the 1923 longshoremen's strike. Pratt reported that a campaign was underway by the Marine Transport Workers Union, an

⁷ The Shipping Federation's use of private detective agencies and informers is examined in Parnaby, "On the Hook," 49-51.

⁸ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-1, file 3.

⁹ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2.

¹⁰ Petrie's business cards are at CVA, PAM 1935-113.

affiliate of the Industrial Workers of the World, who thought that if they could “organize the sailors as well as the dock workers they will be able to cope with the situation when trouble breaks out again ... Perhaps,” continued Pratt,

the Federation would like to keep in touch with this movement rather than let it get out of hand and hazard a renewal of the trouble we have had this last fall in the future...We have an operative well up in the council of the M.T.W.U. here and if your Federation is interested I believe I could quote you a rate for continuous service that would not be too costly, as I can arrange to divide the cost of the operation with another client who is also interested in the movement.¹¹

Pratt’s proposal raises the possibility that detective agencies may have exaggerated the threat posed by agitators or their own ability to collect reliable intelligence in order to elicit surveillance contracts. Competition between agencies however, allowed the Federation to be selective in the intelligence it purchased. The Federation kept in close contact with allied employers in various industries and on the American coast, affording it a more panoramic view of any worrisome developments than that available to individual operatives or agencies. Competition amongst labour spies gave the Federation the additional privilege of insisting on the correct ideological lens through which operatives interpreted developments. In one instance, Pratt was ordered to discontinue using an operative on the grounds that his “sympathies lay in the wrong direction.” Pratt dutifully complied, but insisted that he personally knew that this man “has been at odds for a long time with some of the men dominating the affairs of the I.L.A. [International Longshoremen’s Association] and [is] totally out of sympathy with

¹¹ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-1, file 3, C. E. Pratt to B. C. Keeley, 7 March 1924.

them.”¹² In the eyes of the Shipping Federation executives, their private police differed from other waterfront workers only in job descriptions and therefore could not entirely be trusted. As employees, labour spies might be more inclined to identify with the interests of labour than their paymasters, and there was little to guard against the possibility that operatives might be swayed by the radicals with whom they frequently interacted. The amount of loyalty available for purchase by the Federation was therefore limited. Conversely, if the Shipping Federation was overly concerned about having a loyalist perspective reflected back in spy reports, it is likely that intelligence may have been skewed at times to please Federation executives.

After the 1923 longshoremen’s strike, the Federation adopted a policy of “welfare capitalism” as a way of inducing compliance from their workforce and which inaugurated an extended period of relative acquiescence by longshoremen.¹³ But by the early 1930s, reports of a new wave of agitation that threatened to upset the Shipping Federations’ waterfront domination began trickling into its offices. Over a relatively short period of time, the Workers’ Unity League had entered the fray and transformed the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers’ Association from a company union into a militant one and succeeded in getting a slate of Communist cadre elected to the union executive.

How did the Communists so easily gain control of a company union that was designed explicitly to stifle the radical unionists? An internal company document

¹² CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, C. E. Pratt to J. R. Stewart, 3 November 1923.

¹³ See: Parnaby, “On the Hook,” especially chapter one; and Yarmie, “The Right to Manage.”

summarizing the “longshore situation” in May 1934 explains how WUL district organizer, George Drayton, “interested himself in a campaign to bring about an amalgamation” of the various compartments that had successfully divided the longshore workers in a union committee structure:

Drayton’s next move was to organize within the Association what is called an “opposition group.” These opposition groups are carefully selected to include as far as possible those known to be of militant character. Having formed a group sufficiently large and militant, the next move was to capture offices, which was done by systematic team work, in which the old office holders were branded among the membership as reactionary and entirely too subject to the dictates of the Shipping Federation. The result of this campaign was that at the last election they captured all but one or two of the offices of the Association for their militant opposition group members, since which time the Association has assumed an aggressive attitude in matters pertaining to working conditions, apportionment of work, etc.¹⁴

This portrayal of the Workers’ Unity League implies they were the only active agents stirring conflict on the waterfront. The language suggests a military campaign rather than union politics, in which executive positions were “captured” as if by force of arms rather than democratic elections. Military metaphors of course have a long pedigree in politics, but their use here comes at the expense of mentioning the workplace grievances the Communists seized upon to win support within the union. Shipping Federation policies are also not mentioned, or anything else to indicate the context of Drayton’s machinations. Instead, Drayton and his comrades seemingly created industrial strife where none previously existed by way of stratagems and shrewd maneuvering to manipulate the situation.¹⁵ Federation bosses apparently felt besieged by the Workers’

¹⁴ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, “Re: Longshore Situation,” unsigned document, 9 May 1934.

¹⁵ Steve Hewitt makes this observation of government thinking in this period. Hewitt, *Riding to the Rescue*, 105.

Unity League, which they framed as a foreign organization, completely divorced from pre-existing waterfront tensions. The WUL challenged the Shipping Federation's leadership on the waterfront, threatening to shift the balance of power in favour of employees.

The view inside the Shipping Federation regarding leadership can be inferred from personal history files of both conservative and radical unionists compiled by its labour manager, Major W. C. D. Crombie. Workers' Unity League activists had beat out conservatives for control of the longshore union with the election of a "Clean Sweep" slate to the executive in 1933. If the major's descriptions of the main contenders vying for control of the union are valid, that election outcome should not have surprised anyone. One of the ousted conservatives was H. Burgess, "a strong supporter of rational labour principles [who] believes in Shipping Federation control of longshore labour." Burgess was strong minded but was "inclined to antagonize by his aggressive manner and self opinionated attitude to others. Should be useful under guidance of a strong leader," Crombie wrote. W. Westwood was another "company union man by inclination," who Crombie considered "a tea-totaler, clean living, honest and trustworthy ... While no talker and possibly not the type to organize a body of men, he is a fighter." Westwood was clearly not leadership material either, since he was "unable to obtain support of members when running for Business Agent." Nevertheless, he "is fearless and would go a long way under good leadership."¹⁶ While the union men considered friendly to the

¹⁶ CVA, SF, Loc. 520-F-5, file 8, W. C. D. Crombie to J. E. Hall, 25 April 1935.

Shipping Federation exhibited several useful characteristics in Crombie's opinion, their flaws nullified their strengths in lieu of effective leadership.

In contrast was a group dubbed the "Big Three" by Major Crombie: Ivan Emery, George Brown, and Oscar Salonen. Emery was described by Crombie as "a smooth and convincing speaker ... Stubborn to an extreme, his inability to understand 'no' sometimes breaks down anything but the firmest opposition. While undoubtedly an opportunist, [I] believe him to be sincere in his objectives." As for George Brown, Crombie felt that although he was "not personally prominent and not so often quoted as the two other members of the Big Three, I consider this man to be the fanatic type." Brown was "self-assured, quiet and determined and an indefatigable worker." The most "dangerous" of the Big Three, Oscar Salonen, was assumed by Crombie to be illiterate, with "his activities being verbal ... but which does not prevent him acting as delegate and organizer for the Big Three." Salonen "apparently handles Union spy system" and was also "a clever and shrewd exponent of Communist ideals."¹⁷ Crombie's descriptions reflect what he believed explained the advantage enjoyed by the Communists in the union's politics. The Big Three exhibited similar deficiencies to the loyal union men, such as combativeness and issues with communication. But for the Communists, these were offset by an organizational structure that matched their strengths to their respective roles as leaders in the union.

Crombie did recognize the importance of individual skills and talents, but it was the Communist machine that gave the Big Three a decisive edge over their loyalist rivals

¹⁷ Ibid.

and which helps explain the grudging admiration Crombie expressed towards his red adversaries. He reported to his bosses that

it is almost certain that behind [the Big Three] is a "Central Council" which constitutes an advisory board whose members are connected with the Communist Party, the Workers' Unity League and other Communistic organizations. Guided by the "Central Council" the Big Three pass on instructions to what is known as "The Old Guard" consisting of some 100 to 150 men whose duties are to control all meetings, to exploit the decent element in the Union and to recruit other members to the Communist faction through radical propoganda, persuasion, and veiled intimidations; they also act as spies, spotters, and informers.¹⁸

Conservative labour leaders had been swept away on the longshore union executive not just by the Big Three, but by this larger clandestine organization, according to Crombie's sources.

In a letter to the Attorney-General in June of 1934, the president of the Shipping Federation expressed his concern about the change in the union and fears as to what the implications might be for the future. Longshoremen were "becoming more and more aggressive," he wrote, "and the first thing we know, we may have a situation similar to what they have to the South of us."¹⁹ The "situation" on the American coast offered a glimpse of where the Communists were attempting to lead British Columbian workers and the hazard this posed to the Shipping Federation's waterfront fiefdom. American Communists on the Pacific coast subscribed to the same strategic doctrines that were

¹⁸ CVA, SF, Loc. 520-F-5, file 8, W. C. D. Crombie to J. E. Hall, 25 April 1935.

¹⁹ BCA, GR-0429, reel no. B09324, BC Attorney-General, Correspondence regarding unemployment administration (hereafter GR-0429), 1934-1935, Box 21, file I, K. A. McLennan to Attorney-General Sloan, 21 June 1934.

formulated in Moscow as did the WUL in BC.²⁰ In the US, Communist tactics precipitated a waterfront strike that paralyzed all the major seaports on the Pacific coast and which spiraled into San Francisco's "Great Strike" in July of 1934.²¹ The Shipping Federation, however, was not just concerned that the turmoil in the US might spread up the coast to Vancouver, as if by some natural domino effect, but that the same process was already playing out in British Columbia. As one waterfront agitator put it when asked by a Federation spy his opinion of the American strike, "it did not matter much whether it was settled or not, that when the next strike came to this Burgh it would be a good one."²²

Intelligence reports submitted by Federation spies showed an escalation in tensions on the waterfront that September just as contract negotiations were underway between the Shipping Federation and the union. The Federation began taking steps to reenact the strategy that served it so well in the 1923 strike by preemptively forming yet another company union. They assigned an office to a man only known as "Sigmund," a former private detective, and named him secretary of the new union. He signed up men willing to be replacement workers, mostly recent immigrants with little or no knowledge

²⁰ The Comintern's doctrine from 1929 until 1935 was its "Third Period" analysis that predicted that the crises of postwar capitalism "would ripen into a global political crisis." The Workers' Unity League and its American counterpart, the Trade Union Unity League, were products of the Third Period political strategy for Communist parties to "prepare for independent revolutionary leadership by struggling both to wrest the reformist trade unions away from the reformist bureaucracy and to form 'revolutionary' unions and union centres." Specific Communist initiatives such as strikes and the On-to-Ottawa Trek however, were determined locally. John Manley, "Canadian Communists, Revolutionary Unionism, and the 'Third Period': The Workers' Unity League, 1929-1935," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, New Series, vol. 5 (1994), 170.

²¹ On the Great Strike and the US pacific strikes, see Selvin, *A Terrible Anger*.

²² CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Report submitted by Operator #5, 6 August 1934.

of waterfront issues, who were given assurances that there would be plenty of work coming available in the near future.²³ The Communists interpreted this as a Federation scare tactic, a bluff that would be very costly for the Federation if they ever followed through, intended to cajole longshoremen to agree to any contract rather than risk losing their jobs. The *Heavy Lift*, the newsletter of the waterfront militants, ran a front page editorial under the headline "Prepare for Battle!" warning longshoremen not to fall for this ruse. Longshore work, the *Heavy Lift* argued, was more specialized and required a higher level of skills and training than it did in 1923. The Shipping Federation had no guarantee that it would not simply end up back in the same situation if the same grievances and Communist agitation carried over into the new union. If waterfront workers sustained their solidarity and militancy, according to the *Heavy Lift*, the Federation would eventually have to yield to at least their most important demands, such as control of the hiring hall that dispatched work gangs to the docks.²⁴ On the surface, it would have appeared that the Communists' blustering was just that, and that their call to arms signified little more than an unwillingness to concede defeat in their revolutionary scheme. An agreement with the union was within reach and it thus appeared that a strike could be averted. If not, the new company union could take over longshore work just like the 1923 strike, even if it proved costly to the Shipping Federation in the short term.

²³ Information on Sigmund is from *Vancouver Daily Province*, 3 Oct 1935; CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Complimentary report, "Re: Longshore Matters," 10 September 1934; and *Heavy Lift*, 11 September 1934.

²⁴ *Heavy Lift*, 11 September 1934.

But the Shipping Federation's spies kept employers abreast of the Communists' stratagems, which sometimes told a different story than what was presented for public consumption. The Federation knew, for example, that the Communists' analysis of the new company union was based on more than astute observation. The Communists had their own spies who had infiltrated the newly formed company union.²⁵ More significant was that the Communists' strategy was in no way dependent upon successful contract negotiations. The union's Communist business agent, Oscar Salonen, told a labour spy that the executive was willing to eventually sign an unsatisfactory agreement simply because they knew the Federation would not make concessions at the bargaining table. In the meantime, they intended to "stall off signing up as long as possible" because they "were expecting something from the south."²⁶ The *Heavy Lift* was a little more specific, sarcastically proclaiming that "We couldn't be expected to ask the I. L. A. [International Longshoremen's Association] down the Coast for the same moral and financial backing we gave them during their strike!"²⁷ Signing a contract would thus signal a step closer to a strike, not indicate that an acceptable agreement was reached between the union and the Shipping Federation.

Details of the Communists' plans continued to trickle in from field operatives through the second week of September. "It is quite apparent that there [sic] campaign leads to a General Strike to take place about May 15th 1935, while shipping is at its peak,"

²⁵ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Complimentary report, "Re: Longshore Matters," 10 September 1934.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Heavy Lift*, 11 September 1934.

Operative #3 reported. “Longshoremen out first, then other transport workers, followed by the Industrial Unions.”²⁸ This plan was apparently being coordinated with Communists in the streetcar and lumber workers’ unions, as well as other industries penetrated by the Workers’ Unity League.²⁹ Operative #3 reported that a delegation of WUL representatives from these three industries was planning a trip to Russia and was also told that “a large fund,” available to local agitators, “is held in New York from Russia for the sole purpose of aiding in strikes.”³⁰

The backgrounds of specific agitators were also increasingly coming to light in these reports. For example, J. G. Petrie, Operative #3’s handler, contacted the Canadian Pacific Railway’s company police to confirm a report that one agitator, R. H. Flynn, was employed for twenty-five years with the CPR before being fired in 1929 for advocating a general strike.³¹ Petrie also sent the Shipping Federation the criminal record of another Communist and former Wobbly, Sam Scarlett, whose name appeared in operative reports. Scarlett’s name was familiar to Petrie as a convicted leader of the

²⁸ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Report submitted by Operative #3, 14 September 1934.

²⁹ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Reports submitted by Operative #3, 28 and 29 September 1934 and 1 October 1934.

³⁰ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Reports submitted by Operator #3, 14 September 1934 and 1, 5, and 20 October 1934. According to #3, someone named Charles Hanson handled the money from Moscow and had travelled to New York to receive funding. Evidence from the Comintern archives in Moscow shows that the Communist Party of Canada received funding at least in the 1920s and in the 1980s, some of which was channelled through the American party’s headquarters in New York. Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, eds., *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 132. By the spring of 1935, police concluded that the Canadian movement was self-financing. The point here is that the Shipping Federation had evidence, however unreliable, that Soviet money had been earmarked for agitation in Vancouver. Also see: *RCMP Quarterly*, July 1935.

³¹ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Report submitted by Operator #3, 25 August 1934 and J. G. Petrie to Major W. C. D. Crombie, 25 August 1934.

1931 Estevan miners' strike in which three strikers were killed by the RCMP.³² Petrie had written his former boss, the chief constable of the Saskatoon Police Department, requesting Scarlett's record, and added in his report that "I know this man personally and his is a very dangerous character."³³

These reports show that the Shipping Federation had enough inside information by the fall of 1934 to see a difference between this new wave of agitation and earlier militant union activity on the waterfront. It was in some ways a continuation of earlier radicalism, including some of the same Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobbly, activists now agitating under the Communist banner.³⁴ An important difference as far as the Shipping Federation was concerned was that they were now part of a well-organized international movement backed by a nation-state. At the same time, this new militancy had local roots, which made the threat appear all the more insidious to the Federation. These agitators were building on the syndicalist traditions of the region in which they could draw on personal experience and devise tactics to reflect concerns of local workers, who were then more likely to accept Communist leadership.³⁵ As part of an

³² On the Estevan strike, see Stephen Lyon Endicott, *Bienfait: The Saskatchewan Miners' Struggle of '31* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); and Steve Hewitt, "September 1931: A Re-interpretation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's Handling of the 1931 Estevan Strike and Riot," *Labour/Le Travail* 39 (Spring 1997), 159-178.

³³ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, J. G. Petrie to Major W. C. D. Crombie, "Re: Sam Scarlett," 3 October 1934.

