

Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the "Oriental Problem"

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Vancouver, from its very beginning it may be stated, has always been thoroughly anti-Chinese in its sentiments.¹

The Chinese question was then constantly before the [Vancouver Trades and Labour] Council and many motions were made on the various phases of the question.²

The history of labour politics in early twentieth-century British Columbia was marked by periods of intense anti-Asian agitation.³ Although the labour movement is commonly seen as an indication of developing working-class consciousness, white workers' consciousness of a common working-class interest in British Columbia did not extend to Asian workers.⁴ This

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¹ *The British Columbia Federationist*, 18 November 1911, 4.

² *The B.C. Trades Unionist and Union Label Bulletin*, September 1908, 1.

³ See Thomas Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labour Movement and Political Action," 1879-1906 (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1954); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver: B.C. Federation of Labour Boag Foundation, 1967); Carlos Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979); Robert Wynne, *Reactions to the Chinese in the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia* (New York: Arno Press, 1978).

⁴ There is a rich body of literature in Marxian theory on the relationship between class structures and class consciousness as well as a plethora of historical studies of working-class conflict in industrial-capitalist societies. Collective action dedicated to advancing the interests of workers in opposition to employers is commonly seen as an indication of some degree of consciousness of class divisions, although there is much disagreement about the "degree" of consciousness and its links to revolutionary social movements. See, for example, Adam Przeworski, "Proletariat into a class: the process of class formation from Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* to recent controversies," *Politics and Society* 7 (1977): 343-401; and Nicolas Abercrombie and John Urry, *Capital, Labour and the Middle Class* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).

leads us to question why the white labour movement followed a strategy of excluding rather than including Asian workers in attempts to collectively improve their lives in British Columbia.

Those who have attempted to answer this question have focused on two different factors: social psychology and economic competition. W. Peter Ward is the strongest proponent of the psychological approach, suggesting that the "Oriental problem" was fundamentally a product of "the social psychology of race relations."⁵ "At the bottom of west coast radicalism lay the frustrated vision of a 'white' British Columbia."⁶ Ward sees ideas as historically free-floating and therefore sufficient explanation for social action. This argument is premised on the sociologically untenable assumption that social structures are primarily the outcome of the conscious creation of the human mind. The relationship between human agency, social structures, and ideas is a reflexive social process in which people are both the products and the producers of their social environment.⁷ Ideological factors are important for understanding racism, but it is necessary to consider the social context in which ideas have efficacy in specific historical times and places.

The more common explanations for racial exclusion by white workers focus on economic factors, either alone or in combination with psychological or cultural differences. For Paul Phillips, Thomas Loosmore, Ross McCormack, Rennie Warburton, and Robert Wynne, economic competition between high-wage white workers and low-wage Asian workers explains racial exclusion by white workers.⁸ These authors agree that labour

⁵ W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1978), ix.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22; and W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 17-36.

⁷ Anthony Giddens refers to this process as "structuration." People are the (material and ideological) products of the social structures into which they are born and live, but the structures only exist as the outcome of human actions. So we are, at the same time, structured by pre-existing social arrangements, and reproduce and change those social structures and cultural and ideological forms through human agency (Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979]). Similarly, Marx observed that "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past" (Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [New York: International Publishers, 1963], 15). "New" social history, in an attempt to pursue Marx's historical method, is in essence the study of the structuration of classes, the interplay between the social relations that produce the working class and the social relations that the workers produce and reproduce through their actions. This seems a particularly fruitful approach to the study of ethnic divisions within the British Columbia working class.

⁸ Phillips, *No Power Greater*; Loosmore, "The British Columbia Labour Movement";

competition was the central feature of ethnic divisions in the working class, and that exclusion was the only viable strategy under those circumstances. Exclusion was the only viable strategy because Asians were, they suggest, unorganizable. As McCormack argues, Asians were "unassimilated and, therefore, impossible to organize."⁹ Two factors make this explanation weak: white workers did not try to organize Asians and then exclude the latter when organization failed; and Asian workers showed greater involvement in labour militancy than conventional wisdom allows, suggesting that solidarity with Asians was a possible alternative to exclusionary practices. The exclusion of Asian workers was not, then, the automatic outcome of competition in the labour market; other factors, such as the denial of political rights to Asians and their status as permanent "foreigners," were important considerations that shaped the practices of white workers.

Other authors have attempted to combine economic and ideological explanations. Patricia Roy and Carlos Schwantes both argue that racism had two distinct loci: economic competition and the ideology of racism, or, in Roy's words, fear for the future of a "white" British Columbia.¹⁰ Neither considers the relationship between economic and ideological factors, however, so an integrated analysis is undeveloped. David Bercuson and H. Clare Pentland consider cultural differences as emigrants from different ethnic origins compete with one another. Pentland argues that large numbers of low-status immigrants led to lack of solidarity, while few low-status immigrants facilitated labour radicalism.¹¹ British Columbia is placed in the latter category, ignoring the coexistence of radicalism and anti-Asian exclusion. Bercuson suggests that the key to intra-working-class conflict was immigrants' different expectations before arriving in Canada. Asians were cheap and docile because they faced worse conditions in their countries of origin and expected nothing better than they found in Canada; while European, especially British, immigrants expected better conditions and were radicalized.¹² Bercuson does not explain why radicalized

McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*; Wynne, *Reactions to the Chinese*; Rennie Warburton, "Race and Class in British Columbia: a Comment," *BC Studies* 49 (Spring 1981): 79-85.

⁹ McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 10.

¹⁰ Schwantes, *Radical Heritage*; Patricia Roy, "The Oriental 'Menace' in British Columbia," in J. Friesen and H. K. Ralston (eds.), *Historical Essays on British Columbia* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 243-55; and "British Columbia's Fear of Asians, 1900-1950," *Histoire Social/Social History* 13(25) (1980): 161-72.

¹¹ H. Clare Pentland, "The Western Canadian Labour Movement, 1897-1919," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 3(2) (1979): 53-78.

¹² David Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review* 58(2) (1977): 154-75.

white workers excluded rather than included Asians as a solution to cheap labour competition. He also seems to assume that Asian docility gave white workers no choice but exclusion.

What follows is a case study of patterns of racial exclusion and solidarity among one group of workers in an attempt to analyze the circumstances that shaped such actions. Practices of Asian exclusion and inclusion within the Vancouver labour movement are explored in the period prior to the Second World War. Racial divisions within the working class reflected the importance of race in defining workers' lives, not only in the workplace, but also in the political sphere, in civil society, and in prevailing ideologies through which people understood their lives. Race appeared more or less salient in workers' understanding of their lives and problems under different circumstances. As the following analysis will attempt to show, white workers' treatment of Asian workers varied with economic conditions, adherence to radical political ideologies, and the participation of Asian workers in labour conflicts. The white labour movement often pursued anti-Asian activities in the period before the Second World War. Yet racial solidarity grew during periods of heightened labour radicalism and Asian labour militancy, especially during the Great Depression, even though competition for jobs was at its most intense. At such times white workers no longer distinguished Asians as "foreigners" whose exclusion would advance the situation of "real" (white) workers; they were seen as members of the Vancouver working class with interests similar to other workers.