³⁴ On the Wobblies, see Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990).

³⁵ John Manley notes that the WUL had become more pragmatic and sensitive to local conditions in this period than they had been earlier in the decade: "Local organizers began to study the working class with as much care as they studied Comintern directives." Manley, "Canadian Communists," 175.

international movement, local Communists were well-positioned to generalize local workplace issues to the broader class struggle and thus transcend industrial divisions and international borders as never before. The Shipping Federation's material advantages and the Communists' small numbers remained relatively unchanged, but a situation was nonetheless unfolding that would have seemed to merit more than a boatload of specials as far as the Federation's interests were concerned.

Operative #3 reported in October that the "Red Element" was "very optimistic and believe that a General Strike is not far off," and that they claimed "to have the Lumber Industry in such a shape that they can depend on them at very short notice."³⁶ Operative #3 did not personally agree with this assessment and suggested that a strike would only pit the Communist minority against the "regular fellows" who were "dead against the reds."³⁷ But the other possibility, that the Communists' optimism was justified despite their small numbers, was not something Federation executives were willing to risk. They harboured no illusions that the waterfront operated along democratic lines; after all, the Federation's own dominance on the waterfront was not based on the majority opinion of longshoremen.

On 20 September, the Federation's manager, Major Crombie, fired off a flurry of letters outlining what he had learned from his private detectives to the Attorney-General of BC, the RCMP, the Vancouver Police, the CPR, the BC Electric Railway Company, and other allied businesses. Crombie's information apparently did not alarm the RCMP,

³⁶ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Report submitted by Operator #3, 20 October 1934.

³⁷ Ibid.

however, which was also tracking Communist activities in 1934 and submitting weekly updates to the federal government on subversive activities. In August, the RCMP reported that the waterfront dispute in Vancouver “will be settled satisfactorily in the near future according to present indications,” referring to both the resolution of American waterfront strikes and the progress of contract negotiations in Vancouver.³⁸ Furthermore, the organizational activity of Vancouver Communists was “at a low ebb” according to the RCMP, owing to “considerable friction and very much criticism in the Bolshevik manner on every member, by every member of the [Communist Party] Bureau.”³⁹ In October, an RCMP operative did report that a delegation consisting of representatives from the streetcar, longshore, and lumber workers’ unions had been selected to visit the Soviet Union, but there was no mention of any coordinated action planning amongst these same unions in BC.⁴⁰ Also in October, the union and the Federation finally reached an agreement, “thus removing the possibility of a longshoremen’s strike in that seaport” in the RCMP’s assessment, despite Major Crombie’s information indicating that the Communist general strike conspiracy did not hinge on either contract negotiations or the success of the US waterfront strike.⁴¹

³⁸ Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, ed., *RCMP Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part I, 1933-1934* (St. John’s: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1993), 207.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 307. Of course it is possible that unreleased or long destroyed RCMP reports painted a more alarming picture, but that would contradict the impression given in the available reports from late 1934 and early 1935.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 338.

Possible reasons for the RCMP's apparent indifference to the same information that so alarmed Major Crombie are numerous. One worth mentioning here is the likelihood that the RCMP simply did not trust intelligence originating from private detective agencies, particularly in regards to labour disputes.⁴² Another possibility is that they did not believe that the threat of a general strike was credible. After all, these were not the first radical zealots to conspire against capitalism and plot general strikes. The Shipping Federation and other business interests in turn, may have regarded the RCMP's lack of concern as a sign that they could not depend on state authorities to take decisive action against the Communist menace.⁴³ If so, employers could not afford to be passive and would have to take the initiative to safeguard their own business interests, which in the Shipping Federation's perspective were identical to the interests of the nation:

The labor situation in the West, and particularly in Vancouver, is the vital concern of every Canadian Citizen. It is the vital concern of every citizen who believes in law, order, and constituted authority. It is the duty of every person in Canada who has industrial investments or other investments to decide whether ... he is going to be prepared to allow a well-organized minority, Communistically led, run him out of his business, run him out of his investments and run his country for him.⁴⁴

⁴² Police reform in this period was in part an attempt to raise professional standards in police work, which may have found the RCMP disregarding "amateurs" performing work for which they felt Mounties were uniquely qualified. In other words, institutional jealousy may have been a factor for ignoring or not taking seriously intelligence from private sources, at least without corroboration.

⁴³ It is also possible that Major Crombie's intelligence report simply did not make it from the RCMP's "E" Division in Vancouver to their national headquarters in Ottawa. But whether this information was disregarded or lost in a bureaucratic shuffle would not alter the end result or the point here that there was a discrepancy between Shipping Federation and RCMP threat assessments of Communism in Vancouver.

⁴⁴ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-B-1, file 2, Unsigned document, "Memorandum of Labor Situation at Vancouver," 23 May 1935. Recall a similar sentiment expressed by a Federation executive in 1923 (see page 37). They claimed then that its interests were synonymous with the welfare of the city; now they speak for the entire country.

The language used here is reminiscent of earlier strikes in which “leading citizens” took direct action to defeat the perceived enemies of business rather than depend upon the state – and certainly not the local police – to maintain a capitalist order. But whereas earlier strikes posed a threat to the welfare of the city, this time the entire country was imperiled.

The area where the Shipping Federation felt it was losing most ground to the Communists was in public opinion. The actual numbers of recruits to the Communist Party remained small even during this heyday, but Communist Party members were at the centre of struggles that elicited unprecedented sympathy for the plight of workers during the depression.⁴⁵ Operative #3's reports show this as a pre-occupation of the Shipping Federation in that much of his spy work was spent tracking the location of the Communists' mimeograph machines, which were frequently moved so that they would not be lost in a police raid. An RCMP operative also noted in a report that Vancouver was “famous” for the Communist propaganda produced on those machines.⁴⁶ The Shipping Federation funded a moderate labour newspaper, *Labour Truth*, but that did little to offset the impact of Communist propaganda. Moreover, J. E. Hall, the Federation's president, was not sure that even *Labor Truth* was free from Communist influence and admitted receiving reports indicating that “our radical friends have gotten

⁴⁵ Even the most virulent anticommunists expressed sympathy with the plight of workers and noted the failings of capitalism. One typical example can be found in a speech given at a conference of police executives by San Francisco's Chief Quinn, who led the brutal assault that crushed the Great Strike: “Many mistakes have been made by the capitalistic class, of course, and working men are anxious to improve their condition...I have no argument against the conservative labor man. As a matter of fact I am for him.” *Canadian Police Gazette*, March 1935.

⁴⁶ Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, eds., *RCMP Security Bulletins: The Depression Years, Part II, 1935* (St. John's: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1993), 30.

control” of the newspaper.⁴⁷ Such a climate was not conducive to building public support for business interests in a fight to keep wages down and unions weak, especially among the working class portion of the public.

Public opinion was not the only area the Shipping Federation felt it was out-manuevered by the Workers’ Unity League. Major Crombie’s opinion that Communist agitators exceeded the conservative union men in leadership capacity was noted earlier, but that critique was also extended to the Shipping Federation itself. An internal document clearly articulates the Federation’s interpretation of developments:

Labor men have to be led. If the employer fails to do this, of course, there are many of the men who will accept any leadership that comes along, without giving due consideration as to whether it is good or bad. Inasmuch as the employers failed to provide leadership for the men, Red leadership soon took control of the dissatisfied minority and rapidly increased its membership.⁴⁸

To the Shipping Federation, the Workers’ Unity League was succeeding where it had only managed limited and temporary successes. The Federation’s authority on the waterfront had ultimately been based on their ability to induce compliance from their workers with jobs and wages, and to coerce them through either the threat of firing

⁴⁷ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-D-3, file 11, J. E. Hall to Christy Thomas, Seattle Chamber of Commerce, 22 April 1935. In August 1935, the head of the Vancouver Police Department’s Communist Activities Branch found it noteworthy to report to the chief constable that “there is an alleged ‘hang-out’ with someone in the Lumbermen’s Building.” CVA, VPD, Chief, General correspondence, 1935, series 197, Loc. 75-E-7, file 9, Herbert Darling to Colonel Foster, 8 August 1935. The Lumbermen’s Building, located at 509 Richards Street in Vancouver, was home to *Labor Truth*, Pratt Secret Services, the Citizens’ League, and most of the far right-wing groups that were active in Vancouver during the 1930s. The building was owned by C. F. Pretty, a wealthy lumber baron, founder of the Fascisti of Canada, and a fellow traveller of Gerry McGeer in his zeal for monetary reform. See: CVA, Add. MSS 879, Francis C. Pilkington (hereafter FCP), Loc. 591-E-6, file 3; University of British Columbia Special Collections, G. McGeer papers, Loc. Box 2, folio 8, C. F. Pretty to G. G. McGeer, 17 May 1933.

⁴⁸ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-B-1, file 2, Unsigned document, “Memorandum of Labor Situation at Vancouver,” 23 May 1935.

them or with the use of private police and strikebreakers. In contrast, the Communists had neither the carrot of monetary inducements nor the stick of police hirelings, and yet they were apparently leading waterfront workers down a “Communitic” path with little more than their stratagems and shrewd political maneuvers.

Major Crombie also passed along a criticism to his bosses from one of the deposed conservative unionists that pointed to the Federation’s own failings as a cause of the WUL’s “clean sweep” of the union. “He is quite frank as to the mistakes he believes the Shipping Federation has made,” Crombie wrote. “They are too much inclined to change their minds, too prone to listen to talk without getting at the facts, and have not paid enough attention to the psychological effect their actions may have upon the men.”⁴⁹ The Board of Directors apparently took such criticism to heart and reflected on the Federation’s own role in their struggle with the union. “Taking a leaf out of the Red leaders’ book,” the Shipping Federation itself underwent a “drastic reorganization” to allow it to swiftly and decisively respond to the challenges posed by the labour militants and “to fight a battle which can be won by a solid, united front, whence [sic] it could not be won individually by those who have an investment in the Community.” This internal memo claimed that “the Shipping Federation was a very democratic affair as it operated under the original organization.” But after the restructuring, it was able to present “a solid front as all policies are endorsed 100 percent” by a board that had been slashed from fourteen down to just four directors.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ CVA, SF, Loc 521-C-2, file 2, memorandum, Major W.C.D. Crombie, 16 July 1934.

⁵⁰ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-B-1, file 2, “Memorandum of Labor Situation at Vancouver,” 23 May 1935.

Leading the effort to turn things around within the Shipping Federation and in its labour relations was a man specially appointed by the Federation, J. E. Hall, whose credentials could not be better suited to his new position.⁵¹ He was the vice-chairman of the Vancouver Citizens' League that helped defeat the 1919 strike called in sympathy with the Winnipeg General Strike. The Shipping Federation's Board of Directors undoubtedly expected a repeat performance from Hall in confronting the new strike threat on the waterfront. But even prior to his appointment and before the restructuring of the Shipping Federation, a change in the political leadership of the city had already been put into effect.

This was the context in which a wealthy lumber exporter on the waterfront launched a political campaign in October 1934 to have a new civic administration elected in the December election. The outcome was the most staggering electoral defeat in the city's history and the inauguration of a new regime under Gerry McGeer. Curiously absent in the 1934 election campaign was any mention of Communist agitation or the emerging mass movement of the unemployed despite the presence of a delegation of 500 relief camp strikers in the city threatening to bring another 4000 unless their grievances were addressed.⁵² Instead, McGeer's campaign was fought on a "war on crime" platform and a promise to overhaul the Vancouver Police Department to crack down on commercial vice operations. It soon became clear, however, that it was the militant labour movement under Communist leadership that was the new regime's

⁵¹ CVA, SF, Loc. 73-F-8, file 2, meeting minutes, 23 January 1935.

⁵² Lorne Brown, *When Freedom was Lost: The Unemployed, the Agitator, and the State* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987), 90.

biggest preoccupation in its first year in power, not gamblers, bootleggers, or pimps.

Indeed, it was these revelations of a general strike conspiracy, uncovered by the Shipping Federation's spies, that called the new civic regime into existence.

Chapter Three

A New Broom Sweeps Clean: The New Regime, 1934-1935

There will have to be something done about this fellow, the Red Shadow. For several weeks now he has been taking all the first string grapplers into camp, his latest victim being Leo Nurma Anderson at the Auditorium Thursday night. The bout was one of the shortest on record, the masked one getting two straight falls in less than eight minutes, both with his famous "back-breaker." The fans once again did not take kindly to the winter-underwared lad.

Vancouver News-Herald, 27 November 1936



Figure 4: Police disperse unemployed demonstrators in Victory Square in 1932. This photo was taken from the Dominion Building, home of a secret police branch set up in 1935 to spy on Communists and possibly the police rank and file. Victory Square was a popular location for Communist-led demonstrations in the depression years, including one that ended with the mayor reading the riot act. (Image # Re N2.2 courtesy City of Vancouver Archives)

The winter of 1934-1935 was one of the harshest in Vancouver's short history. Thousands of old-growth trees were knocked down in Stanley Park's forest by a violent wind storm and subsequent blizzard, forever altering the landscape of the city's "most priceless possession." Like those old trees, left lying in "hopeless tangles," L. D. Taylor's political career was devastated by a different kind of storm that election season.¹ With just under 9000 votes for mayor to almost 35 000 for Gerry McGeer, Taylor was buried in the biggest electoral landslide the city had ever seen. It was a sharp reversal of fortune for Taylor, a political fixture since 1911 who had been chosen mayor of Vancouver more times than anyone before or since. The impression given in the local newspapers is that Taylor had grown too old and ill-equipped to lead Vancouver through the remainder of the depression. An editorial in the *Vancouver Sun* said he was "associated with the past," implying that, like the storms that cleared the way for Stanley Park's regeneration, Gerry McGeer swept away the political debris impeding progress. Vancouver was no longer the blossoming lumber town it was when Taylor was first elected and now needed, according to the *Vancouver Sun*, a new leader to build "the great world metropolis" Vancouver was destined to become.²

Notwithstanding the *Sun*'s editorials, the 1934 mayoral race, like most elections, was more than a simple contest between two contenders. Nor can the election results be explained as an inevitable change with the times – a reflection of Vancouver's natural growth – since the underlying dynamic propelling the change, conflict between labour and capital, was as familiar to Vancouverites as the aging mayor. L. D. Taylor was

¹ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 6 February 1935.

² *Vancouver Sun*, 13 December 1934.

targeted for removal as part of a larger strategy to thwart the latest attempt by waterfront workers to improve their bargaining position with their employers. The general strike being planned by Communists for the spring of 1935 provoked a coordinated response that extended the struggle to the civic political arena and which united liberals, conservatives, and fascists against a common enemy. Gerry McGeer was only one component of this plan despite the insistence of local histories that his forceful and idiosyncratic style made him a political force unto himself. He was recruited to run in that election specifically to lead the fight against Communism. His victory at the polls, however, was not in itself sufficient to ensure the defeat of whatever revolt the Communists might muster.

The events that followed McGeer's election sweep suggest that the prize most coveted in the election was less the mayor's office than control of the police department. As mayor, McGeer also became chair of the police board and was joined by a transitional team of experts charged with overhauling the police department, signifying not only a leadership change but the inauguration of a new policing regime. Publicly, the reorganization of the police department was presented as an effort to eliminate the rampant crime that the old regime allegedly permitted by allowing corruption and inefficiency to fester in the police department. The extent of actual police corruption is impossible to determine from the limited sources available, but those same sources indicate that no concrete evidence was ever produced publicly that could confirm such allegations. The Communist menace, meanwhile, was not mentioned in the election campaign or in official explanations of why the police reorganization was necessary. In addition to a purge, McGeer's election promises translated into such things as increased

departmental autonomy, a new training school and intelligence branch, greater material support, and a bold new leadership composed of military men. The police force that arose from the ashes of the old regime was outfitted with all the trappings of modernization along with a newfound capacity to battle the forces of Communism. For the architects of the new police, it was imperative that the rank and file be a disciplined body of subordinates, which entailed undercutting their collective strength relative to management to ensure compliance with the new regime's agenda.

Unlike Gerry McGeer, L. D. Taylor did not have the backing of big business and instead looked to organized labour as one of his main constituencies. He was not a political radical by any measure, although his opponents attempted to brand him as one. He billed himself as the "little guy from Chicago," independent and unafraid of the "monopolies, corporations, and other similar influences" that dominated Vancouver's political economy, but his populism was matched by his political moderation.³ Taylor opposed radicalism more vehemently than he did monied interests, especially after Communists began organizing militant protests with the onset of the depression. "So far as I am concerned," he proclaimed in 1934, "the Communist Party is going to be held in check in the city of Vancouver."⁴ Communist union organizers, however, were not always forthcoming about their political affiliations, especially after a 1931 crackdown sent eight of their leaders to prison for belonging to an organization outlawed by Section 98 of the criminal code.

³ Francis, *L. D.*, 59, 72.