Cheap Labour/Foreign Workers

Patricia Roy, W. Peter Ward, Edgar Wickberg, Tien-Fang Cheng, Peter Li, Ken Adachi, and others have documented the pervasiveness of racism against Asians during the early twentieth century.¹³ Racism was expressed both through dominant ideologies about the inferiority of non-Europeans and through discriminatory practices in the labour market, in the political system, and in most areas of daily life. Asians were not equal

¹³ Roy, "The Oriental 'Menace'"; "British Columbia's Fear of Asians"; "The Illusion of Tolerance: White Opinion of Asians in British Columbia, 1929-37," in K. Victor Ujimoto and Gordon Hirabayashi (eds.), *Visible Minorities and Multiculturalism: Asians in Canada* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1980), 81-91; and "Citizens Without Votes: East Asians in British Columbia," in Jorgen Dahlie and Tissa Fernando (eds.), *Ethnicity, Power and Politics* (Toronto: Methuen, 1981), 151-71; Ward, *White Canada Forever*; Edgar Wickberg (ed.), *From China to Canada: A History of Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982); Tien-Fang Cheng, *Oriental Immigration in Canada* (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1931); Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976).

to whites in the province during the first half of this century, either in popular consciousness or in the social institutions of the society.

Racial inequality was firmly linked to, and much acrimony rested upon, the role of Asians as cheap wage labourers in the economy. The push and pull of Asian immigration was tied to their status as wage labourers. The first large-scale migration of Chinese recruited by the Canadian Pacific Railway was precipitated by the demand for cheap labour, and Chinese, Japanese, and East Indian migrants actively sought entry into Canada in pursuit of wage-labour opportunities. With a small indigenous population, immigration filled economic development needs, and the motivations for emigration were little different for European or Asian immigrants.¹⁴ Immigrants of all kinds sought better economic opportunities, and the vast majority would find those opportunities labouring for someone else. Capitalism was, and remains, a central organizing feature of Canadian society, and immigration patterns were, and are, closely linked to the demands of capitalist economic development.

What differentiated Asian migrants from Europeans was not only the precise role that the former played in the labour market, as an under-class of cheap labourers, but also their being denied political rights by the Canadian state. The mostly male Asian workers were largely confined to the least desirable unskilled labour and concentrated in the primary and service sectors of the economy; earned from one-half to three-quarters of the wages of unskilled white men in the same industries; and were typically hired under labour contractors rather than as individuals, a system that added to their lower standard of living and segregation from the white labour force.¹⁵ Low wages and restricted employment opportunities were directly related to the second-class political status accorded Asians in

¹⁴ The context of emigration was not identical for all Europeans or all Asians: conditions inducing emigration from the home country varied enormously; some had stronger ties and obligations to kin left behind; no doubt some were "sojourners" without intentions of settling permanently in British Columbia; some had skills that were in demand while others did not. Yet the common thread inducing emigration was the desire to improve one's life's chances. For a discussion of the concept of the sojourner in Chinese Canadian history, and questions about its efficacy, see Anthony Chan, "The Myth of the Chinese Sojourner in Canada," in *Visible Minorities and Multiculturalism*; and Jin Tan, "Chinese Labour and the Reconstituted Social Order of British Columbia," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19(3) (1987): 68-88.

¹⁵ Cheng, *Oriental Immigration*, 163-97; Ward, *White Canada Forever*, 17; Gillian Creese, "Working Class Politics, Racism and Sexism: The Making of a Politically Divided Working Class in Vancouver, 1900-1939" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Carleton University, 1986), 72-81; Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, 43-55; Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration* (Sessional Papers, no. 54a, 1885); Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration* (Sessional Papers, no. 54, 1902).

Canada. Unlike other immigrants, Asians were denied the rights of political citizenship, restricted in areas of employment, regulated, taxed, and even prohibited from immigration to Canada.¹⁶ In its policies the Canadian government clearly distinguished between desirable white settlers and Asian migrants who would be encouraged to work but not to settle in Canada.¹⁷ Asians were considered unassimilable permanent "foreigners," irrespective of naturalization or place of birth.

The different treatment Asian and European immigrants received from employers and the Canadian state created a racially stratified society.¹⁸ Asian subordination was an integral part of social relations in British Columbia. As a result, class relations were shaped by practices of white domination and Asian subordination.

Class relations of power and domination derived from the rights of private property and the pursuit of profit central to a capitalist economy, and were a part of the daily life (if not always daily consciousness) of all who laboured in the province.¹⁹ Although class inequality was common to all wage labourers, however, practices attributed to the race and the gender of the worker shaped the nature of the subordination. To a considerable extent racial and gender characteristics defined the type of work available, the wages received for work, the ability to acquire various kinds of skills, and even conditions in the workplace.²⁰ White men monopolized the

¹⁶ Cheng, *Oriental Immigration*, 38-162; Roy, "Citizens Without Votes," 151-71, "The Oriental 'Menace,'" 243-44, and "British Columbia's Fear of Asians," 168-69; Ward, *White Canada Forever*, 33-38; Peter Li, "A Historical Approach to Ethnic Stratification: The Case of the Chinese in Canada," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 16(3) (1979): 320-32, and *The Chinese in Canada*, 27-33.

¹⁷ See, for example, the conclusions in the 1902 *Royal Commission on Chinese and Japanese Immigration*, 272-79 and 397.

¹⁸ An explanation for the origins of this differential treatment must begin with the history of uneven capitalist development and colonialism conquest. Racial theories about the inferiority of non-Europeans emerged out of colonial conquest, a product of unequal power relations, European ethnocentrism, and justification for colonial domination. With the colonial settlement of Canada, British racial ideologies formed an integral part of civil society and structured immigration policies, thus shaping the treatment that immigrants from different origins experienced in Canada.

¹⁹ There is no direct relationship between objective class structures and subjective class consciousness. Przeworski has pointed out that classes are not simply derived from their objective position in the economy; classes, as social actors, are "the effects of struggles" structured by economic, political, and ideological relations. Rather than a unilinear progression of class consciousness, "classes are continually organized, disorganized, and reorganized." This suggests that economic notions of the unilinear progression of working-class consciousness are too simplistic. See Przeworski, "Proletariat into a Class," 367-72.

²⁰ For discussions of women's paid labour in early twentieth century British Columbia and the differential treatment that men and women received in the labour market, see Josie Bannerman, Kathy Chopik, and Ann Zurbrigg, "Cheap at Half the Price:

skilled trades, and received higher wages than other workers in unskilled labour. Some work was clearly classified as "women's work" and other work as "coolie labour," sometimes with overlapping boundaries.²¹ Workers in British Columbia were not, then, neutral units of labour power: they were hired as white *or* Asian workers, male *or* female workers, and were treated differently by employers. In a society where racial and gender characteristics defined the nature of citizenship and political rights, women and Asian workers were socially defined as more exploitable than white male workers.²² It should not be surprising, then, that both race and gender affected the development of the labour movement in British Columbia, a movement dominated by white men, the strongest segment of the working class.

The Politics of Exclusion in the Vancouver Labour Movement

The Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC), founded in November of 1889, was the centre of the Vancouver labour movement and the centre of working class anti-Asian activity. The "Oriental problem" was constantly before council during its early years, as a review of its first year of operation shows. In February the VTLC supported an agreement between the City of Vancouver and Rogers Sugar Refinery granting the latter tax concessions in exchange for an all-white hiring policy.²³ In

The History of the Fight for Equal Pay in BC," in Barbara Latham and Roberta Pazdro (eds.), *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984), 297-313; Marie Campbell, "Sexism in British Columbia Trade Unions, 1900-1920," in Barbara Latham and Cathy Kerr (eds.), *In Her Own Right: Selected Essays on Women's History in B.C.* (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980), 167-86; Gillian Creese, "The Politics of Dependence: Women, Work, and Unemployment in the Vancouver Labour Movement Before World War II," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 13(1-2) (1988): 121-42; Star Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver, 1900-1915," *BC Studies* 41 (Spring 1979): 36-55.

²¹ Muszynski has pointed out that during the late nineteenth century Chinese male labour was in demand, not only to fill the "rough" unskilled male jobs in resource extraction and railway construction, but also to fill typically women's jobs in service occupations due to a shortage of women in the province. See Alicja Muszynski, "The Creation and Organization of Cheap Wage Labour in the British Columbia Fishing Industry" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986), 161-74.