⁴ L. D. Taylor, quoted in Kealey and Whitaker, *RCMP Security Bulletins, 1933-1934*, 73.

During a logging strike in 1934, Taylor helped strikers by allowing several hundred loggers conduct a series of tag-days in the city to raise funds and publicize their grievances. Before granting permission, he interrogated a delegation of strikers, who “gave discreet answers to all questions put to them” regarding the role of “‘reds’ and outsiders.”⁵ Taylor was satisfied that no “outside radicals” would be involved and so allowed the tag-days, which did not bode well for the BC Logger’s Association, the representative of the biggest logging companies in the province. The Association’s response was to hire local fascist pundit Tom McInnes to denounce the strikers on the radio, to which L. D. Taylor rejoined with his own broadcast. On another occasion, the mayor threatened the president of the BC Electric Railway Company that if he did not settle a dispute with the streetcar worker’s union, Taylor would legalize jitneys to satisfy the city’s transportation needs, ominously adding that the police might not be able to protect company property in the event of a strike.⁶ Both the logging and street railway unions, according to Shipping Federation intelligence, had been penetrated by Communist organizers actively working towards a general strike.⁷ Taylor was either unaware of this information or simply unimpressed by those reports. In contrast to big business executives in this period, the mayor did not equate union activism with seditious Communism. Business owners and managers felt that they ought to be wholeheartedly

⁵ BCA, GR-0429, 1934, Box 22, file 16, “Re: Lumber Workers Industrial Union,” unsigned operative report, 2 March 1934.

⁶ Francis, *L. D.*, 183-184. Ironically, the Citizen’s League organized a jitney service to undermine the streetcar worker’s strike during the 1919 sympathetic strike.

⁷ CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2, Reports submitted by Operative #3, 28 and 29 September 1934 and 1 October 1934.

supported by the police and mayor in their struggles against labour agitation, especially in light of the disorder a general strike would bring.

One waterfront-based business owner took the initiative in October 1934 to arrange for L. D. Taylor's defeat in the upcoming December election. Colonel Nelson Spencer owned a timber exporting company and was a seasoned politician. He had been elected to the provincial legislature in 1928 on a "millionaire slate" of Vancouver-based Conservative candidates and previously served as mayor of Medicine Hat in his home province of Alberta.⁸ That autumn Spencer announced that he had formed an ad hoc group, the Better Vancouver League, "to rid Vancouver of Taylor rule." Spencer had no intention of running himself, and his Better Vancouver League was not to be a political party as such. His proposal was for a two-pronged strategy for ending Taylor's reign. First, League members would select a "virile, hard-hitting, clear-thinking man and [throw] their collective weight behind him." Secondly, they would use "their influence to prevent any weaker third-party" from splitting the anti-Taylor vote. This strategy apparently resonated with other mayoral candidates because three of them enthusiastically dropped out of the race after hearing Spencer's proposal. One hold-out was J. J. McRae, an alderman who vowed to follow through in his commitment to run for mayor. The *Vancouver Sun* declared that McRae "couldn't beat Taylor even if he had the whole field to himself" and quoted a League supporter who agreed that McRae "must be

⁸ Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972), 229-230. Biographical details on Colonel Spencer can be found in the *Vancouver Daily Province*, 7 December 1938 and 30 September 1943. His company, Nelson Spencer Ltd., was not a constituent member of the Shipping Federation, but his inclusion on the guest list of a luncheon held to discuss the Federation's reorganization indicates that he was considered a stakeholder. CVA, SF, Loc. 517-G-3, file 5, "Re-organization Committee, Shipping Federation of British Columbia Ltd.: Luncheon," 18 April 1935.

pulled out of the field.”⁹ A little more than a week later, J. J. McRae did pull out of the race, citing advice from his doctor.¹⁰

Once the path was cleared for “a straight fight against Taylor,” the Better Vancouver League needed to find a suitable candidate. Colonel Spencer described the man they were looking for as “a strong man with no personal axe to grind.”¹¹ Several names were proposed as possible contenders, but Gerry McGeer seemed to be uniquely suited for the position. McGeer, however, was reluctant, and later recalled his initial reaction to the League’s overtures:

When a group of citizens came to me and asked me to enter the Mayor’s office, I was not interested in it. I had devoted many years of my life to a study of what I thought one of the paramount national problems [and] I intended to resign from the Provincial legislature to run for the House of Commons as soon as the Federal election came.¹²

Gerry McGeer was convinced that his destiny was to go to Ottawa and reform the monetary system based on his economic theories, which he had cobbled together from the ideas of John Maynard Keynes, Abraham Lincoln, and Jesus.¹³ “In blindly following the ‘mumbo-jumbo’ nonsense of academic economists and the false teachings of the age-old craft of usury,” he wrote in 1934, “we have ignored the economic implications of

⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 17 October 1934.

¹⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 29 October 1934.

¹¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 17 October 1934.

¹² CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of G. G. McGeer, 813.

¹³ Gerry McGeer, *The Conquest of Poverty, or Money, Humanity and Christianity* (Gardenvale, QC: The Gardenvale Press, 1935). The last two chapters consist of an imaginary radio program with President Roosevelt interviewing Abraham Lincoln.

Christianity and have tried to build our civilization upon a foundation of mass usury in violation of the laws of God.”¹⁴ Given his divinely inspired mission, only a very compelling reason would persuade McGeer to divert his energies to something as parochial as city politics. That reason came in the form of some “very definite information” given to McGeer in “advance” by his Better Vancouver League friends. A “certain situation” was developing, he later explained, “this communistic general strike, which was to be the ... start of the rebellion ... to be launched in Vancouver and was to sweep across the Dominion to establish ... the new order in the Dominion of Canada.”¹⁵ To the elation of the Better Vancouver League, Gerry McGeer agreed to put his monetary reform agenda on hold and accept the offer to lead the anticommunist campaign. “We have obtained the answer we came for,” League spokesman C. E. Thompson told the press. “It now rests with us to put the necessary machinery in motion required in such a campaign.”¹⁶

Gerry McGeer was already well known in Vancouver. Years earlier, as a lawyer representing the provincial government, he earned a reputation as “the man who flattened the Rockies” after a successful campaign to lower freight rates that

¹⁴ G. G. McGeer, “Progress,” *National Home Monthly*, September 1934. There is no evidence that McGeer personally held anti-Semitic views, but his belief in an international conspiracy by usurious bankers had definite anti-Semitic overtones. David Ricardo Williams, *Mayor Gerry: The Remarkable Gerald Grattan McGeer* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1986), 312 n 11.

¹⁵ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of G. G. McGeer, 816, 827.

¹⁶ *Vancouver Sun*, 7 November 1934.

discriminated against goods shipped by rail through the Rocky Mountains.¹⁷ The outcome was a windfall for British Columbia's economy because now export-bound prairie wheat came through Vancouver's harbour instead of eastern seaports. By 1932, grain comprised 73% of the total tonnage exported through Vancouver's port and the percentage of Canadian grain handled by BC ports jumped to 44% from just 9% a decade earlier.¹⁸ McGeer's notoriety increased in 1928 as the lead attorney in the Lennie Inquiry, which was called to investigate charges of corruption in the police department and in L. D. Taylor's city hall. Despite a purge and some structural tinkering based on Lennie's recommendations, the most consequential result of the inquiry was that it eroded both public confidence in the Vancouver Police and the morale of the men on the force.¹⁹ Gerry McGeer's vivid depictions of a city riddled with crime and vice impressed upon the public consciousness an image of police corruption, dirty politicians, and powerful underworld kingpins soiling the moral integrity of the city.²⁰

In typical populist style, McGeer's electoral strategy was to position himself against "politics." Continuing where he left off in the 1928 police enquiry, he painted traditional politicians as the cause of Vancouver's crime and vice problems – problems that he would correct, not as a politician *per se*, but as a lone citizen-hero who would

¹⁷ Eric Nicol, *Vancouver*, (Toronto: Doubleday, 1970), 173. For McGeer's involvement in the freight rate fight, see Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, especially chapter four.

¹⁸ Leah Stevens, "The Grain Trade of the Port of Vancouver, British Columbia," *Economic Geography* 12, no. 2 (April 1936), 186.

¹⁹ This observation is made in a memo by Police Commissioner R. Wilkinson. CVA, Board of Police Commissioners (hereafter BPC), Loc. 75-C-7, file 5, R. Wilkinson to L. D. Taylor and members of the Police Commission, 6 February 1933.

²⁰ The Lennie Inquiry is discussed in Marquis, "Vancouver Vice."

infiltrate the government and set things right.²¹ He insisted that high-level dirty cops survived the 1928 shake-up along with Mayor Taylor. Vancouver remained the hostage of an unscrupulous cabal of politicians, police, and gangsters, “an underworld group that will soon turn this great Canadian city into a bankrupt carbon copy of the City of Chicago in its most evil days.”²² McGeer’s rhetoric played to voter cynicism by depicting this situation as a creature of traditional civic politics. In this characterization, typical politicians like L. D. Taylor serve only themselves and their friends who finance political campaigns, leaving the rest of the population vulnerable to immoral forces. To illustrate his own anti-political credibility, McGeer related an incident from his youth when he first gained a reputation as a “disturber of public affairs” after getting caught with a group of boys “throwing rocks at an old wooden hall in which an election meeting was in progress” and where his father was in attendance.²³

The policing strategy McGeer proposed in his campaign was results-oriented, but in contrast to the straw-man politician he conjured in the image of L. D. Taylor, his administration would not interfere in police matters. He would make sure that the police received whatever “wholesome, generous co-operation” they needed to stamp out crime in the city.²⁴ If the crime problem still persisted, McGeer would call upon

²¹ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of G. G. McGeer, 814.

²² *Vancouver Sun*, 22 November 1934. According to Taylor’s biographer, the Lennie Inquiry cost him the election in 1928 because it put persistent police corruption at the top of the political agenda, even though Taylor was cleared of any criminal wrongdoing. L. D. Taylor returned to the mayor’s office the following election. Francis, *L. D.*, 157.

²³ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 December 1934.

²⁴ *Vancouver Sun*, 6 December 1934.

provincial and federal police to intervene. “If that can’t be done,” he blustered, “I’ll organize a band of vigilantes from men who think the same as I do and we’ll do the job,” one election promise he would keep, but directed at Communists rather than criminals.²⁵ McGeer offered a very muscular leadership in his war on crime and vice, yet doggedly adhered to the principle of political non-interference in police work. Even the worst case scenario in which all levels of police failed to vanquish the criminal underworld, he would resort to vigilantism rather than directly interfere in policing matters. Without independence from political agendas, the police could never be effective, according to both McGeer and the broader police reform movement underway in the 1930s.²⁶

Gerry McGeer’s campaign was wildly successful, politically obliterating his opponent. His performance captured the attention of the national media and demonstrated that he was indeed the “strong man” sought by the Better Vancouver League.²⁷ Here was someone to watch, according to *Maclean’s Magazine*, “a new type of bird” on the political landscape. Not only did McGeer have an aggressive leadership style, he was also the physical embodiment of masculinity:

²⁵ *Vancouver Sun*, 1 December 1934.

²⁶ The classic study of police reform is Walker, *A Critical History*. For Canada, see Marquis, *Policing Canada’s Century*.

²⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 17 October 1934.

He's a big, broad-shouldered man of forty-seven, this Gerry McGeer. Powerfully built, he first developed his physique as a worker in an iron foundry, but now he keeps in trim and his poundage down by wrestling, road-work and handball. His is a typical Irish fighting face – flashing black eyes, uptilted nose, jutting jaw, broad, mobile mouth, and jet-black hair slicked down across his high, wide forehead. He knows everyone in Vancouver and everyone knows him – even the newspapers refer to him as plain Gerry in their headlines – and yet he is too much of a lone crusader to make many close friends. Those who know him best say it's because he is too absorbed in winning his battles to be consistently tactful.²⁸

As this description indicates, Gerry McGeer was not only suitably virile for the purposes of his backers, as reflected in his stereotypical “Irish fighting face,” but he also projected a distinctly working class persona. Perhaps this is why he was selected as the Better Vancouver League's candidate rather than one of the seasoned politicians already in its ranks, like Nelson Spencer.²⁹ If middle class men had drifted towards a model of “masculine domesticity” by this period, as some historians have argued, McGeer clearly retained the “aggressive manliness” of working class men in British Columbia.³⁰ Many of L. D. Taylor's labour constituents could probably identify with Gerry McGeer, as might

²⁸ *Maclean's Magazine*, 15 March 1935.

²⁹ Another Better Vancouver League member with ties to waterfront commerce, besides Nelson Spencer, was W. L. Craig, a granary director and also the president of the Federated Ratepayers Association. The Better Vancouver League faded into the background once the election campaign began, but some of its members would later become prominent in the Non-Partisan Association, formed in 1937 along similar lines, including Spencer, McGeer, and C. E. Thompson, McGeer's campaign manager who later became mayor on the NPA slate. *Vancouver Sun*, 17 and 29 October 1934, 7 November 1934, and 22 December 1934; *1934 Sun Vancouver Directory*. On the NPA, see Andrea Barbara Smith, “The Origins of the NPA: A Study of Vancouver Politics, 1930-1940” (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1981). Besides businessmen, the Better Vancouver League also attracted moral reformers, including Lyle Telford. Founder of the provincial CCF and mayor in 1939, Telford supported McGeer early in the campaign, though the two men would become bitter political rivals. Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 169.

³⁰ Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 130-131. McGeer's law career helped him transcend the working class, as did his marriage into the Spencer family, one of the leading retail family dynasties in western Canada.

the workers gravitating towards Communist leadership. McGeer also had direct experience with industrial conflict on the waterfront, having defended longshoremen in court cases arising from the 1923 strike.³¹ Above all, McGeer was a fighter, who called his fight “the churchman’s fight for clean government, the citizen’s fight for better government and the business man’s fight for efficient government.”³² He held the promise of delivering class harmony as no one else could, and of restoring authority to the civic household of which he was now the head: “My friends put me in here to clean up the city and put its house in order,” he told the *Maclean’s* reporter shortly after his election sweep. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to do.”³³

The reform program was already underway before McGeer was sworn into office. In December, he persuaded Premier Pattullo to replace two unsympathetic Vancouver magistrates, one of whom sat on the police board. The Vancouver Bar Association decried this blatant political interference in the criminal justice system and the *Victoria Times* warned that this precedent could lead to a “Tammany in Vancouver” by less principled mayors in the future, referring to the corrupt machine politics in vogue in some American cities.³⁴ The *Vancouver Daily Province* defended McGeer, reminding

³¹ Sam Engler, in *Fighting for Labour: Four Decades of Work in British Columbia, 1910-1950*, Sound Heritage Vol. VII, no. 4, eds. Patricia Wejr and Howie Smith (Victoria, BC: Aural History Program, Province of British Columbia, 1978), 36.

³² *Vancouver Sun*, 20 December 1934.

³³ *Maclean’s Magazine*, 15 March 1935.

³⁴ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 5 January 1935. On machine politics and policing in the United States, see Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2004), 61-70.

readers that he had “pledged himself to the principle that he was going to make radical changes in police administration and wanted a police board which would support him.”³⁵

Meanwhile, Chief Constable John Cameron visited McGeer at home in an unsuccessful attempt to retain his own position, but a replacement was already lined up and Cameron resigned before he could be fired.³⁶ McGeer’s first choice for chief constable was his old friend General Victor Odlum, who declined the post because of other obligations. McGeer then turned to another war hero and his neighbour in upscale Shaughnessy, Colonel W. W. Foster. The two men had a meeting where McGeer briefed Foster on the Communist general strike conspiracy and explained the disarray in police department. After placing the “whole situation before him,” McGeer offered Foster the position of chief constable, not as a career opportunity, but “to volunteer for that service as a citizen ... on the same basis that he had volunteered his services in the Great War at the commencement. And upon that basis he accepted.”³⁷

Other military men were recruited to assist Foster with the police reorganization. The colonel was joined by McGeer’s law partner, Major T. G. McLelan, retired Alberta Provincial Police Commissioner Colonel W. C. Bryan, and BC Provincial Police Inspector Forbes Cruikshank. With Foster at the helm, this group formed the transitional leadership of the new policing regime. Following the police board’s confirmation of these appointments, Colonel Foster’s resume was splashed on the front pages of the

³⁵ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 5 January 1935.

³⁶ Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 172; *Canadian Police Gazette*, August 1935.

³⁷ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of G. G. McGeer, 816.

daily newspapers: trained as an engineer, served as superintendent for the CPR, provincial Member of the Legislative Assembly and Deputy Minister of Public Works, and returned from the war “weighed down with enough honors and decorations for two men.” Foster was also an avid mountaineer, having been on the first expeditions to climb Mount Robson and Canada’s highest peak, Mount Logan.³⁸ His credentials demonstrated that Foster had the requisite bravado and leadership abilities for reversing the fortunes of the ill-famed Vancouver Police.

Even more intriguing than the biographical details published about Colonel Foster are those that were omitted from newspaper reports, especially those experiences that would seem to have a direct bearing on his new post. Foster was a veteran lumber executive, having served as managing director of the Globe Lumber Company on Vancouver Island and later as general manager of Evans, Coleman & Evans, a waterfront-based company and constituent of the Shipping Federation.³⁹ This was his position when he chaired the Federation’s Protection Committee and organized police specials during the 1923 strike. He also had been a justice of the peace and police magistrate in Revelstoke, further experience that would seem relevant to his new job but not reported in the newspapers.⁴⁰ Instead, the impression given of the new chief was that he had no policing experience, which made it necessary to supply him with a team of expert

³⁸ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 3 January 1935. Mount Colonel Foster on Vancouver Island was named after Foster.

³⁹ *Vancouver World*, 7 November 1923.

⁴⁰ *Vancouver Sun*, 8 August 1994; S.M. Carter, ed., *Who’s Who in British Columbia, 1937-38-39* (Vancouver: S.M. Carter, 1939), 38; and British Columbia Historical Society, *Sixty Years of Progress, British Columbia* (Vancouver and Victoria: British Columbia Historical Society, 1913).

advisors. Mayor McGeer claimed that because Foster was not promoted from within the force, he would be immune from the effects of an institutional culture beset by years of corruption and mismanagement.⁴¹ This appointment represented a clean break with a past in which Vancouver was known as the “graveyard of the police chiefs” because of a high turnover rate and long trail of ruined police careers.⁴²

The first step in the police reorganization was a purge of the force. Seventeen men were suspended and subjected to a “military tribunal” conducted by Colonels Foster and Bryan and Major McLelan in the privacy of Colonel Foster’s office. Twenty-five more men whose names appeared on a list handed to Foster “for his personal dealing” were also interrogated.⁴³ On 18 January 1935, twelve of the suspended men were dismissed for “neglect of duty” and “discreditable conduct.”⁴⁴ Because ex-Chief John Cameron preemptively resigned, he was not subjected to the tribunal and was the only one of the purged men able to refute allegations against him in a court of law, where he was cleared of all charges.⁴⁵ Major McLelan conducted an investigation with the

⁴¹ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of G. G. McGeer, 814-815.

⁴² Marquis, “Vancouver Vice,” 245.

⁴³ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 11 February 1939. According to one of the purged men, R. S. Quirk, Colonel Bryan slept through his interrogation. The other suspended men were: James Ellice, John Murdoch, Roderick McLeod, Donald Cameron, J. A. Parsons, Percy Kirkland, George Sunstrum, D. A. Sinclair, C. W. MacDonald, John Killeen, Robert Knox, J. Copland, Walter Bell, W. J. Fisk, R. F. Dunlop, and J. J. Branca. CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-2, file 3, meeting minutes, 3 January 1935.

⁴⁴ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 21, exhibit 73, Colonel W. W. Foster, “Report to the Chairman and Members, Vancouver Police Commission,” 18 January 1935.

⁴⁵ The judgment in the conspiracy case can be found in E. C. Senkler, *The British Columbia Reports*, Vol. L (Victoria, BC: The Law Society of British Columbia, 1936), 179-193.

assistance of at least three undercover operatives imported from other police departments, presumably to gather incriminating evidence of police corruption for the legal case against John Cameron.⁴⁶

“Then came the day of the stool-pigeons,” in the words of a *Canadian Police Gazette* editorial.⁴⁷ A permanent intelligence branch was set up completely separate from the regular police department. It was staffed entirely by men from outside the department, including some from McLelan’s investigation. Colonel Bryan recruited two detectives from Alberta, J. J. Nicholson and A. F. Plummer, who in turn were assisted by at least seven undercover operatives.⁴⁸ Colonel Foster claimed the secret branch was created after the RCMP issued an ultimatum that

conditions were so deplorable in the Vancouver Police Force that they would stop all their negotiations with it unless some changes were made. The R.C.M.P., he said, were prepared to discontinue their cooperation in uncovering bunco games here unless they could deal with agents they felt they could trust.⁴⁹

“Bunco” or confidence games were a type of organized fraud that Foster insisted was the mainstay of secret branch investigations until the unit was dismantled in 1939.⁵⁰ The police rank and file viewed the secret branch in a somewhat different light, however, and

⁴⁶ CVA, BPC, Loc. 75-D-5, file 4, “Memoranda re officers with whom Federal Association are not satisfied as regards appointment, etc.”

⁴⁷ *Canadian Police Gazette*, August 1935.

⁴⁸ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 18 November 1936.

⁴⁹ *Vancouver Sun*, 11 February 1939.

⁵⁰ CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-3, file 1, meeting minutes, 10 February 1939. On bunco, or confidence, games, see David W. Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Game* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940).

believed that they themselves were surveillance targets. This was a reasonable assumption, considering police workers were routinely painted by their new bosses as disposed to collusion with the criminal underworld. Regular police referred to operatives in the secret branch as “G-Men,” but with the “G” in this case standing for “Gerry,” not “Government” as it did for the G-Men in J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation.⁵¹ These G-Men were considered to effectively be labour spies, specials recruited as part of the campaign to ensure that “it never again will be possible for [the police force] to come under evil influences.”⁵² Not surprisingly, the police union viewed the secret branch as an affront to the interests of its members.⁵³ The extent to which the secret branch monitored police workers and con artists is unknown, but the extant reports it generated show a different primary target, as reflected in the name it was eventually given, the “Communist Activities Branch.”⁵⁴ Its headquarters were in the Dominion Building at the intersection of Cambie and West Hastings Streets. If it was in a south-facing office, the secret branch would have conveniently looked out over Victory Square, a public park where many Communist-led protests took place in the depression years (see figure 4 on page 65).⁵⁵

⁵¹ CVA, Pacific Press I – microfiche collection, Vancouver Police Probes, M7443-2, “Police ‘G’ Men to be Demobilized,” [1939].

⁵² Colonel Foster, quoted in *Vancouver Daily Province*, 9 March 1935.

⁵³ CVA, BPC, Loc. 75-D-5, file 4, Foster to Board of Police Commissioners, 16 December 1936.

⁵⁴ More details on the Communist Activities Branch can be found in Lonardo, “Under a Watchful Eye.”

⁵⁵ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 11 February 1939.

The results of the police corruption investigation were kept secret but ostensibly formed the basis of Colonel Foster's proposal for reorganizing the police department. His findings were consistent with Gerry McGeer's claims of rampant crime and corruption:

To such an extent has the system of protection for white slavery, bootlegging, gambling, dope and confidence rackets developed that Vancouver has become the International Headquarters of a revolting type of vice and the natural refuge for criminals of dangerous character.⁵⁶

The only concrete evidence of corruption that Foster produced was a recording from the Vancouver Police Department's first attempt at electronic surveillance. A wiretap on the telephone of Joe Celona, a brothel keeper charged along with former Chief Cameron for criminal conspiracy, apparently captured some "interesting conversations" of police advising Celona on how to avoid conviction.⁵⁷ The tape was ruled inadmissible at the trial because it was barely audible and Cameron was cleared of all charges because no other compelling evidence was given to show a conspiracy between the two men.⁵⁸

The only other evidence found regarding police corruption consists solely of what Colonel Foster said was contained in the secret police files, which are not extant.⁵⁹ At the time of the purge, Foster insisted that the law prohibited him from releasing such

⁵⁶ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 21, exhibit 73, Colonel W. W. Foster, "Report to the Chairman and Members, Vancouver Police Commission," 18 January 1935.

⁵⁷ *Vancouver Sun*, 2 December 1936.

⁵⁸ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 11 February 1939; and Senkler, *British Columbia Reports*, 179-193.

⁵⁹ In a response to a freedom of information request, the Vancouver Police Department stated that it does not have any files predating 1950. Presumably this means that files not contained in the City of Vancouver Archives or the Vancouver Police Museum (both of which have been searched) have been destroyed or are in private hands.

information, even to the police board.⁶⁰ In 1937 however, he revealed selected excerpts from the secret files to illustrate to the board the degree to which the force had improved under his command, at least in reputation. The dismal “before” picture of the police force was at its worst in 1933, according to Foster. J. Edgar Hoover, the most influential figure in policing by this time, reportedly wrote that Vancouver was “one of the three worst cities on the continent” for confidence games, and that “my files contain many instances of confidence men picking up their victims in your vicinity (Vancouver) and riding them out to other cities.”⁶¹ Another memo from the Bureau of Investigation (the forerunner of the Federal Bureau of Investigation) revealed that:

All Federal Officers, U. S. A., were definite in their opinion that Vancouver, B. C. was one of the worst places on the continent from the point of view of police administration. That they, the Federal officers, could never get any assistance or cooperation in Vancouver, B. C. and that it was one of the safest hide-outs for con men on the continent.⁶²

A visiting Mountie from Montreal echoed his American counterparts: “When I was in Vancouver, these confidence men were a cursed nuisance, but very few, if any, were convicted. I suppose you know the reason by now.”⁶³ None of this evidence proves widespread police corruption, but is nonetheless compelling, and the fact that wiretap

⁶⁰ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 21 October 1936.

⁶¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 10 March 1938; and CVA, BPC, Loc. 75-D-5, file 5, W. W. Foster to Board of Police Commissioners, 24 June 1937.

⁶² CVA, BPC, Loc. 75-D-5, file 5, W. W. Foster to Board of Police Commissioners, 24 June 1937.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

evidence was submitted in court suggests that Colonel Foster's claims were not entirely fictitious.

There are, however, ample reasons for doubting at least the extent of corruption alleged by Colonel Foster. His unwillingness to release further evidence against fired police officers, such as details of the secret tribunal proceedings, calls his motivations into question. If there was evidence of criminal wrongdoing, why was ex-Chief Cameron the only one of the purged men to face charges? One possible conclusion is the same one drawn by other historians for interwar Vancouver, which is that the police "winked at vice, gambling, and prostitution, but were not systematically corrupt."⁶⁴ This would not account for accusations of police colluding with confidence men however, and would not have satisfied the purged officers who repeatedly lobbied for an opportunity to refute charges against them.⁶⁵ The most compelling reasons to doubt Colonel Foster's allegations of corruption are that most of the fired men eventually trickled back onto the force, no formal charges were ever brought against them (except ex-Chief Cameron, who was acquitted), and that they were fully exonerated four years later.⁶⁶

Corruption was linked to the larger problem of inefficiency that was also to be weeded out by the police reorganization. Colonel Foster argued that a training school was necessary for creating an efficient force. Training, according to the colonel, was

⁶⁴ Marquis, "Vancouver Vice," 267. Also see: Nicol, *Vancouver*, 187; and CVA, Add. MSS 772, Daniel Chowne, Loc. 585-C-6, file 9, Daniel Chowne, "The Case for Police Reform: Vancouver, 1928" (BA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1982).

⁶⁵ Vincent Moore, *Gladiator of the Courts: Angelo Branca* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1981), 63-64. Branca was the lawyer representing the purged police officers.

⁶⁶ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 11 February 1939.

“something that is long overdue ... Men [are] simply being picked up as vacancies arise and put to work without any training in dealing with the public, criminal code, bye-laws [sic], collecting evidence, Court procedure, and other essential matters.”⁶⁷ Foster was expressing what police reformers had been arguing for years: that police training was critical for establishing the professional force needed to police modern society. August Vollmer, the leading police reformer at the time, offered this analogy:

If the legal, engineering, or medical profession recruited its members at random, with no requirements for preliminary training, from among all the persons who might desire to hang out a professional “shingle,” disaster would be the inevitable consequence of such stupidity.⁶⁸

Training was so important in Foster’s proposal that he urged the board to appropriate \$10 000 to cover the expense of the school even though the “Force itself is already greatly reduced in establishment, and underpaid, having undergone several cuts in salaries.”⁶⁹ Colonel Bryan had already begun training the first twenty-five recruits on a voluntary basis and Foster claimed the added expense would be offset by the elimination of “unnecessary extravagances and waste” uncovered in the course of his investigations.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 21, exhibit 73, Colonel W. W. Foster, “Report to the Chairman and Members, Vancouver Police Commission,” 18 January 1935.

⁶⁸ August Vollmer, *The Police and Modern Society* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1936; reprint Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1971), 230.

⁶⁹ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 21, exhibit 73, Colonel W. W. Foster, “Report to the Chairman and Members, Vancouver Police Commission,” 18 January 1935.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

While Colonel Foster seemed to embrace principles of modern policing in his arguments for a training school, Colonel Bryan understood modernity itself as the cause of discord in the interwar period. In a speech given to the Chief Constables' Association of Canada, Bryan decried developments such as the mechanization of production that eroded the work ethic and laws granting rights to women that ignored the "fundamental difference of sex." He listed several examples of modern culture to illustrate the "moral psychology of the present revolt against the spirit of authority," including the "musical crime" of jazz, "freak forms of poetry ... Futurism, Cubism, and other aesthetic Bolsheviki."⁷¹ Ironically, the training school, Colonel Bryan's main contribution to the fight against Bolshevism in Vancouver, was couched in terms of modernization. Whereas August Vollmer advocated college degrees and criminology courses for his police, Colonel Bryan's school was more oriented to discipline and combat preparedness, with a curriculum of drills, physical fitness, first aid training, and marksmanship.⁷²

The new police board unanimously passed a resolution to accept Colonel Foster's training school proposal and allocated the full \$10 000 even as the city teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.⁷³ But by the end of April, the colonel submitted yet another report to the board stating that, in order to keep within the approved police budget for the year, "it would be necessary to dispense with the Intelligence Section and the Training

⁷¹ Colonel W. C. Bryan, Chief Constables' Association of Canada, *Convention Proceedings*, 1924, quoted in Marquis, *Policing Canada's Century*, 128.

⁷² Swan, *A Century of Service*, 69.

⁷³ CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-2 file 3, meeting minutes, 22 January 1935.

School.” In a showy display of his commitment to providing the police with adequate resources, Mayor McGeer called in the city comptroller and insisted that this money be found somewhere in the city’s budget. The board then passed another unanimous resolution approving \$50 000 for expenses relating to intelligence work and the training school.⁷⁴ Neither police board minutes nor Colonel Foster’s proposal provide a rationale for linking training and intelligence funding, but like the secret branch, subsequent developments indicate that the training school was designed primarily to combat Communism as a vehicle for training specials.

With the purge of the police board and police force and a new intelligence branch and training school, the path had been cleared for the new regime to implement its anticommunist plan. The purge and charges of rampant crime and corruption, whatever their merit, were used to great effect in reorienting the police department to the new regime’s agenda and in stifling resistance to that agenda. Gerry McGeer may have had other motivations for entering civic politics, but those were secondary, if not incidental, to the fight against the red menace. The evidence is somewhat fragmentary and in many cases indirect, but it is sufficient to dispel the myth that McGeer decided to run for mayor because he was mortified by the extent of vice and corruption in his beloved “city of destiny.”⁷⁵ Conversely, evidence of either police corruption or a crime wave is too

⁷⁴ CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-2 file 3, meeting minutes, 14 May 1935.

⁷⁵ “City of destiny” refers to a speech given by McGeer that his biographer uses to explain McGeer’s puzzling decision to run for mayor in light of his economic reform agenda he wished to pursue at the federal level of politics. Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 167.

thin to support the new regime's stated justifications for the reorganization.⁷⁶ Yet, the Communist threat by itself cannot fully explain the purge because there is no indication that the rank and file would have put up even mild resistance to the diversion of resources to battle Communism. Unlike the postwar labour upsurge, when the police exhibited ambivalence towards labour militants, by 1935 there was no doubt in police circles that Communist agitation was a menace to law and order.⁷⁷ Oddly enough, a more compelling explanation is that reformers saw evidence of a breakdown of authority and the potential for labour unrest in the police force itself. The reorganization was thus part of the effort to constitute authority, but the treatment of police workers in the process created new tensions that would complicate the new regime's program and modify the outcome.

⁷⁶ Historians generally have found little evidence of a generalized crime wave in this period, although this assumption was only rarely challenged by contemporaries. See: Walker, *A Critical History*, 152-153. For Vancouver, see James P. Huzel, "The Incidence of Crime in Vancouver during the Great Depression," *BC Studies* 68-69 (Spring/Summer 1986), 211-248.

⁷⁷ The source that probably best captures the opinions of police workers, or at least helped inform those opinions, was the *Canadian Police Gazette*, a locally published journal that regularly railed against the Communist menace. See, for example, "Communism Exposed," *Canadian Police Gazette*, April 1933.

Chapter Four

“A Modern System of Discipline, Training, and Intelligence”: Consolidating Police Power, 1935-1939

The Shadow? He may be a power among criminals. Faced by the Red organization, he would be helpless. His cloak of mystery would prove a thin, ineffective disguise. Whether he works alone, or depends upon other men, he would be utterly unable to combat the agents of Moscow.