²² Lacking the same political and civil rights as white men, both Asian men and all women were in a weaker bargaining position in any attempts to attain better wages in the labour market. The second-class citizenship status of women and Asians was also reflected in justifications for why white male labour was worth more than Asian (male) labour (because the latter had an innately lower standard of living) or (white) female labour (because women were dependants of male fathers/husbands). Thus women and Asian workers were cheap labour by definition. See Creese, *Working Class Politics*, 277-82.

²³ Vancouver Trades and Labour Council Minutes, 14 February 1890.

September 1890 the VTLC pursued a boycott of Chinese laundries and enforcement of Sunday closing bylaws against Chinese businesses.²⁴ In October VTLC delegates attended the Trades and Labour Congress convention in Ottawa to express their views on the dangers of Chinese immigration, and met with Prime Minister John A. Macdonald to demand an increase in the Chinese head tax from \$50 to \$500.²⁵ In November the VTLC formed a committee to investigate and compile statistics on Chinese labour to be used in its agitation for stricter immigration laws.²⁶ And in April of the following year the VTLC adopted a resolution calling for the total prohibition of Chinese immigration to Canada.²⁷

Individual unions within the Labour Council regularly complained of cheap Chinese, and later Japanese and East Indian, competition undermining union workers. In a single council meeting on 4 June 1908, for example, three different unions identified Asian competition as the cause of poor labour conditions for the union concerned.²⁸ The Tailors' Union reported:

Trade dull; Chinese competition displacing membership. Delegates urged the demand for their label, the only guarantee that their clothes were made outside Asiatic sweat-shops and non-union premises.

The Cooks and Waiters' Union reported:

Asiatic competition was a continual menace to their organization. Complaint that white cooks could not be secured was due to higher wages demanded. . . . Many members out of employment; trade very dull.

The Typographical Union reported on the existence of Chinese and Japanese print shops "doing work for 'patriotic' local businessmen" that were putting union members out of work. Two motions were passed at the meeting concerning Asian competition. One motion was directed to the provincial Attorney-General to find out

why the Asiatic population is not compelled to comply with the civic Health by-laws the same as others . . . [and] urged that prompt measures be taken to see that the Chinese disease-breeding sweat-shops be at least cleaned up and made to comply with the law.

And the VTLC executive was directed to inquire why Japanese establishments were granted liquor licences. Although all VTLC meetings were not

²⁴ Ibid., 30 September 1890.

²⁵ Ibid., 30 October 1890.

²⁶ Ibid., 14 November 1890.

²⁷ Ibid., 24 April 1891.

²⁸ Ibid., 4 June 1908.

as preoccupied with the "Oriental problem" as this meeting in June 1908, Asian competition was a recurring concern for the Council.

The VTLC and its union affiliates engaged in numerous forms of anti-Asian activities. Exclusionary labour practices included boycotts against Asian businesses, campaigns to replace Asian labour with white labour, to disallow the employment of white women alongside Asian men, to restrict areas of Asian employment, areas of Asian residence and the hours that Asians could work, to prohibit further Asian immigration, and to prohibit Asian membership in trade unions. The labour movement tended to equate non-union labour with Asian labour, even though only a minority of white workers were unionized.²⁹ And while cheaper Asian labour was criticized for undermining union workers, Asian workers were explicitly excluded from membership in trade unions.

Concern with cheap Asian labour competition was pressed most strongly by unions faced with direct Asian competition, especially tailors, garment workers, laundry workers, and restaurant workers. The skilled craft unions, which made up the bulk of VTLC membership, were not often in direct competition with Asian workers, although skilled unions perceived potential Asian competition in their industries as a threat. For the unskilled unions, Asian labour competition was often a preoccupation, especially during periods of high unemployment. The minutes of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union, for example, record persistent denunciations of union men patronizing "unfair" restaurants, referring to restaurants and hotels employing Chinese cooks, waiters, or bus boys rather than non-union establishments employing whites. Chinese waiters and cooks were identified as the major impediment to more successful union organizing in the culinary industry. The Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union actively supported the Asiatic Exclusion League and tried repeatedly to persuade City Hall to tie licences to white-only hiring clauses and to disallow the employment of white women in Chinese restaurants. The union also directly lobbied hotels and restaurants to replace Chinese employees with whites in return for union patronage of their establishments.

²⁹ In 1916 only 6.3% of the non-agricultural labour force in British Columbia was unionized, rising to 21.8% in 1919, dropping to 9.1% in 1921, 9.2% in 1931, and rising to 12.7% by 1939 (Paul Phillips, "The British Columbia Labour Movement in the Inter-War Period: A Study of its Social and Political Aspects" [unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1967], 388). In Vancouver, union membership reached its pre-war peak with 15% in 1912 (Robert A. J. McDonald, "Working Class Vancouver, 1886-1914: Urbanism and Class in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 69-70 [Spring/Summer 1986]: 45). In 1931, 7.2% of the Vancouver labour force was unionized (calculated from the number of unionized workers as a percentage of the total Vancouver labour force in 1931). See Phillips, *The British Columbia Labour Movement*, 389; and *Census of Canada*, 1931, vol. 3, 756-63.

The Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union did not try to include Chinese restaurant workers as a solution to cheap labour competition until 1938, when a Chinese union organizer was hired.³⁰

The labour movement's rationale for excluding Asians was based not only on cheap labour competition but also included explicitly racist ideas. Asians were considered inferior social beings: "Japs," "Chinks," "Coolies," "Hindoos," "insidious Orientals." Just as the Canadian state distinguished between Asian immigrants without political rights and whites who would become "real" Canadians with political rights, so too did the labour movement define Asian workers as "foreigners" and whites as the "real" working class in Canada. Critiques of the oppression of workers were often linked to demands to hire "citizens" of one's own "race." In 1907 a petition was circulated among upper class women to repeal the \$500 Chinese head tax because it contributed to a scarcity of servants in the city. In the VTLC's response to this petition, the importance of race is central to the definition of the working class:

Thus we urge the present Government to disregard the petition of those ladies of British Columbia, who want Chinese servants. The women of the working class do their own work and when they need help, they employ their own race. Let these ladies who now waste their time . . . [in] useless functions emulate the example of their poorer sisters and do a little of their own domestic work. If, however, they claim immunity from work, let them pay the price, or modify the conditions of service in such a manner as will secure for them girls of their own race. It is, we think, absurd that the working class of Canada should run the risk of having its standard of living degraded to the level of a Chinese coolie merely to gratify the whim of an aristocratic lady for a Chinese servant.³¹

For the labour movement, the essential factor defining membership in the Vancouver working class was not, apparently, union membership, length of residence, or Canadian versus foreign birth; it was race. Asians were considered nonassimilable "foreigners" who were undermining the living standards of real (white) workers in British Columbia. The problem was not immigration per se, but the type of immigration into British Columbia:

The demand for Asiatic Exclusion can not be answered by a counter-demand for the exclusion of all immigration, upon the ground of equal treatment to the peoples of all nations. Admitting that European immigration, as it has recently developed, constitutes a problem demanding immediate attention, it

³⁰ Hotel, Restaurant, and Culinary Employees' Union, Local 28 Minute Books, 1910-1939.