Maxwell Grant, *The Shadow: The Red Menace*, 1931

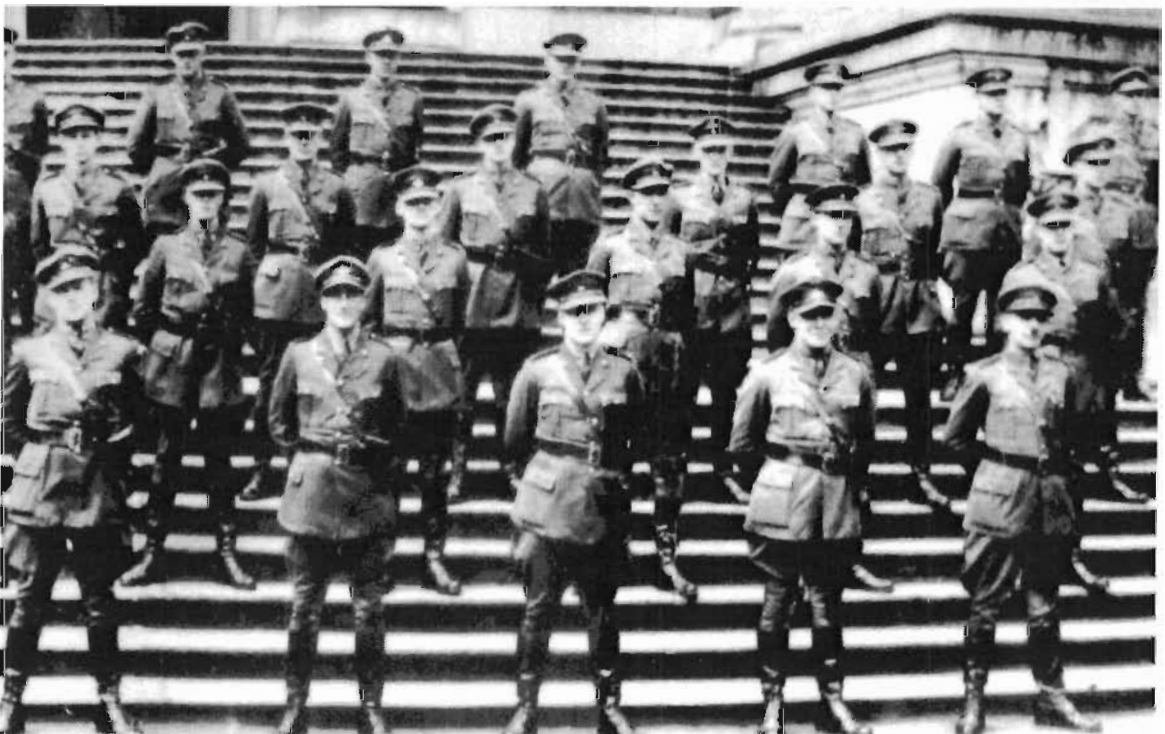


Figure 5: Special constables with the British Columbia Provincial Police, supplied by the fascist Canadian Guard as part of the response to the Communist plan to coordinate a general strike in 1935. (Image # G-03284 courtesy British Columbia Archives)

Vancouver did not witness a Bolshevik revolution in 1935. The general strike failed to materialize, at least on the scale hoped for by the Workers' Unity League or imagined by the authorities as a prelude to revolution. The closest it came was a one-day walk out on May Day, "one of the largest labour demonstrations in the history of that city" in the RCMP's assessment, but hardly a proletarian uprising.¹ Still, not everyone was convinced that the danger had been averted even after the general strike deadline passed. In a radio broadcast months after the May Day demonstration, Mayor McGeer insisted that Communists still threatened to turn Vancouver into a battleground, citing evidence from the United States. He quoted Sam D'Arcy, a Communist organizer from California and delegate to the Comintern in Moscow, who forecast "a strike of unprecedented scope of seamen and dock workers and embittered struggles on the Pacific Coast under Communist leadership" for September. The US government was taking the threat extremely seriously, according to McGeer:

In Seattle and other American cities they fear the coming situation so much that they are prepared to mobilize upon what they call the X Plan, which means the calling out of all City and State police reserves, State Militia and State Guards and the National force, including the cavalry and artillery troops. Although we in Vancouver are fully prepared to meet any situation that may develop, the public are induced to believe, by the propaganda of the underworld element and the Communists, that our police reorganization work and increased police expenditure is ill-advised and unnecessary.²

¹ Kealey and Whitaker, *RCMP Security Bulletins, 1935*, 267.

² CVA, PAM 1935-9, Mayor G. G. McGeer, "Radio Speech over CKWX," 8 September 1935. The US apparently took developments in Vancouver seriously as well. In the spring of 1935, General Douglas MacArthur had the military's contingency plan to invade Canada, "War Plan RED," updated to include Vancouver as a primary target should the need for an invasion arise. That same year, MacArthur's nephew began his intelligence gathering/diplomatic career as vice-consul in Vancouver. Floyd Rudmin, "Plan Crimson: War on Canada: Secret War Plans and the Malady of American Militarism," *CounterPunch* 13, no. 1 (January 1-15 2006), 1, 4-6, <http://www.counterpunch.org/rudmin02172006.html>; and Douglas MacArthur II, Interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, 15 December 1986, The Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for

Disclosing the US government's contingency plan over the radio likely violated international conventions, but it served McGeer's purpose of justifying the enlarged police force and the reorganization of the police department.

By the time Mayor McGeer made the above remarks, the city police had been bolstered with new and more weapons, hundreds of special constables, a secret intelligence branch, and a virile leadership relatively freed from political constraints. But beneath this fortified veneer were members of the rank and file, who experienced the reorganization as an increase in job insecurity and a loss of seniority rights even while they laboured extra long hours with no additional pay under the lingering cloud of corruption allegations.³ The paradox of a strengthened police force and a correspondingly demoralized rank and file suggests that the reorganization was an attempt to "constitute authority" over police workers as well as militant strikers. The new regime's primary objective was not just to strengthen the police force, but mold it into an instrument of political power that would serve as a bulwark against present and future labour disturbances. In this dichotomizing strategy, the collective agency of the police rank and file represented an obstacle to the new regime, one which it ultimately failed to overcome.

Creating a police force "fully prepared to meet any situation" was the new regime's top priority, but which in the early months of 1935 was still couched in terms of

Diplomatic Studies and Training, United States Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mfdip.2004mac03>.

³ CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-2, file 3, meeting minutes, 19 November 1935.

modernization and improving police efficiency against criminals, not Communists. Two months into his mandate, Colonel Foster issued a “frankly-worded announcement” to the press outlining the police situation. Crime was still a problem according to the chief, but professional criminals had been effectively vanquished by the vigorous law enforcement under his command. “No really bad men” would risk the lash and lengthy prison terms for the “paltry rewards” available from a life of crime under the new regime. Foster was satisfied with this progress, but added that the situation was still unacceptable. Policing resources were insufficient to reduce crime to tolerable levels, he explained, and a new problem was aggravating the situation. Unemployed men from the federal relief camps, blacklisted for union organizing, were drifting into the city in increasing numbers: “Faced with starvation, they resort to petty crime which gradually leads to wider ramifications.” If this trend continued, Foster stated that the force would need to be “greatly augmented.” Specifically, the department was short on revolvers and handcuffs, but also required “armoured cars with bullet-proof glass; a fleet of fast, powerful radio cars; more high-powered motorcycles; sub-machine guns; high-powered rifles; shotguns; and an addition of at least fifty constables.”⁴

In explaining the reasons for enlarging the police arsenal, Colonel Foster did not mention that the blacklisted relief camp men were either Communists or knowingly working alongside Communist organizers. The police knew as early as January that relief camp organizers were planning a mass strike that would concentrate the unemployed in

⁴ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 9 March 1935.

Vancouver in April.⁵ Reports indicated that as many as 2000 relief camp workers were to begin making their way to Vancouver on 4 April to protest the intolerable conditions in the federal relief camps.⁶ The camps were designed to meet two government objectives: to be a cost-effective stopgap solution to the unemployment crisis and to keep the throngs of disaffected young men away from urban centres.⁷ Conditions in the camps were abhorrent, with the men working long hours at arduous and often pointless labour in remote areas for twenty cents per day. They were operated by the Department of National Defence and offered poor quality food and no facilities for recreation or social activities.⁸ One historian has characterized them as “gulags”; Communist organizers referred to them as “slave camps” and found there a receptive constituency for another militant WUL union.⁹ The Relief Camp Workers’ Union aborted an earlier strike attempt in January, but police intelligence reports indicated that organizers this time promised the men “that a general strike would take place in

⁵ Kealey and Whitaker, *RCMP Security Bulletins*, 1935, 29.

⁶ Brown, *When Freedom was Lost*, 104

⁷ Several works on the Relief Camp Workers’ Union strike and the subsequent On-to-Ottawa Trek and Regina Riot have been published in addition to Lorne Brown’s monograph. See: Bill Waiser, *All Hell Can’t Stop Us: The On-to-Ottawa Trek and Regina Riot* (Calgary: Fifth House, 2003); and Victor Howard, *We Were the Salt of the Earth: A Narrative of the On-to-Ottawa Trek and the Regina Riot* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, University of Regina, 1985). The classic first hand account is Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On To Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973). On the relief camps, see Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “Relief Camp Workers in Ontario during the Great Depression of the 1930s,” *Canadian Historical Review* 76, no. 2 (June 1995), 205-228.

⁸ A provincial police spy living in a relief camp noted the radicalizing quality of the food, which was “certainly rotten and this plays right into the hands of the extreme radical.” BCA, GR-0429, 1934, Box 21, file 2, unsigned operative report.

⁹ Laurel Sefton MacDowell, “Canada’s Gulag: Project #51 Lac Seul (A Tale from the Great Depression),” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1993), 130-158.

Vancouver, in sympathy with the relief camp workers, as soon as they had deserted the camps,” which would have seemed to ensure their grievances would be addressed.¹⁰

The waterfront situation was the main concern of the authorities, but the possibility that thousands of relief camp workers might join in common cause with longshoremen made the general strike threat even more plausible and menacing.¹¹ This was the primary concern over relief camp workers in the city requiring a “greatly augmented” police force, not, as Colonel Foster suggested, their effect on petty crime rates.¹²

To prepare for a general strike, the new regime began by drawing up a contingency plan. The “Public Safety Plan” detailed the armed “force available for emergency action,” comprising over 1000 men that could be deployed in Vancouver’s streets within thirty-six hours. It specified details such as facilities to be used for billeting and operational headquarters, as well as instructions for mobilizing the various units into battle. The total force was broken down into city, provincial, and federal police units, as well as 100 permanent troops and 500 militiamen based in Vancouver and Victoria under the army’s “military aid to civilian power” mandate. Police contingents were subdivided into regular officers, probationers from the new training school, and special constables. The distinction between the latter two groups was soon abandoned, indicating that few

¹⁰ CVA, VPD, Subject files, 1929-1939, series 199, Loc. 75-F-2, file 10, “Re – Relief Camp Workers,” 10 August 1935.

¹¹ McCandless, “Vancouver’s ‘Red Menace.’” 56.

¹² Foster later reported that concentrating police in the core of the city during the relief camp strike resulted in increased petty crime in the outlying areas, suggesting that minimizing petty crime was not the primary objective of police policy. CVA, VPD, Chief, General correspondence, 1935, series 197, Loc. 75-E-7, file 5, Foster to McGeer, 18 April 1935.

“probationers” were destined for regular employment.¹³ The actual number of specials recruited that year was much higher than proposed in the Public Safety Plan. Those attached to the city police peaked at 238 in July, while the British Columbia police reported that “330 special-duty men were attached to its Vancouver division” in addition to 200 regulars “detailed to protect a portion of Vancouver’s dock district.”¹⁴ The number of RCMP specials is unavailable, but they cost its Vancouver division \$21 954 in 1935, a three-fold increase over the previous year, not including \$1 642.86 for “casual civilian employees,” the RCMP’s euphemism for informants.¹⁵ In one estimate, a total of 750 specials were mobilized in Vancouver that year.¹⁶ By comparison the strength of the regular – unionized – city police force was 336 at year end. This was an increase of only four over the previous year, but the permanent available strength was now buttressed by

¹³ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 21, exhibit 79, “Public Safety – O. O. #1,” 1 February 1935. Police already on the force were not given the benefit of the training school until the end of 1935. CVA, BPC, General files, 1905-1937, series 181, Loc. 75-D-5, file 4, Foster to McGeer, 14 December 1935.

¹⁴ CVA, VPD, Chief’s correspondence, 1935, Loc. 75-E-7, file 3, Colonel Foster to Deputy Chief Constable, 19 July 1935; and British Columbia Department of the Attorney-General, *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, for the year ended December 31st, 1935* (Victoria, BC: Province of British Columbia, 1936), 7, 14. In contrast to the previous year, this report does not distinguish between probationary and special constables.

¹⁵ Dominion of Canada, Report of the Auditor General for the year ended March 31, 1934, Volume II (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1934), X-14; Dominion of Canada, Report of the Auditor General for the year ended March 31, 1935, Volume II (Ottawa: Dominion of Canada, 1935), X-14. The assumption that the “casual civilian employment” line item in the Auditor General’s Reports refers to informants is discussed in John L. Martin, *The Canadian Cossacks: A Review of the Facts Concerning the RCMP* (Vancouver: n. p., 1935), 6.

¹⁶ This is the number given in Parnaby, “On the Hook,” 358.

an additional forty-five men “In Training School but not appointed to the Force,” nor paid a full wage.¹⁷

The Public Safety Plan also noted that “Civil Auxiliaries ... should be procured as soon as possible” to add to the force.¹⁸ Unlike the specials, these were probably intended to be unpaid volunteers, but the evidence suggests that organizations responding to the call filled the ranks of the specials rather than participate as separate contingents. One such group was the Legion of Frontiersmen, an ultra-patriotic paramilitary organization founded by an ex-Mountie in 1905. It had active chapters throughout the British Empire, including British Columbia, until its membership was decimated in the First World War, rendering the Canadian section inactive.¹⁹ The Vancouver branch was revived in early 1935 just as the anticommunist forces were being assembled.²⁰ Training was conducted at the Beatty Street Drill Hall, the operational headquarters specified in the Public Safety Plan, by W. J. Bingham, a former Vancouver chief constable. Before coming to Vancouver, Bingham briefly tried his hand as a private detective in Alberta’s oil fields.²¹ Prior to that, he had been a district supervisor with the

¹⁷ CVA, PDS-1935-1, City of Vancouver, City of Vancouver Financial Statements and Annual Report for the year ended December 31st, 1935 (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1936), 109.

¹⁸ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 21, exhibit 79, “Public Safety – O. O. #1,” 1 February 1935.

¹⁹ On the Legion of Frontiersmen, see Geoffrey A. Pocock, *One Hundred Years of the Legion of Frontiersmen: Soldiers, Spies and Counter-Spies, Sacrifice and Service to the State* (Chichester, UK: Phillimore, 2004).

²⁰ CVA, PAM 1951-31, *The Frontiersman*, December 1951.

²¹ CVA, FCP, Loc. 591-E-6, file 1, W. J. Bingham to Mr. Sculley, 30 May 1928. In an interesting slip, Bingham refers to Francis Pilkington as “Mr. Pinkerton” in this letter.

Metropolitan Police in London, and he compared the Frontiersmen to the “reputable citizens ... Doctors, Artisans, Laborers, [and] Bank employees” that he coordinated as a force of specials during and after the First World War, covering a period encompassing two police strikes and a general strike. In his assessment, the specials mobilized during the 1926 British General Strike “did more than anything else to avert the Revolution that the rest of the world was waiting to see.” The actual composition of his Vancouver Frontiersmen is unclear, except that “about one third” of its members had the means to purchase the uniforms.²² The Legion of Frontiersmen formally affiliated with the RCMP from 1937 to 1939, and two other members had also served as Vancouver’s chief constable: Colonel W. W. Foster and the spokesman for the 1935 incarnation of the Citizens’ League, Colonel C. E. Edgett.²³

The business executive who organized the Citizens’ League during the 1919 general strike in Vancouver, J. E. Hall, reconstituted the group in 1935. Hall was now the president of the Shipping Federation, appointed specifically to direct its campaign against labour agitation on the waterfront. The public face of the new Citizens’ League was that of a propaganda instrument created to denounce Communism and to expose the revolutionary agenda behind recent strike activity through pamphlets, full-page

²² CVA, Mayor’s Office (hereafter MO), General correspondence, 1899-1994, series 483, Loc. 33-D-1, file 5, W. J. Bingham to Sir James MacBrien, Commissioner, RCMP.

²³ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 7 November 1935; Legion of Frontiersmen Canadian Division, *The History of the Legion of Frontiersmen* (Regina: Dominion Headquarters, Legion of Frontiersmen, Canadian Division, n. d. [1976]). This volume also has a reprint of “Our Affiliation with the RCMP: The Founder’s Dream Comes True,” *The Frontier News*, December 1936. Also see: *RCMP Quarterly*, October 1937.

newspaper advertisements, and its spokesman, C. E. Edgett.²⁴ Less public was that the Citizens' League "supplied a number of special constables to the Vancouver Police," according to one of its members.²⁵ That member was Francis Pilkington, who was also a founding member of the Canadian Guard, another extreme right-wing anticommunist organization. This was a "semi-secret and exclusive" group that the Communist press characterized as "near-fascist," though it was formed from the remnants of overtly fascist groups.²⁶ The RCMP described Canadian Guard members as "employed individuals in receipt of fairly good salaries, residing in good homes, and of good families."²⁷ Pilkington felt that the Citizens' League was "a very worthy organization, and is doing very good work," but its leaders "are mostly old, retired colonels and men of that type, while the Guard is composed of young men."²⁸ Despite its youthful vitality, the Canadian Guard failed to spark the mass movement envisioned by its founders, but it did succeed in

²⁴ CVA, VPD, Subject files, 1929-1939, series 199, Loc. 75-F-2, file 14, Citizens' League of British Columbia, *Communism in British Columbia* (Vancouver: n.p., n.d. [1935]).

²⁵ CVA, FCP, Loc. 591-G-2, file 4, Francis C. Pilkington to Mrs. A. B. Cavanagh, 29 September 1960.

²⁶ *BC Workers' News*, 22 January 1937. The sarcastic "near-fascist" label is because most fascists in Vancouver had ceased identifying themselves as such by the mid-1930s in order to distance themselves from the excesses of European fascism. Pilkington wrote that his group "decided that, as we were not as extreme as the Italian Blackshirts we would 'dilute' the colour" of the uniforms and adopt gray shirts. CVA, FCP, Loc. 591-E-6, file 9, Capt. F. C. Pilkington to Frederick Edwards, 14 August 1936.

²⁷ Report of J. K. Barnes, Division E., Detachment, Vancouver, Re: Canadian Guard of B. C., 16 March 1938, 3544-5, RCMP Security Service Records, quoted in Martin Robin, *Shades of Right: Nativist and Fascist Politics in Canada, 1920-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 196.

²⁸ CVA, FCP, Loc. 591-E-6, file 10, Capt. F. C. Pilkington to Const. Alex Miller, B. C. Provincial Police, 15 August 1935.

ensuring that the BC Provincial Police had a ready supply of special constables (see figure 5 on page 90).²⁹

Gerry McGeer's old friend and Liberal Party colleague, General Victor Odlum also helped ready the troops.³⁰ Repeating a promise he made during his election campaign, McGeer publicly warned a delegation of longshoremen that Odlum was preparing to lead an army of 10 000 "like-minded men" against any Communist disturbances.³¹ The *BC Workers' News*, the organ of the provincial Communist Party, described an orientation meeting held at the Beatty Street Drill Hall for 160 specials recruited for the RCMP's waterfront contingent. "Semi-military gents [possibly Frontiersmen] were running around calling the new recruits into groups of 15 to 25 in number" and guns and badges were issued to these "blue shirts." A general and a colonel "of some importance," probably Odlum and either Edgett or Foster, addressed the meeting, thanking the men for volunteering and explaining the importance of their duty in freeing up the regular police.³² Little else besides these fragments has been found to shed light on the anticommunist force, making a comprehensive portrait impossible. It is nevertheless clear that this was a diverse group coordinated into a relatively seamless

²⁹ CVA, FCP, Loc. 591-G-2, file 4, Francis C. Pilkington to Mrs. A. B. Cavanagh, 29 September 1960.

³⁰ For Odlum's record regarding organized labour and Communism, see *BC Workers' News*, 7 June 1935. Odlum also assisted the police during an earlier relief camp strike in Vancouver in December 1934. CVA, BPC, General files, 1905-1937, series 181, Loc. 75-D-2, file 2, Police Board to General Odlum.

³¹ *Vancouver Sun*, 27 May 1935.

³² *BC Workers' News*, 12 July 1935. The militant longshoremen's newsletter reported that Foster, Edgett, and Odlum had been seen together attending meetings at the Beatty Street Drill Hall. *Heavy Lift*, 8 July 1935.

force under a unified command structure. At the helm were liberals, conservatives, and fascists, primarily military officers battle-hardened by both traditional warfare and industrial conflict. Middle class fascists and patriotic ex-servicemen formed the nucleus of the anticommunist force, while others simply needed the work.³³ Unlike the specials and vigilantes enlisted to break earlier strikes, these men were organized under the auspices of the public police. To the extent that they were “probationers,” they also represented a large reliable pool of possible replacements should problems arise with the unionized police regulars.

Foster harboured the same doubts about the regular police that he and his Shipping Federation colleagues expressed during the 1923 strike. On a visit to Vancouver in April 1935, RCMP Commissioner MacBrien reported a “feeling of fear in Vancouver generally ... Foster [is] none too sure about his own Police as following recent reorganization police none too happy.”³⁴ Another group listed in the Public Safety Plan was also deemed unreliable by MacBrien. The Point Grey militia base in Vancouver doubled as a relief camp for the unemployed.³⁵ Presumably these militiamen cum relief camp inmates harboured grievances similar to their striking counterparts and MacBrien

³³ Following an especially provocative radio address entitled “Communism Rears its Ugly Head in Vancouver,” McGeer was inundated with letters from ex-servicemen answering his call to arms against Communism. He replied that he would forward their letters to General Odium. BCA, McGeer, Vol. 3, file 1. The ease with which job vacancies could be filled in the police department in the midst of the depression was illustrated by the flood of applicants following the purge. *Vancouver Sun*, 4 January 1935.

³⁴ General McNaughton, LAC, *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 61, file 380 (B), Memorandum, 18 April 1935, quoted in Brown, *When Freedom was Lost*, 111.

³⁵ A brief discussion of this camp Point Grey camp can be found in the transcript of a meeting between R. B. Bennett and a delegation of camp strikers, published in Liversedge, *Recollections*, 214-215.

reported that “those in relief camp at Point Grey hav[e] been influenced by [the] general feeling.”³⁶ Out of approximately 400 militiamen based in the Point Grey, fifty-one joined the strike by the end of April and 112 by July, and it is doubtful that the remainder would have been enthusiastic if ordered into battle against their former camp mates.³⁷

Not only did Colonel Foster question the loyalty of his men, but the intelligence generated by the new secret branch was also of dubious reliability. Historian Victor Howard has characterized Vancouver Police intelligence reports during the camp strike as “a blend of alleged facts, speculation, advice, and gossip,” even suggesting that they may have been composed by convicts offered early release in exchange for spying.³⁸ Several reports display a questionable alarmism with, for example, warning of inevitable bloodshed and that workers planned to torch relief camps when they walked out on strike. “Troops should be kept in readiness and martial law might have to be declared,” according to one operative.³⁹ Another report claimed that the longshoremen’s strike was “assuming very definite lines.” The operative was “convinced that the longshoremen will go on strike in the very near future.” The BC Provincial Police commissioner

³⁶ General McNaughton, LAC, *McNaughton Papers*, Vol. 61, file 380 (B), Memorandum, 18 April 1935, quoted in Brown, *When Freedom was Lost*, 111.

³⁷ The fifty-one number comes from: Brown, *When Freedom was Lost*, 112; the 400 number from CVA, VPD, MacDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 21, exhibit 79, “Public Safety – O. O. #1,” 1 February 1935; and the 112 number from BCA, GR-0429, 1934-1935, Box 21, file 5, Brigadier B. J. MacDonald to Attorney-General Sloan, 4 July 1935.

³⁸ Howard, *Salt of the Earth*, 40.

³⁹ “Item 12: Unaddressed and unsigned memorandum, April 27, 1935” and “Unsigned memoranda of March 22 to Chief Constable W. W. Foster,” in Liversedge, *Recollections*, 147, 155; and BCA, GR-1323, reel no. B02301, BC Attorney-General correspondence, unemployment (hereafter GR-1323), L-125-1-1935, J. H. McMullin to Attorney-General, 22 March 1935.

informed the Attorney General that “our information has been rather to the opposite,” and indeed the waterfront strike was still over two months away.⁴⁰ Not only did some operatives overstate developments, but on occasion their information was simply wrong.

Fortunately for Colonel Foster, these reports were only one of many information sources, so he was not dependent on them for assessing developments. All three levels of police met daily between 1935 and 1938 to pool information on “subversive activities” in the city.⁴¹ He could also find out what transpired at meetings without having to rely on the word of spies because he had all left-wing public meetings electronically recorded in 1935.⁴² An officer in the longshoremen’s union was another source Foster claimed gave him reliable information.⁴³ Even with this array of intelligence sources, “two electrifying moments” of the relief camp strike “took the authorities completely by surprise.”⁴⁴ One was a protest in the Hudson’s Bay department store that ended with the mayor reading the riot act; the other, an occupation of the museum that cost the city a weekend’s worth of relief money as an inducement for the strikers to vacate the building.

⁴⁰ BCA, GR-1323, L-125-1-1935, J. H. McMullin to Attorney-General, 13 March 1935.

⁴¹ CVA, VPD, Chief, General correspondence, 1935, series 197, Loc. 75-E-7, file 9, Colonel Foster to Superintendent Darling, 5 July 1935; and CVA, VPD, Annual reports, 1908-2001, series 616, microfiche PDS-25, Vancouver Police, *Annual Report for 1938* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 1939), 28.

⁴² *Vancouver News-Herald*, 11 February 1939.

⁴³ CVA, VPD, Chief, General correspondence, 1935, series 197, Loc. 75-E-7, file 5, Colonel Foster, “Factors in the Relief Camp Situation.”

⁴⁴ Howard, *Salt of the Earth*, 40.

To fix the intelligence problem, Foster arranged for the loan of the RCMP's foremost intelligence expert and anticommunist, Herbert Darling.⁴⁵ As a high-ranking RCMP spymaster, Darling was intimately familiar with the pitfalls of mercenary secret agents "taken on without very careful examination in regard to them and [whose] work has been of little or no value after engaged."⁴⁶ In Vancouver, he was given a free hand to restructure the intelligence apparatus as he saw fit.⁴⁷ His "first work," not surprisingly, "dealt with subversive activities."⁴⁸ This included the creation of a central registry system modeled after the one used by the RCMP, in which all subversion-related files were consolidated and reclassified, and personal and organizational history files were prepared.⁴⁹ Darling found the secret branch established by Colonel Bryan to be "not functioning properly," and so he "broke it up, disbanded it, and started afresh," rechristening it the "Communist Activities Branch."⁵⁰ His six month term stretched out

⁴⁵ Darling's work with the RCMP is detailed in Michael Butt, "Surveillance of Canadian Communists: A Case Study of Toronto RCMP Intelligence Networks, 1920-1939" (PhD diss., Memorial University, 2004). A more thorough account of his time in Vancouver is in Lonardo, "Under a Watchful Eye."

⁴⁶ H. Darling, LAC, RG 18, 85-86/574, Box 9, G-537-1, "Organization of the CIB," Darling to Commissioner, 22 May 1934, quoted in Kealey, "The Early Years," 144 n 11.

⁴⁷ For the view inside the police department that Darling was "the real head of the police department," see CVA, MO, Investigation transcripts and reports, 1935-1936, series 526, Loc. 28-B-6, file 3, "Tucker Report," 5 November 1936, 34.

⁴⁸ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of Herbert Darling, 76.

⁴⁹ Darling gives a detailed account of his reorganization of the filing system in Vancouver in CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of Herbert Darling, 75-79. On the RCMP's central registry system, see Kealey, "The Early Years," 132-133.

⁵⁰ CVA, VPD, McDonald Investigation records, 1936, series 207, Loc. 75-F-3, file 15, testimony of Herbert Darling, 77-78.

to two years and his bureaucratic and procedural reforms went deep, but those efforts came too late to help prepare the police for the general strike, the relief camp strike, or the tensest moments of the waterfront strike. But from the perspective of the police rank and file, Darling was effectively another special, an interloper recruited during the reorganization to a high ranking position that could have been filled by one of their own.⁵¹

Even with the problem of unreliable intelligence, Colonel Foster managed to glean enough details before the relief camp strike began to conclude that a general strike was unlikely to materialize, much less spark a Bolshevik revolution, and noted that “so far, such efforts have not met with success.” Participants were to include mill workers, streetcar operators, longshoremen, and relief camp strikers. The first two groups “were definitely out of the picture,” and although a waterfront strike was still pending, it would not happen until several weeks into the relief camp strike. The colonel added that camp strikers would not want to jeopardize their considerable public support with “any premature offensive tactics.” For their part, longshoremen did not trust camp strikers to “show determination and become involved in real conflict with authority.”⁵²

Communists may have dominated the leadership of the relief camp union, but it was now clear that many or even most camp strikers were not committed to Communism or the general strike on principle. In light of these divisions, Foster implemented a policy of treating “the General Strike situation, and Communist activities promoting it, as distinct

⁵¹ *Canadian Police Gazette*, August 1935; and *Vancouver News-Herald*, 11 February 1939.

⁵² CVA, VPD, Chief, General correspondence, 1935, series 197, Loc. 75-E-7, file 5, Colonel Foster, “Factors in the Relief Camp Situation.”

from that of the Relief Camp Workers,” and that the two groups “should be kept apart” as far as possible. Foster concluded that relief camp workers for the most part were not troublemakers posing a challenge to constituted authority, yet the situation would remain “precarious” as long as they were in the city. After their money ran out camp strikers would be more receptive to Communist overtures to merge their strike with the one looming on the waterfront.⁵³

Foster’s revised analysis shows that he had dispensed with the idea that Moscow was financing local agitation. McGeer seized upon this revelation to link his two campaigns against Communism and “money power” and described how international financiers “rule the world from a secret and invisible kingdom. They sit behind closed doors on international banks manipulating the affairs of nations, developing wars and revolutions whenever it suits their purposes.” This cabal, he hypothesized, felt threatened by his own monetary reform agenda and so colluded with Communists to make Canada ungovernable. A military dictatorship would result and prevent McGeer’s election in the upcoming federal contest.⁵⁴ Foster’s sober analysis and McGeer’s less sober conspiracy theory reflect how pivotal the general strike plot was in bringing the new regime into existence; without that specific security threat, there was little cohesion to the anticommunist movement.

McGeer would not easily moderate his position on the Communist threat, regardless of Colonel Foster’s revelations. This was disconcerting to the colonel and so

⁵³ CVA, VPD, Chief, General correspondence, 1935, series 197, Loc. 75-E-7, file 5, Colonel Foster to Mayor G. G. McGeer, 18 April 1935.

⁵⁴ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 27 May 1935.

he called a meeting with RCMP and BC Provincial Police officials to express his concerns.

The BCPP assistant commissioner described the meeting in a memo to his boss:

The Chief, who was quite disturbed, wished us to meet Mayor McGeer who, believing in the imminence of a general strike, wanted the Police to raid all Communist quarters, arrest known Communists, and also establish a Concentration Camp for Relief Strikers who were then to be returned to their various camps. As we found ourselves to be in opposition to this idea, I suggested further discussion might be saved were Colonel Foster to prepare a written resume of the existing situation.⁵⁵

A few days earlier, the local Department of National Defence office informed Ottawa headquarters that “McGeer reports he is in position to cope with situation and wants showdown as soon as possible.”⁵⁶ Ironically, considering his past leadership in strikebreaking and armed combat, Colonel Foster was becoming a voice of moderation in the war against Communism.

The commander of the BC Provincial Police contingent in Vancouver, Staff Sergeant Kier, questioned Colonel Foster’s treatment of camp strikers. Kier wrote a lengthy report to his superiors expressing dismay at Foster’s leniency towards the camp strikers, noting that protesters had been permitted to congregate *en masse*, disrupt traffic, and even assault police without repercussions.

⁵⁵ BCA, GR-1323, L-125-1-1935, T. W. S. Parsons to Commissioner J. H. McMullin, 15 April 1935.

⁵⁶ LAC, McNaughton Papers, Vol. 61, File 380 (B), DOC 11 to A. G., 9 April 1935, quoted in Brown, *When Freedom was Lost*, 111.

I discussed the matter of constables being beaten and no action being taken, with the Deputy Chief and I pointed out to him that if this continued it would break the morale of his men. However, the Deputy Chief's only remark in this connection was that if anything was started it would result in property damage. I might say that I have instructed our men that if any of them are knocked down or abused the others must go to his rescue forthwith and use whatever force is necessary.