³¹ VTLC Minutes, 21 March 1907.

is after all a problem of quantity, whereas Asiatic immigration is distinctly a problem of quality.³²

The prevalence of racist attitudes about the inferiority of Asian workers in British Columbia was grounded in the social organization of Asians as cheap wage labourers at the bottom of the class structure, and the state's denial of citizenship rights. Racism was part of the dominant ideology of the period, a legacy of British colonialism, which found salience in the conditions of workers' lives since employment practices were explicitly race-conscious. White workers' experiences included witnessing the expansion of cheaper Asian labour in the primary and service sectors of the economy as employers sought to drive down the price of labour and undermine union organization. As an article in *The British Columbia Federationist* suggested, white workers feared that the long-term effect of this competition threatened to undermine their already inadequate living standards:

It has been proved, time and time again, that when the Oriental once gets a foothold in a certain line, the standard of wage in that field at once drops because of his basing his wage demands according to his standard of living. It is not a case of possibly raising the Oriental to the white standard, it is a case of the certain lowering of the standard of the whites.³³

In the context of a racially segregated labour market the strongest segment of the working class, white (male) workers, organized to exclude, rather than include, cheaper and politically weaker workers who were already defined as "foreigners" within Canadian civil society. In order to overcome racial exclusion, white workers had to begin to define Asian workers as part of the working class rather than as "foreigners" who were the cause of the former's insecurity.

During two brief periods between the First and Second World Wars, when many organized white workers pursued greater solidaristic practices with Asian workers, the labour movement did begin to redefine Asians as part of the Vancouver working class. At the end of the First World War (1917-1921) and during the Great Depression, the two most militant periods of Vancouver labour history, some white labour organizations actively set out to organize with Asians rather than against them. It was also during these periods that Asian workers were most actively involved in labour militancy.

³² *B.C. Trades Unionist*, April 1908, 6.

³³ *British Columbia Federationist*, 24 March 1916, 1.

Asian workers were always in a weaker position than white workers in Vancouver. They were less likely to engage in labour militancy and more vulnerable when they did so. This is not surprising. Asian workers lacked political and citizenship rights, possessed fewer economic resources than white workers, lacked well-developed trade union and socialist traditions, faced the resistance of the ethnic community élites, dominated by Asian employers, and were the object of exclusionary practices by white trade unions. Nevertheless, the image of Asians as strikebreakers but never labour activists during the early years of the labour movement is exaggerated. Although much less active in labour conflicts than white workers, there was a thread of Asian labour activism in Vancouver throughout the early twentieth century.³⁴

In the Greater Vancouver area Chinese, Japanese, and East Indian workers took part in no fewer than fifty separate strikes between 1900 and 1939 (see Appendix A).³⁵ Seventy percent of these strikes involved the joint action of Asian and white workers, mostly in the lumber industry and the fisheries. Two-thirds of the strikes involving Asians were concentrated in two periods: Asian workers struck twelve times at the end of the First World War (1917-1921) and twenty times during the Great Depression (1921-1937). In contrast, Asians engaged in only thirteen strikes during the first sixteen years of this century and in only six strikes between 1922 and 1930.

It is not coincidental that higher levels of Asian labour militancy occurred simultaneously with greater solidaristic practices by white workers. The position of Asian workers was strengthened considerably by common action with white workers, thereby encouraging Asian labour militancy. And the more militant Asians were in the workplace, the more likely that white workers would recognize their common interests and attempt to unite with Asian co-workers. For all workers, the state of the economy shaped labour activism: the labour shortage at the end of the First World War strengthened the position of all workers, while the depth of the

³⁴ In his recent study of the New Westminster labour movement, Allen Seager also points out that Asian workers were much more involved in labour conflicts than is generally supposed. See "Workers, Class and Industrial Conflict in New Westminster, 1900-1930," in Rennie Warburton and David Coburn (eds.), *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 117-40.

³⁵ The fifty-one strikes listed in Appendix A are labour conflicts where the involvement of Asian workers could be documented, and probably under-represents Asian labour activism. For a more detailed discussion of Asian labour activism in Vancouver prior to the Second World War see Creese, *Working Class Politics*, 98-172; and "Organizing Against Racism in the Workplace: Chinese Workers in Vancouver Before the Second World War," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 19(3) (1987): 35-46.

economic crisis during the 1930s had a general radicalizing effect. These three interrelated factors — economic conditions, the growth of radical labour politics, and increased Asian militancy — resulted in greater racial solidarity at the end of the First World War and during the Great Depression.

There were, of course, instances of Asian-white co-operation during strikes in the period prior to the First World War, especially, but not exclusively, in the salmon fishery.³⁶ Whatever co-operation occurred, however, was short-lived, lasting only during a particular labour conflict, and never involved organizational inclusion. Lack of organizational unity weakened joint strike activity, and employers often found it possible to break strikes by forcing weaker Asians back to work. White workers gave little consideration to the weaker economic and political position of Asian workers, and simply branded the latter as strikebreakers. In the fisheries, for example, the areas where Japanese fishermen could fish were restricted, while white and Native fishermen could fish throughout the coast. This had a profound effect on labour conflicts in that industry. As one Japanese fisherman remembered, Japanese fishermen could not strike for long because if they lost the season in their area they could not go elsewhere to recoup as could other fishermen. This made Japanese fishermen “the weak link in the chain” in spite of their commitment to improving fish prices and frequent involvement in fisheries strikes. When economic necessity forced the Japanese back to work, white and Native fishermen simply branded the Japanese as strikebreakers, even though the whites and Natives were instrumental in enforcing restrictive regulations against Japanese fishermen in the first place.³⁷

On rare occasions some white labour organizations advocated organizing Asian workers as a solution to cheap labour competition. In 1903 The Western Federation of Miners suggested organizing Chinese coal miners to forestall strikebreaking during the Canadian Pacific Railway strike, but nothing came of it.³⁸ The WFM’s successor, the International Workers’ of the World, also, on occasion, suggested organizing Chinese

³⁶ Percy Gladstone and Stuart Jamieson, “Unionism in the Fishing Industry of British Columbia,” in *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 16 (1950): 1-11; James Conley, “Relations of Production and Collective Action in the Salmon Fishery, 1900-1925,” in *Workers, Capital, and the State*, 86-116.

³⁷ Public Archives of British Columbia, Reynoldson Research Project, Oral History Tape 1462.

³⁸ William Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Broadway Printers, 1937), 115-20; Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 37-41.

workers, but apparently never acted on the idea.³⁹ Apart from these two industrial unions, no other unions even considered Asian organization a possibility.

Exclusionary politics were much less prevalent in the more radical industrial unions and in the socialist political parties in the province than in the mainstream labour movement, even before the First World War. The dominant socialist organization in British Columbia during the first two decades of this century was the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC). Like other labour representatives, SPC members of the Legislative Assembly supported legislation discriminating against Asians in the workplace and restricting further Asian immigration.⁴⁰ But while endorsing the labour movement's call for the abolition of Asian immigration, socialists also cautioned that this would not solve the labour problem; only the abolition of capitalism would accomplish that end. As the *Western Clarion* suggested:

Organized workers are even now making loud complaints against what they term the "Sikh invasion." They are calling upon the powers that be to put a stop to it. They overlook the fact that the powers to whom they appeal, and the property interests which profit by the influx of this cheap and docile labor are identical. Their appeal thus of necessity must fall upon deaf ears. If the workers of this or any other country desire the exclusion of people from other lands they must first take possession of the reins of government in order to effect their purpose and enforce their will.⁴¹

This race question is being agitated by the master class in order to delude the workers into participating in a trade war for their masters' benefit. . . . The longer that the hope of betterment by emigration is before the workers, the longer they will be in discovering that their one common hope of betterment lies in the overthrow of the wage system.⁴²

By the beginning of the First World War the Socialist Party's position on Asian workers had become clearly defined in the context of the international solidarity of all workers, and the politics of exclusion was rejected:

What does it greatly matter who our masters import or exclude? We are slaves here. We are slaves in China or Japan; so our condition can be changed but slightly while the capitalist system lasts. We are not of any nationality; we are not white or black; but one thing suffices to make us all common; we are forced to sell labour power to another class in order to live.⁴³

³⁹ Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia*, 40-42.