Another incident that puzzled Kier seems to hint at a possible, if partial, explanation for

Colonel Foster's relatively moderate approach:

Whilst our men were there the crowd kept up a continual "booing" of the Provincial Police. While this does not bother us still, it shows the feeling of the "mob" towards the B. C. Police. The strikers do not follow this practice with the City Police.⁵⁷

Colonel Foster's tolerance possibly reflected his disregard for the police under his command and the importance he placed on property value, as Kier suggests. It also shows Foster's strategy of treating camp strikers more favourably than the more Communistic waterfront workers, which impressed at least one Communist organizer.

Ronald Liversedge, a relief camp strike leader, recalled his impression of "the suave Colonel":

I can say that he was polite, courteous, never raised his voice, and I formed the opinion that a bourgeois officer in the British Army of those days did not have the necessary brutal fortitude to serve the ruling class in the fascist political conditions of that day.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ BCA, GR-0429, 1934-1935, Box 21, file 4, Staff-Sgt. Kier, quoted in F. Cruikshank to Commissioner McMullin, 19 May 1935. Labour militants generally considered the more militaristic RCMP and provincial police as strikebreaking "Cossacks." This characterization was also made for the American state police and reflects Robert Peel's different models for the London police and the colonial police in Ireland. See: Martin, *Cossacks*; Gerda W. Ray, "From Cossack to Trooper: Manliness, Police Reform, and the State," *Journal of Social History* 28 (Spring 1995), 565-586; and Mike Brogden, "The Emergence of the Police – The Colonial Dimension," *British Journal of Criminology* 27 (Winter 1987), 4-14.

⁵⁸ Liversedge, *Recollections*, 120.

But Liversedge and the camp strikers were soon out of the picture, and Colonel Foster left a very different impression on waterfront strikers.

According to Gerry McGeer, “some strange force, possibly an act of Providence” ended the revolution in Vancouver.⁵⁹ The camp strikers left atop boxcars in early June, shortly after the waterfront strike was called, in what became the On-to-Ottawa Trek. It was an attempt to take the protest directly to the federal government in contravention of the Communist Party line issued from Toronto headquarters, which held that Vancouver was where the real struggle was unfolding.⁶⁰ With a donation of \$4000, Communists in the longshore union likely prolonged the strikers stay in the city, but that money did not last long and camp strikers felt they had accomplished all they could in Vancouver.⁶¹

Although the Trekkers took with them any lingering hope for a general strike in Vancouver, a version of the showdown advocated by McGeer transpired two weeks later in the “Battle of Ballantyne Pier.” A three hour riot erupted after police attacked a crowd of about 1000 striking longshoremen and their supporters for attempting to march to the docks in defiance of Colonel Foster’s order to desist. The colonel responded with a signal for his men to attack with clubs and tear gas and federal,

⁵⁹ CVA, PAM 1935-9, Mayor G. G. McGeer, “Radio Speech over CKWX,” 8 September 1935.

⁶⁰ Waiser, *All Hell Can’t Stop Us*, 53.

⁶¹ The money offer was apparently made at a meeting of the camp strikers and an affidavit by an attendee was obtained as evidence of the Communists’ revolutionary intentions. CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-5, file 3, “Affidavit of Bernie Worthey,” 22 May 1935; CVA, PAM 1935-9, Mayor G. G. McGeer, “Radio Speech over CKWX,” 8 September 1935; and *Vancouver Daily Province*, 19 February 1936. Communists denied the offer was ever made. According to Liversedge, “there was not a word of truth in that police stool-pigeon’s evidence. What a man will do for \$2 a day and a uniform.” Liversedge, *Recollections*, 86.

provincial, and city police contingents stationed nearby promptly joined the melee. Not content with turning the crowd back, police “conducted a general mopping-up” of the entire neighbourhood. In the final tally, seventeen arrests were made and twenty-eight of the sixty people injured were hospitalized, including a bystander wounded by a police shotgun.⁶² In the aftermath of the battle, Foster issued a decree “banning picketing of piers and waterfront approaches.” He acknowledged that “peaceful picketing is legal,” but recast that right as “picketing privileges,” which he then revoked.⁶³ By preventing strikers from approaching the docks, and using the affray to justify a ban on further picketing, Foster changed the rules of engagement for industrial conflict on the waterfront. In contrast to 1923 when the legal right of strikers to picket the docks was respected, longshoremen were now deprived of a tool that had given them leverage in the past.⁶⁴ Recalling the Shipping Federation’s claims that police colluded with strikers in 1923, police workers this time would neither be entrusted with policing pickets nor allowed to “fraterniz[e]” with strikers in the line of duty.⁶⁵

If Colonel Foster was taking the police rank and file into account with his ban on pickets, they were likely unconcerned. The streets were not where they chose to press their demands. Long after the Communist menace was neutralized, the police union

⁶² *Vancouver Daily Province*, 19 June 1935; *Vancouver Sun*, 28 September 1935; CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-3, file 1, meeting minutes, 11 March 1937.

⁶³ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 19 June 1935.

⁶⁴ The intent of the marchers to assert the right to picket the docks is discussed in Fred Wilson, “The Bloody Road to Ballantyne,” in *Fighting Heritage: Highlights of the 1930s Struggle for Jobs and Militant Unionism in British Columbia*, ed. Sean Griffin (Vancouver: Tribune Publishing, 1985), 66.

⁶⁵ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 30 October 1923.

continued to agitate through conventional channels to have those aspects of the reorganization that undermined the interests of its members reversed. Colonel Foster was able to circumvent the union's demands until intervening forces compelled him to address them. The union's first breakthrough came in the form of a police inquiry at the end of 1936 after a disgruntled accounting clerk submitted a report making serious allegations against the new regime.⁶⁶ The inquiry was headed by a retired provincial Supreme Court judge, W. A. Macdonald, who dismissed most of the allegations as baseless but validated the grievances of the police rank and file.⁶⁷ He recommended that the dismissed men "be entitled to present their appeals before the Police Commission" and named as the source of police dissatisfaction "persons from outside the Province [who] joined the force, and were placed in superior positions." Macdonald concluded that "security, with a prospect of promotion, is to my mind, a most important feature in an organization such as a Police force."⁶⁸

In the climate created by the Macdonald inquiry, Colonel Foster could no longer ignore the union's demands. Most specials had been dismissed by this time, but the union and the colonel haggled over the fate of eight remaining interlopers. Foster argued that the union was attempting to undermine his authority to hire those he felt

⁶⁶ CVA, MO, Investigation transcripts and reports, 1935-1936, series 526, Loc. 28-B-6, file 3, "Tucker Report," 5 November 1936.

⁶⁷ Macdonald also headed an inquiry in 1935 that led to the demise of the relief camps. "The Report of the Macdonald Commission," in Liversedge, *Recollections*, 125-146.

⁶⁸ CVA, PAM 1936-92, "Report received from the Hon. W. A. Macdonald, K. C.," 5 November 1936, 23, 26.

“competent to fill positions.”⁶⁹ The rank and file was more concerned with the seniority rights and job security that were eroded by the reorganization. One officer complained that “although he had been employed by the department for 18 years, he was forced to take orders from a man who joined as a special constable in 1935.”⁷⁰ Some of the remaining specials had been recruited by Major McLelan to investigate corruption in early 1935. One of them was P. C. 245 Castle, who had “acted as undercover man both for the R. C. M. P. and for this Force” and therefore, Foster informed the board, the police regulars “do not like his previous occupation.”⁷¹ P. C. 208 Morgan was another one of this group, but Foster felt he was untrustworthy anyway and saw “no reason for retaining his services.”⁷² By the end of these negotiations, the only objectionable men left were those assigned to the secret branch and whose services Foster “definitely assured” the union would be dispensed with by the end of the month.⁷³

That month stretched into years, and the union had to wait until 1939 for another breakthrough. In the interim, Colonel Foster agitated for what British police historian Clive Emsley has characterized “a public sector equivalent of a company union” that

⁶⁹ CVA, BPC, General files, 1905-1937, series 181, Loc. 75-D-5, file 4, W. W. Foster to A. R. Stewart, 10 December 1936.

⁷⁰ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 18 November 1936.

⁷¹ CVA, BPC, General files, 1905-1937, series 181, Loc. 75-D-5, file 4, Foster to Board of Police Commissioners, 16 December 1936.

⁷² CVA, BPC, General files, 1905-1937, series 181, Loc. 75-D-5, file 4, W. W. Foster to Board of Police Commissioners, 16 December 1936.

⁷³ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 11 February 1939.

existed in Britain.⁷⁴ During a minor scandal in 1937 in which bail bond money went missing from the police department, Foster claimed that the purged officers were again colluding with criminals, this time by conspiring for a change of chief constable. “The bunco crowd say the good old days are soon coming back,” he wrote to the board. The purged men “are stating that with the change their old positions have been promised them again.”⁷⁵ While Foster’s suspicions cannot be corroborated with available sources, it is worth noting that he was receiving intelligence on the police rank and file, a point he “denied emphatically” in relation to the secret branch.⁷⁶ The scandal failed to blemish Foster’s reputation, but shortly after he submitted two reports to the board

dealing with the constitution of the Police Federation in Great Britain and the Police Act as it refers to the Federation of Police, stating that it would possibly be of interest to the members of the Board in view of the present set up of the Vancouver Police Federation.⁷⁷

Foster also submitted excerpts of the 1919 Police Act, the legislation that “killed the Police Union” in Britain following the 1918 and 1919 police strikes.⁷⁸

The police union’s issues with the reorganization were finally resolved in 1939 after Lyle Telford, one of Gerry McGeer’s staunchest opponents, was elected mayor.

⁷⁴ Emsley, *The English Police*, 134-135.

⁷⁵ CVA, BPC, General files, 1905-1937, series 181, Loc. 75-D-5, file 5, Foster to Board of Police Commissioners, 8 July 1937. On the bail bond scandal, see *Vancouver Sun*, 12 July 1937.

⁷⁶ *Vancouver News-Herald*, 11 February 1939.

⁷⁷ CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-3, file 1, meeting minutes, 2 September 1937.

⁷⁸ CVA, BPC, General files, Loc. 75-D-5, file 6, Foster to Board of Police Commissioners, 26 August 1937. The quote is from T. A. Critchley, *A History of Police in England and Wales*, rev. ed. (London: Constable, 1978), 194.

Telford initiated a war on vice and police reorganization curiously reminiscent of McGeer's new broom administration, but with the key difference that he sought to undo any residual damage left by the new regime. The purged police, all but one of whom had been rehired at lower ranking positions, were finally allowed to make their case to the police board and were formally exonerated. Colonel Foster insisted that the secret branch would be dismantled after one last bunco case was brought to its conclusion. The union reiterated its objection to detectives Nicholson, Plummer, and Grier, the outsiders operating the spy branch, but Foster successfully "eliminated opposition" to his plan by reading a confidential 1935 report in a private meeting with union representatives.⁷⁹ The police board minutes record that the secret branch was finally dismantled on 16 September 1939 "in view of the present emergency." Colonel Foster, Detective Nicholson, and close to sixty others left the force to join the war effort, while Plummer and Grier were transferred to the detective and records divisions respectively.⁸⁰ Special constables became a permanent part of the force to compensate for the wartime shortfall in police strength and as an auxiliary after the war.⁸¹

The Vancouver police ended the depression decade with increased capabilities, autonomy, and legitimacy, but the rank and file was not reduced to an instrument of civic

⁷⁹ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 15 March 1939. The three objectionable interlopers recorded in the police union's 1936 minutes were Detectives Nicholson and Plummer and Superintendent Darling. Darling went back to the RCMP in 1937, but the union then objected to another secret branch operative, J. H. Grier. Grier's initial work in Vancouver was assisting Colonel Bryan in setting up the new intelligence system. CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-3, file 1, meeting minutes, 13 October 1939.

⁸⁰ CVA, BPC, Minutes, 1904-1968, series 180, Loc. 75-A-3, file 1, meeting minutes, 13 October 1939.

⁸¹ Swan, *A Century of Service*, 70.

power and class conflict. On the contrary, the police union was strengthened through this process, having gained unequivocal recognition by the police board and a clarification of the rules governing the department's internal relations. Coincidentally, the new labour relations paradigm introduced after the war succeeded in minimizing industrial conflict, but through a new regulatory framework, not strikebreaking city police. The attempt to mold the police into a weapon for employers against their workers shows that police reform in this period, at least in Vancouver, was a backward-looking endeavour, informed more by earlier strikes than modern ideas of law enforcement. At the same time, with its new emphasis on intelligence, pronounced anticommunism, and increased bureaucratization and institutional autonomy, the new police were well suited for the forthcoming Cold War security state.

Conclusions

The New Police?

There were startling statements in the paper. Some of them, Harry knew, were partially correct. Others were entirely wrong. For he knew facts that the reporters had not obtained, yet his knowledge of the affair was amazingly inadequate ... Once more he glanced through the account in the newspaper, searching for something that did not appear in print. Strange, thought Harry, that in this long report there was not one mention of a man called the Shadow!

Maxwell Grant, *The Shadow: The Living Shadow*, 1931



Figure 6: Vancouver Police constables ride on the running board of an unmarked police car rushing to a protest of the unemployed in 1938. (Image # 1294 courtesy Vancouver Public Library, Special Collections)

Gerry McGeer left city politics for the federal arena at the end of 1936, first as a Liberal Member of Parliament and then a Senator. In 1946, he made a comeback in Vancouver with a similar strategy but in a very different context. In the interim, Better Vancouver League veterans who mobilized support for McGeer's 1935 campaign had established a permanent party, the ironically named Non-Partisan Association, which has, with the exception of a few interludes, dominated city hall ever since. McGeer was the NPA's law and order mayoral candidate and again he swept into office with a mandate to shake-up the police department. At McGeer's urging, the provincial government removed yet another commissioner from the police board to neutralize opposition to McGeer's agenda. Another chief constable was fired, but this time McGeer chose a longstanding member of the force as a replacement, Walter Mulligan.

Gerry McGeer's biographer incorrectly, but tellingly, tells us that "the advent of a police union" made the "process more difficult" in 1947 than it had been in 1935.¹ The Police Federal Association was already decades old, but unlike the earlier purge, could not be ignored in 1947. Fired and demoted police officers now had the right to appeal to the police board for reconsideration and the union won a partial victory through a ruling from an arbitration committee. McGeer died in office in the summer of 1947 and most of the twenty-six purged officers were reinstated by the end of the year. The union also succeeded in reducing the work week from forty-eight hours in 1945 to forty by 1947,

¹ Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 282-283. This assumption comes from the date the union was certified (1945), the year the certification process was established. Fleury, "The Historical Development," 17.

against the wishes of Chief Mulligan.² Undoubtedly the new labour relations regime erected during the war benefited the police union, but it is also apparent that the union solidified its position through its persistence in the face of adversity before the war.³ One indicator that the Vancouver Police Federal Association was not simply a passive beneficiary of the new labour legislation is that its members went from among the lowest paid police in the country in 1928 to having “the best wages and working conditions of any Police Force in Canada” in 1955.⁴

The legacy of interwar developments on management is less clear-cut. Colonel Foster is remembered in the annals of the Vancouver Police Department as the best chief constable in the force’s history.⁵ On the opposite end of the spectrum, the most infamous is Gerry McGeer’s other appointee to the top position, Walter Mulligan. Though the police department was perpetually unstable in the decades before the Second World War, its biggest scandal did not come until 1955. A Toronto-based tabloid published revelations that Mulligan had instituted a pay-off system for organized crime in Vancouver. A sensational public inquiry followed, one implicated officer committed

² R. H. Tupper, *Interim Report of the Vancouver City Police Force Inquiry* (Province of British Columbia, 1955), 21; and Swan, *A Century of Service*, 71.

³ On Canada’s new labour regime, see Aaron McCrorie, “PC 1003: Labour, Capital and the State,” in *Labour Gains, Labour Pains: 50 Years of PC 1003*, eds. Cy Gonick, Paul Phillips, and Jesse Vorst (Winnipeg/Halifax: Society for Socialist Studies/Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 15-38.

⁴ CVA, Add. MSS 772, Daniel Chowne, Loc. 585-C-6, file 9, Daniel Chowne, “The Case for Police Reform: Vancouver, 1928” (BA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1982), 8; and Tupper, *Interim Report*, 152.