⁴⁰ *The Western Clarion*, 1903-1914; Phillips, *The British Columbia Labour Movement*, 129-31.

⁴¹ *Western Clarion*, 1 September 1906, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 12 September 1908, 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 24 May 1913, 4.

For those who embraced radical socialism there could be little rationalization for excluding some workers, whether socially defined as foreigners or not, from the collective working class when the abolition of the exploitation of all workers was the goal. Socialists more clearly defined the "enemy" as capitalist employers, not other workers.⁴⁴ But as Robert McDonald has recently pointed out, the labour movement in Vancouver was not dominated by socialists, it was dominated by "moderate labourism."⁴⁵ For the most part, Vancouver workers' sought reform, not the abolition of capitalism; and one area where reform was pursued was the exclusion of "foreign" Asian workers from immigration to Canada and from more desirable jobs in the economy.

While the *Western Clarion* was calling on workers to recognize that all workers were the victims of capitalism, the VTLC continued to pass motions seeking the "abolition of Oriental labour in mines, lumbering, fishing and railways"; to legislate "white labour clauses" on public works projects and for the renewal of hotel and restaurant licences; and even to enforce "segregated areas" for Asian residence in Vancouver.⁴⁶ However, the shortage of labour and high rates of inflation created by the First World War fostered labour militancy, among Asian as well as white workers, and when combined with the growth of radical socialism after the war, produced increased solidaristic practices within the Vancouver labour movement for a brief period of time.⁴⁷

The First World War marked a watershed in white-Asian solidarity. The post-war period was marked by general strikes in Vancouver in 1918 and 1919, the rapid growth of support for the One Big Union (OBU), massive organization in the largely unorganized lumber industry, and labour confrontations throughout the province. Asian workers participated in militant labour conflicts, including the 1919 general strike; played dominant roles in some strikes, particularly in the lumber industry; and,

⁴⁴ Paul Phillips has suggested that the weakness of the labour movement is often a result of the failure to correctly "identify the enemy," leading to internal divisiveness. (See "Identifying the Enemy: Racism, Regionalism, and Segmentation in the B.C. Labour Movement," unpublished paper, 1981.)

⁴⁵ McDonald, "Working Class Vancouver," 33-69. Seager argues that the New Westminster Trades and Labour Council was also dominated by moderates. See "Workers, Class, and Industrial Conflict," 125.

⁴⁶ VTLC Minutes, 21 April 1910, 20 April 1911, 15 April 1915, and 18 June 1914.

⁴⁷ The growth of radical socialism occurred throughout much of the western world at the end of World War I, as the common problem of economic and social dislocation was widespread. Compared to countries like Italy, Germany, and Hungary, the growth of radical socialism in Canada was weak. See, for example, Charles Bertrand, *Revolutionary Situations in Europe, 1917-1922: Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary* (Montreal: Interuniversity Centre for European Studies, 1976).

for the first time, were admitted into some white labour unions. Chinese and Japanese workers also organized their own trade unions within the lumber industry.⁴⁸

The first confrontation in which Asian workers played a dominant role during the war was the shingle weavers' strike in the summer of 1917. Approximately 800 men, three-quarters of whom were Chinese, struck in dozens of shingle mills in the lower mainland for an eight-hour day with ten hours' pay.⁴⁹ White workers were organized, separately, under the Shingle Weavers' Union, and Chinese workers were organized under the Chinese Canadian Labour Union, formed the previous year. According to *The Chinese Times*, the white union distributed leaflets in Chinese urging the Chinese to organize for shorter hours.⁵⁰ Once the strike began, however, Chinese workers were the main motivating force. As the *British Columbia Federationist* commented:

Officials of the Shingle Weavers' Union assert that if they were as sure of some of the married white workers as they are of the Chinese, there would be no difficulty in enforcing union conditions throughout the jurisdiction. . . . Chinese employees are asking for two cents more per thousand than the whites. However, it is possible that the whites may be able to get the Chinese to come to a more "reasonable" frame of mind. But at that, it's a sight for the gods.⁵¹

The strike was not successful, but it marked the beginning of large-scale organization among Asian workers in the lumber industry, and greater co-operation with whites.

In March 1919 Asian shingle weavers again launched a major strike in the industry. Approximately 1,200 Asian workers, mostly Chinese, struck up to fifty shingle mills in the lower mainland and on the coast to resist a 10 percent wage reduction. The strike lasted one month, with the old wage scale restored in April. In May, the Chinese Shingle Workers' Union, formed during the strike, demanded and won a further wage increase.⁵²

⁴⁸ In 1916 the Chinese Canadian Labour Union, later called the Chinese Workers' Union, was formed. In 1919 the Chinese Shingle Workers' Union was formed. In 1920 the Japanese Labour Union, later called the Japanese Camp and Mill Workers' Union, was founded. All three unions were involved in strikes in the lumber industry during the post-war period.

⁴⁹ PAC, Department of Labour, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts File, Vol. 306, Strike 43; *British Columbia Federationist*, 27 July 1917, 1; *The Chinese Times* (translations in UBCSC), 18 July 1917, and 24 July 1917.

⁵⁰ *Chinese Times*, 18 July 1917, and 24 July 1917.

⁵¹ *British Columbia Federationist*, 27 July 1917, 1.

⁵² PAC, Department of Labour, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts File, Vol. 310, Strike 27; *Chinese Times*, 7 March 1919, 9 April 1919, and 27 May 1919.

Incidents of this kind of Asian labour militancy led to calls for white workers to unite with Asians to improve the situation of all workers.

By 1919 *The British Columbia Federationist*, formerly affiliated with the VTLC, had adopted an explicitly socialist politics and would encourage the growth of the One Big Union. The paper both reflected and further encouraged greater Asian-white solidarity:

Yes fellow workers, Asiatic workers should be encouraged as joining [*sic*] white unions for it is a class problem, and not a race problem that confronts the white mill-worker of B.C.⁵³

It is time that all workers in Canada realised that the "Chink" is as much a part of this country as the Scotchman [*sic*]; that the "Bohunk" is as necessary as the Englishman; that all of us are exploited by a master-class who cares not what nationality we are so long as we remain willing slaves.⁵⁴

Asian workers, especially those in the shingle and saw mills, took an active part in the 1919 general strikes in Vancouver and New Westminster.⁵⁵ According to *The Chinese Times*, the VTLC "promised to treat the Chinese workers well after the strike was over . . . [and] help the Chinese to fight against discriminatory laws."⁵⁶ Asian workers also played an active role in many OBU-organized strikes for the eight-hour day in the lumber industry during 1919 and 1920. In some instances Asian workers were members of the Lumber Workers Industrial Union (OBU), although more commonly joint labour agitation occurred with Asians organized separately in the Chinese Shingle Workers' Union and the Japanese Workers Union.⁵⁷

There were many instances of solidarity unparalleled in the past. In April 1920, for example, Chinese workers, at least some of whom were members of the OBU, struck Fraser Mills in Maillardville when a wage increase was refused. White workers quit work in solidarity with the Chinese, and a joint committee was formed that successfully negotiated a wage increase. *The British Columbia Federationist* commented that such incidents should help to educate white mill workers who mistakenly believed

⁵³ *British Columbia Federationist*, 17 September 1920, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10 September 1920, 4.

⁵⁵ PAC, Department of Labour, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts File, Vol. 314, Strike 190; Vol. 315, Strike 221.

⁵⁶ *Chinese Times*, 10 June 1919.

⁵⁷ Accepting Asian members into OBU unions reflected a greater degree of racial solidarity than limited joint action during a labour conflict. It is probably unlikely, however, that large numbers of Asian workers actually joined OBU affiliates, especially since Chinese and Japanese workers organized their own unions in the lumber industry during this period.

that "the reason they are so poorly paid is because they have to compete with Oriental labour." In this and other cases, the "splendid solidarity evidenced in the way in which the white workers, Japs and Chinese stood together" was recognized as an important factor in the gains being made in the lumber industry.⁵⁸

Labour gains did not last long. By 1921 the post-war recession was producing an onslaught of wage reductions and the One Big Union, and radical socialist politics, dwindled almost as quickly as it had grown. The "moderate labourism" of the VTLC dominated Vancouver labour politics again and, with unemployment high and circumstances no longer advantageous for labour militancy among Asians or whites, Asian exclusion became a central focus of organized labour once again.⁵⁹ In May 1921 the VTLC launched a "Made in B.C. by citizens of Canada" campaign, suggesting that

the time has arrived when the citizens must draw the line more closely between our own nationals, and the aliens from other countries and particularly those from Asiatic countries with a lower standard of living; by replacing these men [with] returned men and citizens generally, with special regard for those who are suffering from handicaps incurred in the war.⁶⁰

Two weeks later the Council struck an "Asiatic Committee" to gather data on Asian employment. In July the committee reported that Asian immigration "constitutes the most serious social menace facing the citizens of B.C." and demanded that Asian immigration be prohibited.⁶¹ In August the VTLC, seven trade unions, five veterans' associations, and the Retail Merchants' Association formed the Asiatic Exclusion League at a meeting at the Labour Hall. The mandate of the Asiatic Exclusion League was threefold:

1. To educate the white population to the terrible menace of the Oriental immigration.

⁵⁸ *British Columbia Federationist*, 16 April 1920, 1, 8; 21 May 1920, 1.

⁵⁹ The One Big Union movement had split the labour movement in Vancouver. The craft unions withdrew from the VTLC, controlled by the OBU, in August 1919 and established the VTLC (International). As the OBU rapidly declined after 1920, the international unions again dominated the Vancouver labour movement and a single VTLC reigned by the mid-1920s. All references to the VTLC in the early 1920s refer to the International Council. See VTLC Minutes, 7 August 1919-4 September 1919. Phillips, *The British Columbia Labour Movement*, 196, 389; David Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 155-70.

⁶⁰ VTLC Minutes, 5 May 1921.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1921, and 21 July 1921.

2. To pledge every candidate who is running for Dominion offices at the next election to give a stated policy for the exclusion of Orientals.
3. To press for immediate registration of all Orientals in British Columbia under the auspices of the government.⁶²

Once the exclusion movement had succeeded with the passage of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1923 and the reduction of Japanese labourers to 150 per year, the Council concentrated on replacing Asian workers with whites and boycotting Asian businesses.⁶³

In 1921 the Japanese Workers' Union applied for affiliation with the VTLC but was turned down. Six years later, and now the Japanese Camp and Mill Workers' Union, the first Asian union became a member of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council. This time only five of the twenty-five unions that voted in the referendum on Japanese union affiliation objected to the latter's inclusion.⁶⁴ Japanese affiliation indicated a greater degree of racial tolerance within the VTLC, but it did not end exclusionary practices. The Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union, the Bakers' Union, the Domestic Workers' Union, and the Shingle Weavers' Union all undertook campaigns, endorsed by the VTLC, to replace Asian labour with white labour.⁶⁵ And when the Canadian Labor Party endorsed the enfranchisement of Asians in the spring of 1928, the VTLC withdrew its affiliation after thirty-two of thirty-six unions voted against the motion in a referendum.⁶⁶

Class conflict within the Japanese community was the main outcome of Japanese union affiliation with the VTLC. The Japanese Merchants' Association condemned Japanese involvement in the trade union movement and mounted a campaign to weaken the Japanese Camp and Mill Workers' Union. Japanese employers fired members belonging to the

⁶² *The British Columbia Labor News*, 19 August 1921, 1.

⁶³ Restrictions against Chinese immigration had been in effect since 1885, when a \$50 head tax was imposed. The tax was raised to \$100 in 1902, to \$500 in 1904, and in 1923 the Chinese Immigration Act was passed prohibiting the further immigration of all Chinese to Canada, excepting students, diplomats, and some merchants. The number of Japanese labourers eligible to immigrate to Canada each year was set, by agreement between the Canadian and Japanese governments, at 400 in 1908, and reduced to 150 in 1923; in 1928 "picture brides" were prohibited, ending further female Japanese immigration. East Indian immigration was halted by "continuous journey" legislation in 1908, which stipulated that immigrants must arrive in Canada by continuous journey from their country of origin. There were no direct shipping routes between Canada and India. By 1923, therefore, Asian immigration to Canada had all but ceased. See Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*, 81-92; Cheng, *Oriental Immigration*, 60, 66, 71, 92, 126, 136, and 145.

⁶⁴ VTLC Minutes, 4 August 1921, 19 July 1927, and 2 August 1927.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1927-1939; *The Labor Statesman*, 1927-1934.

⁶⁶ *Labor Statesman*, 6 April 1928, 1, 4; 4 May 1928, 1, 2; and 8 June 1928, 1.

union. Merchants withdrew all advertising from the union's newspaper, *The Daily People*, objecting to the paper's message that Japanese workers should unite against their employers. In response, the Japanese Camp and Mill Workers' Union organized a boycott of Japanese businesses and a food co-operative to supply their members needs.⁶⁷ Anti-union resistance by Asian employers, who were powerful members of the Asian communities, probably mitigated greater Asian labour organization. In any event, Asian workers were involved in few strikes during the rest of the 1920s and still faced considerable anti-Asian activity among white workers. Although the Camp and Mill Workers' Union was a member of the VTLC, Asians were still not welcome in the white unions. As one Japanese labour activist commented, "without the cooperation of the white unions we could achieve nothing."⁶⁸

As the economic crisis deepened and unemployment escalated during the early 1930s, labour militancy, among whites and Asians, and radical socialist politics grew. The social dislocation was so severe during the 1930s that for many workers capitalism was clearly identified as the "enemy," and solidarity between white and Asian workers was actively pursued. By the end of 1930 there were more unemployed in Vancouver than there were union members.⁶⁹ The depth of unemployment generated two different forums for labour activism: the organization of the unemployed and its increasing demands for state action; and the organization of the unorganized, especially in the lumber industry again, under the Workers' Unity League (WUL). Both the organization of the unemployed and the WUL occurred under the auspices of the Communist Party of Canada.

The VTLC became increasingly irrelevant to labour activism during the depression. Maintaining its stance of "moderate labourism," the VTLC continued to pursue strategies to increase the security and standard of living of its employed members and remained separate from the unemployed organizations and from the "dual unions" that it condemned.⁷⁰ The issue

⁶⁷ VTLC Minutes, February 1929–April 1929; Rolf Knight and Maya Koizumi, *A Man of Our Times: The Life History of a Japanese-Canadian Fisherman* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1976), 38-57.

⁶⁸ Ryuichi Yoshida, quoted in Knight and Koizumi, *A Man of Our Times*, 54.

⁶⁹ Phillips, *The British Columbia Labour Movement*, 271-74.