⁵ Swan, *A Century of Service*, 62. The reputation Foster gained for his work on the Vancouver force extended well beyond local circles. In 1938, he was a contender to become the new head of the RCMP, but withdrew his name because the job would conflict with his military commitments. *Vancouver Sun*, 14 March 1938.

suicide and another failed in his attempt, and Mulligan fled to the United States. A former Mountie was selected as the new chief constable and again the force was restructured.⁶

The head of the 1955 inquiry, R. H. Tupper, delved into structural issues that might have facilitated the scandalous behaviour of individuals. In his interim report, Tupper offers a useful clarification of the unique position of the police in society, not in relation to other workers, but to soldiers and sailors. For Tupper, the police institution was semi-military and should

approximate as closely as circumstance will permit to a military unit. Yet it is composed of citizens occupied with their duties amongst other citizens for only eight hours of the day ... It is impossible to impose upon such a Force all the rules appropriate to a military force living for twenty-four hours each day in the community of a barracks and devoted wholly to the safety of its country in War or to the suppression of crime ... [Police] live at home and are largely with families to whom their pay, and hence promotion, mean much more than to the soldier in barracks and the seaman in his ship. For the same reason he has not the same community of feeling with his comrades as exists in the armed services and esprit de corps is harder to inspire. The Chief of Police has the duty ... of exercising [an] economy in the administration of the Force ... which militates against the ambitions of his men for promotion and better working conditions. In performing this duty he encounters the opposition of the Union whose aim is to advance the working conditions of the Force. It needs little thought to understand the difficulties of his task.⁷

The chief constable therefore had an unenviable disciplinary responsibility because of the contradictory soldier/civilian status of his subordinates. He had to ensure morale on the force while simultaneously fending off the union's insatiable demands. Tupper concluded that the union was strong, wages generous, and conditions good, but "discipline has not

⁶ These events are the subject of Ian Macdonald and Betty O'Keefe, *The Mulligan Affair: Top Cop on the Take* (Surrey, BC: Heritage House, 1997).

⁷ Tupper, *Interim Report*, 95-96, 107.

been of a high order (and as a consequence the efficiency of the Police Department has suffered).”⁸

Tupper’s insights into the nature of police are revealing for their implications for policing workers. Inasmuch as the police force is a military unit, it is an instrument by design, and to the extent that police behaviour detracts from that purpose constitutes a disciplinary problem. Police, however, are not wholly military and therefore have a legitimate reason to deviate from military discipline, which is that they are embedded in the community and thus have other interests that need to be satisfied. Their “community of feeling” is not limited to “comrades” on the force, but extends to the broader community that the police worker inhabits, which presumably includes social class and other groupings besides the family unit. Police management must therefore accommodate police workers as such for the institution to function properly, otherwise morale – the civilian equivalent of *esprit de corps* – suffers, which breeds inefficiency. Inefficiency, measured by how well police perform the police function, also results from management going too far in appeasing police workers.⁹ The police union, according to

⁸ Ibid., 159.

⁹ There is no singular “police function” and the term should be understood in the plural even when written in the singular. Police functions are many, and include such things as social service provision, law enforcement, and monitoring subversives. Police duties also vary dramatically in different contexts, so that “no human problem exists, or is imaginable, about which it would be said with finality that this certainly could not become the proper business of the police.” Neocleous, *Fabrication*, 118. See also: Cyril D. Robinson and Richard Scaglione, “The Origin and Evolution of the Police Function in Society: Notes toward a Theory,” *Law & Society Review* 21, no. 1 (1987), 109-154; and W. T. McGrath and M. P. Mitchell, *The Police Function in Canada* (Toronto: Methuen Publications, 1981).

Tupper, in its incessant campaign for better working conditions, will inevitably intrude on administrative matters if not kept in check.¹⁰

Tupper's characterization of the police as semi-military is not novel, but rather is built into the very idea of the modern police. A century earlier, an Upper Canada judge made a similar observation that "these useful agents are not a class apart from the inhabitants at large" and are "engaged in no less respectable [a] profession than the soldier who opposes foreign aggression."¹¹ But the idealized soldier after which the police subject was modeled was indeed a class apart from other workers. In his Foucauldian analysis of Ontario police, Willem de Lint describes how police reform was problematic for the constable in the early decades of the twentieth century:

If he was a professional, he was not treated as such in his own organization; and if he was an expert, that expertise offered little by way of a convincing account of itself. Thus there was a tension between the autonomy of the institution, and the autonomy of the front-line constable. Disciplinary technologies, although they may have taken legitimacy by claiming to shape men according to the traits of neostoic military gentlemen, did not in fact deploy the devices (class, ascribed status, university education) by which gentlemen were mostly known to be made.¹²

Police workers were subjected to some of the same disciplining techniques as other workers, scientific management for example, but alongside a host of others devised specifically for this occupation. De Lint's governmentality approach complements the one taken here because, although he does not elucidate the class context of his subject,

¹⁰ Tupper, *Interim Report*, 160.

¹¹ James Robert Gowan, *The Canadian Constables' Assistant: Being the Substance of a Charge to the Grand Jury of the County of Simcoe, at the April Sessions, 1852* (Barrie, ON: J. W. Young, 1852), quoted in Willem de Lint, "Shaping the Subject of Policing: Autonomy, Regulation and the Police Constable (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1997), 120.

¹² de Lint, "Shaping the Subject," 114.

the disciplinary technologies he considers helps round out our understanding of the line separating police from other workers. In essence, the police subject was discursively constituted to be self-regulating. In depression-era Canada, the RCMP's Herbert Darling was the leading proponent of using knowledge in this way. Not only did he direct the fight against Communism from behind desks in Ottawa and Vancouver, but he also implemented new protocols and information systems, or bureaucratized, the police, revised the *Canadian Constable's Manual*, and edited the *RCMP Quarterly*, the most authoritative source for what it meant to be a police officer in Canada.¹³ Put a different way, police workers were steeped in a particular ideology and subjected to protocols designed to minimize the inherent contradiction of their job and distance them from other workers.

The unionization of the Vancouver police in 1918 was a signal to waterfront employers that police workers had been indulged to a degree that allowed the police function to be compromised, a position fully articulated by the Shipping Federation during the 1923 strike. At the same time, the fundamental issue for waterfront employers was labour discipline among longshoremen. Welfare capitalism policies in the 1920s were an attempt to discipline their labour force, but which ultimately failed as a long-term remedy for the perennial labour problem on the waterfront. When the plunge to reorient the city police and consolidate police power was taken in 1935, disciplining that force was paramount, which in the first phase involved undermining the relative

¹³ J. H. Townsend and Herbert Darling, *Canadian Constables' Manual*, rev. ed. (Toronto: The Carswell Company, 1933). For a blatant illustration of the disciplinary function of the *RCMP Quarterly*, see Corporal T. G. Scrogg, "The Art of Being Disciplined," *RCMP Quarterly*, October 1935.

strength of the rank and file in the organization. The Communist threat was pivotal as a catalyst, but was only one manifestation of the larger problem perceived as a breakdown in authority, and hence discipline, on the waterfront, in the police force, and the working class generally. What made the image of a fully developed general strike especially ominous was that it represented these nebulous fragments amassing to create an authority independent of the Shipping Federation and other employers. Constituting authority was thus the key to prevention, and neutralizing Communism was only one of the hoped-for outcomes.

Consolidating police power and expanding the local state was a project initiated by Vancouver's tight-knit capitalists, but which depended heavily on the active participation from other segments, including the petit bourgeois managerial class, bureaucrats, and politicians, as well as working class police. Each of these had a particular interest in making it happen, which ensured that constituted authority was a more complex and sophisticated creature of social control than what it replaced. But while other interests were incorporated into the police project, the initial impetus of minimizing the disruptive effects of class conflict was preserved. The same underlying objective was encoded into the industrial relations regulatory regime introduced during the war. Policing strikes has been, on the whole, much less volatile ever since, although violence between police and picketers did not disappear altogether and police were still seen as a weapon of employers. As one officer put it, "of course we weren't neutral, we were basically doing the bidding of the employer – they'd call us up and tell us they want

us to open up the line and off we'd go."¹⁴ More recently, many Canadian police agencies have adopted a softer "strike liaison" model, whereby police communicate with both parties and encourage the ultimate form of police efficiency, self-policing. Of course, "softer" policing can work in a context where the use of replacement workers has become relatively rare and even outlawed in certain jurisdictions. With the retrenchment of labour's gains and the resurgence of private police in recent years however, this may change in the future.¹⁵

Policing demonstrations of the unemployed is another matter. Unlike strikes, unemployed protests are not localized to a particular worksite, nor do they invoke the ire of employers to sharpen the conflict or disrupt economic activity. The relief camp strike, contrary to most histories on the subject, was not understood as part of a generic Communist strategy, at least by Vancouver authorities, nor was it the most worrisome of the 1935 strikes. R. C. McCandless made a point decades ago that seems to have been lost in most subsequent accounts, which is that it was the "unrest on the waterfront which threatened to expand into a general strike" that most concerned the city's business and political leaders, not protests of the unemployed.¹⁶ To be sure, the camp strike was a problem for the police, but more because it was a two-month long crowd control operation than a menace to the social order. It was a public policy issue that acquired national significance with the dramatic On-to-Ottawa Trek and had important

¹⁴ Anonymous interview subject, quoted in Alan Hall and Willem de Lint, "Policing Labour in Canada," *Policing & Society* 13, no. 3 (2003), 225.

¹⁵ Hall and de Lint, "Policing Labour," 223.

¹⁶ McCandless, "Vancouver's 'Red Menace,'" 56.

implications for the postwar welfare state. Its importance to local security operations however was in what it might become – part of a general strike – not what it was. Despite the occasional violent incident, the camp strikers impressed Colonel Foster and others, who saw them as a disciplined body of workers. Early on Foster argued that a significant problem was the public’s misperception that relief camp unrest was a labour dispute over workplace issues in the camps. “The desire of the men actually affected,” he wrote, was “to terminate the existing camp system ... [and] however wrong their methods may be, [they] are merely interested in changing conditions and substituting work for Relief Camps.”¹⁷ Extra police may have been deemed necessary just for the relief camp strike, but it was not a matter vital to the local political economy in the way that the waterfront situation was, and does not explain the major security operation in Vancouver that year.

At the same time, the general strike plan was more than just a conspiracy theory or “rumour,” and McGeer’s “waving of the red flag” was not just a disingenuous maneuver “designed to provoke the federal government into dealing with the [camp] strikers.”¹⁸ The radical program of the Communists has been all but written out of this period in Vancouver historiography, which instead emphasizes the harsh conditions of the depression, the need for a welfare state, the ultra-conservatism of capital, and government intransigence. At first glance, this seems reasonable given that the general

¹⁷ CVA, VPD, Chief, General correspondence, 1935, series 197, Loc. 75-E-7, file 5, Colonel Foster, “Factors in the Relief Camp Situation” and Foster to McGeer, 18 April 1935.

¹⁸ Waiser, *All Hell Can't Stop Us*, 51. The conspiracy theory view is most pronounced in Brown, *When Freedom was Lost*, 126, 133.

strike plot failed, and in the longer view, the Communist Party only ever played a minor role Canadian history.¹⁹ Anticommunism, on the other hand, was at the heart of domestic security policy for many decades and profoundly affected thousands of Canadian lives and shaped important developments. For this reason, understanding how and why Communism was construed as a threat by capital and the state is vital to unlocking important parts of the past. The general strike conspiracy is critical for explaining the anticommunist response in 1935 and which exposes that response as a counter-conspiracy instead of simply a reaction to street protests.

Moving the red menace back to the centre of this history directs us to a more secretive world of intrigue and dissimulation, where evidence is often unreliable and fragmented and our conclusions must sometimes be more tenuous than historians are typically comfortable with. In this respect, this study modifies Vancouver's historiography with a more compelling explanation of Gerry McGeer's extraordinary victory and L. D. Taylor's political annihilation in the 1934 election than offered in previous accounts. Historians, even those trying to recover Taylor's legacy for posterity from McGeer's overbearing shadow, have failed to consider behind-the-scenes forces that made the biggest civic upset in the city's history possible.²⁰ Without exception, these narratives tell us that McGeer, largely on the force of his personality, was simply judged by voters to be better suited to lead the city through hard times while his

¹⁹ This is not to deny that many Communists played important roles, as they did in the On-to-Ottawa Trek and the labour movement. But compared to its rivals, the Communist Party was always minor.

²⁰ For example, see Francis, *L. D.*, 188-189; Mary Rawson, "'Single tax' Taylor: Louis Denison Taylor, 1857-1946," *B. C. Historical News* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2000/2001), 22; Williams, *Mayor Gerry*, 169-171.

anticommunism was “little more than political posturing” or a personal fixation.²¹ In fact, McGeer was sought out by the Better Vancouver League to be the political figurehead of its anticommunist campaign and turned his bellicosity into political capital. As the prototype for the Non-Partisan Association that formed two years later, which marked the advent of civic party machines in Vancouver, McGeer’s 1934 campaign is a cardinal event in the city’s political history. The NPA is generally considered to have been intended as a bulwark against the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the forerunner to the New Democrat Party.²² This it was, but it was also an electoral strategy forged in the fight against Communism and part of the larger project of constituting authority.

In some ways, this thesis raises more questions than it answers, but in doing so, suggests avenues for further research. One is that re-examining other contexts with a more dynamic conception of political and police power would undoubtedly deepen our understanding of the capital/state/society triad. Besides case studies, comparative and transnational analyses for the interwar period would be appropriate because many of the processes touched on here were international phenomena. Police professionalization, Communism and anticommunism, and labour unrest are ingredients in many local histories that contain a story of state expansion. In the United States, Claire Bond Potter raises an important point that the 1930s war on crime was “more than a moment of public relations that interrupted [J. Edgar] Hoover’s lifelong campaign against political

²¹ Waiser, *All Hell Can’t Stop Us*, 51.

²² Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, rev. ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 255.

radicals,” which began with the 1919 red scare and ended with his death at the close of the turbulent 1960s.²³ Indeed, the war on crime resulted in the massive police machinery, intelligence capacity, and institutional autonomy that enabled the FBI’s persecution of the left for decades. There are possibly more direct links between the American war on crime and antiradicalism. We do know that Hoover collected intelligence on longshore workers before he had the authority to do so, which he then used to leverage a political policing mandate from the president in 1936 by claiming Communists were in a position to “paralyze the country.”²⁴ It would be significant to uncover any cross-border coordination in anticommunist policing, between, for example, American “Red Squads” and the Communist Activities Branch in Vancouver.²⁵ Such an inquiry could also shed light on the general strike in the mid-1930s, because although it was only a failed conspiracy in Vancouver, it was a bloody reality in San Francisco. Historians have treated these events as domestic social histories of labour and the left, but for the authorities in the 1930s, they were matters of international politics and security.²⁶

²³ Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men, and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 4.

²⁴ J. Edgar Hoover, “Confidential Memo” [24 August 1936], in *From the Secret Files of J. Edgar Hoover*, ed. Athan Theoharis (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), 180-181.

²⁵ On the Red Squads, see Frank Donner, *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990). No such direct connection was found in Vancouver police archival collections. A labour spy in California however, was paid by the Shipping Federation to track down Harry Bridges, Communist and leader of the International Longshoremen’s Association in San Francisco, possibly to find out if he was planning a visit to Vancouver in early 1935. CVA, SF, Loc. 521-C-2, file 2. C. E. Pratt to W. C. D. Crombie, 4 March 1935 and “Re: Harry Bridges,” operative reports from Inspector S-9, 26 and 27 February 1935.

²⁶ One exception to the absence of transnational political policing research, although it only deals with the RCMP, is Gregory S. Kealey, “The RCMP, the Special Branch, and the Early Days of the

Finally, if the argument advanced here that police power is not something created by an act of legislation or institutional reform is valid, the history of institutional policing in Canada ought to be extended to include non-state actors, such as vigilante or citizens groups like the Citizens' League, or paramilitary outfits like the Legion of Frontiersmen and even the Boy Scouts. Robert H. MacDonald's study on the scouting and frontier movements that arose in response to a *fin de siècle* "crisis of masculinity" and the decline of the British Empire suggests avenues for exploring broader cultural themes that created an appetite for constituting authority in British Columbia and elsewhere.²⁷ While marginal in this narrative, these organizations were once looked to as a means to greater security by complementing the power of the state. In the US context, Philip J. Ethington describes how the San Francisco Police Department was commandeered by vigilantes in the mid-nineteenth century. The San Francisco police subsequently underwent professionalization and bureaucratization long before other urban police departments, which resulted in a well-paid and stable police force.²⁸ Some of these general patterns and antecedents need to be interrogated further before a comprehensive picture of the development of police power locally and globally is to be had.

Communist Party of Canada: A Documentary Article," *Labour/Le Travail* 30 (Fall 1992), 169-204. On the history of international police cooperation and political policing, see Mathieu Deflem, "Bureaucratization and Social Control: Historical Foundations of International Police Cooperation," *Law & Society Review* 34, no. 3 (2000), 739-778; and Richard Bach Jensen, "The International Anti-Anarchist Conference of 1898 and the Origins of Interpol," *Journal of Contemporary History* 16, no. 2 (April 1981), 323-347.

²⁷ Robert H. MacDonald, *Sons of the Empire: The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement, 1890-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

²⁸ Philip J. Ethington, "Vigilantes and the Police: The Creation of a Professional Police Bureaucracy in San Francisco, 1847-1900," *Journal of Social History* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1987), 197-227.

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