⁷⁰ Since the split with the OBU, the VTLC railed against the problem of "dual unions." During the early 1930s the Workers' Unity League and unemployed organizations (especially the National Unemployed Workers' Association) affiliated with the Communist Party repeatedly applied to speak at VTLC meetings and undertake joint actions, but were always turned down (VTLC Minutes, 1930-1936). Not until the WUL was disbanded to merge into the international unions in 1936 did closer relations between moderates and socialists in Vancouver become possible.

of unemployment did dominate Council concerns, but until the late 1930s one of its major solutions was to demand the exclusion of Asian workers in preference for the employment of whites. As the VTLC's newspaper *The Labor Statesman* often proclaimed, Asians should not be employed when thousands of "Canadian boys" were out of work.⁷¹ Moreover, it was up to the government to ensure the preferential hiring of whites:

... the Provincial Government should also require that goods or materials needed for public works should not be purchased from firms employing Oriental labor.⁷²

In spite of the persistence of the view in the mainstream labour movement that Asians were "foreigners" and not "real" Canadian workers (so the lives of the latter could be improved if the former were eliminated), the 1930s witnessed the breakdown of racial divisions in a more profound way than the brief post-war radicalism had. In the unions of the Workers' Unity League and in the National Unemployed Workers' Association, the umbrella organization for various unemployed groups, Asians were not only accepted as members, they were actively recruited as equals, and issues specific to Asian workers were placed on the labour agenda during conflicts.

The National Unemployed Workers' Association called for the solidarity of all unemployed workers:

The unemployed do not recognize any difference of race or color. . . . among the many thousands of unemployed workers organized in the NUWA there are many Oriental workers who are among the most highly respected in the organization.⁷³

The situation faced by unemployed workers varied by marital status, race, and sex. Chinese workers, for example, were ineligible for city relief because almost all were single men (unlike the Japanese) and only married men qualified for city relief in the early years of the depression. Unemployed Chinese workers were also ineligible for the Relief Camps for single men because these only accepted white men. Thus Chinese workers found unemployment particularly difficult and, as the resources within the Chinese community were stretched beyond their limits, formed the Chinese Unemployed Workers' Protective Association (CUWPA). CUWPA fought for relief for the unemployed along with the Single Unemployed Protective Association, which organized single white men in Vancouver,

⁷¹ *Labor Statesman*, 1 May 1931, 4; and 1930-1934.

⁷² *Ibid.*, June 1932, 1.

⁷³ *The Unemployed Worker*, 26 September 1931, 5.

and the Neighbourhood Councils and Block Committees of the National Unemployed Workers' Association, which organized married families (including Asian, mostly Japanese, families). These organizations successfully pressed for city relief for destitute Japanese (and in at least one instance Chinese) families. They fought for equal relief rates for Asian and white families after the City of Vancouver deemed the former to require 20 percent less than the latter to live. They also lobbied for relief for single Chinese men and demanded, though unsuccessfully, improved conditions in a mission soup kitchen that was contracted to feed unemployed Chinese in 1933 but was so inadequate that over 100 Chinese men died of starvation by 1935. These organizations also demonstrated from time to time to reinstate Chinese men who were cut off further assistance.⁷⁴

Solidaristic practices were not confined to issues of unemployment. Between 1931 and 1939 Asian workers were involved in at least twenty strikes in the lower mainland area, three-quarters of which were in saw mills and shingle mills (see Appendix A). Nearly half of these strikes took place in a single year, 1932, when Asian workers took part in eight strikes in local lumber mills. Most of these strikes were co-ordinated by the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union, affiliated with the Workers' Unity League. During some of these labour conflicts new demands for racial equality emerged.

In September 1931, 600 white, Chinese, Japanese, and East Indian workers struck Fraser Mills in Maillardville over a reduction in wages. Organized under the WUL, the strikers demanded a 10 percent wage increase, "equal pay for equal work," union recognition, the "abolition of the contract labor system for Oriental workers," and the immediate dismissal of the Japanese labour contractor.⁷⁵ The demands in this strike illustrate the extent to which Asian workers were integrated as fuller members of the union and strike committee, especially the demands for equal pay and the abolition of the contract labour system.⁷⁶ In August 1932

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1931-1934; *The B.C. Workers' News*, 1935-1937; *The People's Advocate*, 1937-1939; Creese, *Working Class Politics*, 146-51, and "Organizing Against Racism," 43-44; Wickberg, *From China to Canada*, 181-85.

⁷⁵ *Unemployed Worker*, 19 September 1931, 1, 2, and 4; 26 September 1931, 4; and 3 October 1931, 2; *The Labour Gazette*, October 1931, 1071-72; and December 1931, 1302-03. For a detailed analysis of the Fraser Mills strike, see Jeanne Myers, "Class and Community in the Fraser Mills Strike, 1931," in *Workers, Capital, and the State*, 141-60.

⁷⁶ The union strategy of equal pay was a response to differential wages based on marital status and race. The average hourly wage was 31 cents for married (white) men, 27 cents for single (white) men, and 20 cents for Asian men (Myers, "Class and Community," 146). Strategies of equal pay ran counter to continuing traditions of

fifty white and Japanese workers struck at Sterling Shingle Mills in Vancouver for a 10 percent wage increase and the reinstatement of workers discharged for union organizing, most of whom were Japanese. According to *The Lumber Worker* (a WUL newspaper), this was the first strike where white workers went out in order to protect the jobs of Asian workers.⁷⁷ In September 1933, 1,200 white and Japanese men and women, organized under the WUL, struck a Fraser Valley hop farm demanding a wage increase and better living conditions, especially improvements in the Japanese living quarters. The strike committee included Japanese and white representatives, with the Japanese initially demanding higher wages than the white strikers.⁷⁸ Asian representation on WUL strike committees was common; in fact, it was an intentional strategy of the union and often resulted in placing demands specific to Asian workers on the strike agenda.

The most notable feature of Asian labour militancy during the 1930s was the degree to which Asians were included as equal members of (at least part of) the labour movement in comparison to previous periods.⁷⁹ At the end of the 1930s, after the WUL unions had merged into the international labour movement, even some of the most vocal anti-Asian unions

differential pay for whites and Asians, even when performing the same work. In mainstream trade unions these differentials were included within union agreements in the late 1930s, after the WUL unions had merged into the international unions and Asians were eligible for membership in the latter. For example, in a contract with the International Brotherhood of Papermakers in 1938 "the basic rate for Occidental workers was 51 cents per hour and for Oriental workers 41 cents per hour; from January 1, 1938, these basic rates were raised to 54 and 44 cents per hour respectively" (*Labour Gazette*, December 1938, 1405). Some union contracts even distinguished racial wage scales for each job classification, as a contract in Ocean Falls shows:

... logging (summer) — boommen 68 cents; sawmill — boommen (Oriental) 53 cents, pickers (Oriental) 44 cents, millwrights 68 and 82 cents, bargemen (Oriental) 44 and 58 cents. . . . (*Labour Gazette*, December 1938, 1406)

⁷⁷ *Lumber Worker*, September 1932, 10; PAC, Department of Labour, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts File, Vol. 353, Strike 140.

⁷⁸ *Unemployed Worker*, 13 September 1933, 7; VTLC Minutes, 19 September 1933; PAC, Department of Labour, RG 27, Strikes and Lockouts File, Vol. 356, Strike 102.

⁷⁹ From the perspective of Asian workers, the solidaristic practices of working-class organizations espousing radical socialist views was double-edged. According to some Japanese workers, the socialist orientation of these groups probably deterred many Asians from more active participation in labour struggles. As one Japanese worker remembered, this was because Japanese workers recognized that the socialist movement was deemed illegitimate in the dominant society, and was even less acceptable to leaders of the ethnic community than the mainstream labour movement. This suggests that Asian labour militancy might have been enhanced considerably had the mainstream labour movement, rather than only its socialist wing, adopted solidaristic labour practices. See Public Archives of British Columbia, Reynoldson Research Project, Oral History Tapes 1462 and 1465.

in Vancouver began to include Asian workers within their ranks. The Hotel and Restaurant Employees' Union, for example, hired a Chinese labour organizer to help unionize Chinese cooks in 1938.⁸⁰ Asian workers were by no means fully integrated into the Vancouver labour movement during the 1930s, but the shift toward the acceptance of Asians as equal workers and citizens (rather than as "foreigners") was well underway within sections of the organized working class during the depression. The events of the Second World War demonstrate that racial equality had not yet been accomplished. As the depression ended with the Second World War, Japanese Canadians were again defined as the "foreign" enemy, not only by the Canadian state but also by the white labour movement in British Columbia.⁸¹

Conclusions

The politics of the Vancouver working class reflect the heterogeneity of the conditions experienced by workers. The labour movement in Vancouver, as in all capitalist societies, emerged out of the struggle over control in the workplace and the political sphere; but employment practices were neither colour blind nor sex blind. Male, female, white, and Asian workers did not receive equal treatment in the labour market, by the state, or in civil society. The material realities of working-class life included relations of white domination and Asian subordination (and male domination and female subordination) that, to a large extent, defined conditions of work and wages, and the nature of citizenship rights within civil society. It is little wonder, then, that working-class politics were structured by ethnic (and gender) relations of inequality.

Labour competition was indeed central to racial divisions within the Vancouver working class, but labour competition is not sufficient to explain these divisions. Common assumptions that Asian exclusion was the only possible outcome of labour competition while labour solidarity was impossible are challenged by the foregoing analysis. The extent of Asian labour militancy before the Second World War shows that assumptions about docile and "unorganizable" Asians are, at the very least, exaggerated. Moreover, it should be recognized that the actions of white workers thwarted greater Asian labour organization in the first place. It is

⁸⁰ Hotel, Restaurant, and Culinary Employees' Union, Local 28, Minute Books, 23 March 1938–17 July 1938.

⁸¹ As Werner Cohn has shown, even the CCF and the Communist Party in British Columbia supported the internment of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War. See "The Persecution of Japanese Canadians and the Political Left in British Columbia, December 1941–March 1942," *BC Studies* 68 (Winter 1985): 3–22.

reasonable to assume that Asians would have been even more active in labour struggles if white workers had been more open to co-operation with Asians. Furthermore, if labour competition was a sufficient explanation for exclusionary practices we would expect such practices to be heightened during the depression of the 1930s, when labour competition was most intense. Instead, racial solidarity was strongest during this period. A fuller explanation for racial divisions, and the process of overcoming these cleavages, must include attention to the subordinate status of Asians within civil society, patterns of Asian labour militancy, and changes in the political/ideological orientation of white workers, since socialists and labour reformists pursued different strategies toward Asian workers.

Asian workers formed a pool of cheap labour whose social status within civil society, established through state immigration policies and the denial of political rights, was as permanent "foreigners." For white workers, whose own precarious existence was further threatened by cheaper Asian labour, the "foreigner" status of Asians led, at least for the majority who embraced labour reformism, to strategies of exclusion; as "foreign" workers, Asians were not considered part of the "real" (white) working class whose common interests organized labour sought to represent. A pattern of ethnic divisions developed in Vancouver whereby economically and politically stronger white workers sought to improve their lives by excluding Asian workers from better jobs and, preferably, from the country. Racist labour practices in turn reinforced the subordination of Asian workers in the labour market and in civil society, and ensured their persistence as cheap labour.

Asian labour militancy was hampered by lack of economic and political resources, the racist practices of organized white workers, and class conflict within the ethnic communities. Yet contrary to much of the literature on British Columbia labour history, there was a thread of Asian labour militancy throughout this century. At the end of the First World War, increased Asian labour activism was facilitated by the war-induced labour shortage and inflation, greater militancy among white workers, and the strengthening of socialist politics advocating solidarity with Asians. The severity of the depression of the 1930s fostered even greater Asian labour activism, much of it organized by the Communist-led Workers Unity League and the organizations of the unemployed. During the 1930s, Asian workers began to place their own issues on the political agenda, an indication of their inclusion as more equal members of the labour movement compared to earlier periods of co-operation.

A necessary condition for bridging ethnic divisions among Vancouver workers was the redefinition of Asians as workers, like others in Canada, rather than as "foreigners." The adoption of socialist politics, with its sharper focus on class divisions and solidarity among all workers, and evidence of common class interests shown through Asian labour activism, helped to break down ethnic divisions within working-class politics even though differential racist treatment by employers and the Canadian state, and labour competition between white and Asian men, persisted.

APPENDIX A

Strikes Involving Asian Workers in the Greater Vancouver Area, 1900-1939

<i>Date</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Ethnic Composition</i>
July 1900	salmon fishery	Japanese/White/Native
July 1901	salmon fishery	Japanese/White/Native
Aug. 1901	salmon cannery	Chinese
Jan. 1903	sawmill	Japanese/White
May 1903	sawmill	Japanese
June 1903	factory woodworkers	*Asian/White
July 1903	salmon fishery	Japanese/White/Native
Jan. 1905	sawmill	Japanese
Nov. 1906	laundry	Chinese
Feb. 1909	sawmill	East Indian
Aug. 1913	salmon fishery	Japanese/White/Native
Aug. 1913	salmon cannery	Japanese/Native
May 1916	sawmill	Japanese/White
July 1917	shingle mills	Chinese/White
Nov. 1917	factory	Chinese
April 1918	sawmill	Chinese/Japanese
March 1919	shingle mills	Chinese/E. Indian/Japanese
June 1919	General Strike (Van.)	*Asian/White
June 1919	General Strike (N.W.)	*Asian/White
Oct. 1919	shingle mill	Chinese
Nov. 1919	vegetable hawkers	Chinese
April 1920	shingle mill	Chinese/White
May 1920	seamen	Chinese/Japanese/White
April 1921	sawmill	Japanese
Sept. 1921	shingle mills	Chinese/White
May 1925	salmon fishery	Japanese/White/Native
June 1925	seamen	Chinese
Sept. 1925	salmon fishery	Japanese/White
July 1926	vegetable cannery	Japanese/White
Sept. 1927	salmon fishery	Japanese/White
Oct. 1929	shingle mill	Chinese
Sept. 1931	sawmill	Chinese/Japanese/E. Indian/White
Sept. 1931	sawmill	*Asian/White
March 1932	bowling alley	Japanese

<i>Date</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Ethnic Composition</i>
July 1932	shingle mill	Chinese/Japanese/White
July 1932	shingle mill	Chinese/White
Aug. 1932	shingle mill	Chinese/White
Aug. 1932	sawmill	Japanese/White
Aug. 1932	sawmill	Chinese/White
Sept. 1932	shingle mill	Japanese/E. Indian/White
Sept. 1932	shingle mill	Chinese/White
Nov. 1932	sawmill	Japanese/E. Indian/White
Aug. 1933	shingle mill	*Asian/White
Sept. 1933	hop pickers	Japanese/White
Feb. 1935	shingle mill	Chinese/White
March 1935	shingle mill	East Indian
June 1935	salmon fishery	Japanese/White/Native
Aug. 1935	shingle mill	Chinese/White
Sept. 1935	hop pickers	Japanese/White
June 1936	salmon fishery	Japanese/White
Dec. 1937	shingle mill	Chinese

* Composition of Asian strikers unknown.

SOURCES: Canada, Department of Labour Strikes and Lockout Files, 1907-1939 (PAC RG 27); *Labour Gazette*, 1900-1939; *The Western Clarion*, 1903-1920; *The B.C. Trades Unionist*, 1908-1909; *The Western Wage Earner*, 1909-1911; *The British Columbia Federationist*, 1911-1925; *The British Columbia Labor News*, 1921-1922; *The Labor Statesman*, 1924-1934; *The Unemployed Worker*, 1931-1934; *The B.C. Worker's News*, 1935-1937; *The People's Advocate*, 1937-1939; *The Chinese Times*, 1914-1939; *The Lumber Worker*, 1932; Gladstone and Jamieson, 1950; and Conley, 1988.