

“‘Open Shop’ Means Closed to Union Men”: Carpenters and the 1911 Vancouver Building Trades General Strike*

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“‘Open shop’ means low wages, long hours, . . . wives forced to go out to work to earn the necessities of life for the kiddies . . . the open shop town means that starvation, prostitution and vice of every shape reigns supreme.”¹ The dire warnings of the Building Trades Council’s *Strike Bulletin* indicate the passions animating the month-long general strike of Vancouver building trades workers in June 1911. The 1911 general strike was a pivotal episode in the history of the Vancouver working class. Its effects on class formation are comparable to the 1903 UBRE strike against the CPR, and it was a link across the prewar depression between the 1909-1912 strike wave and the militancy and radicalism of 1917-1919.² The conditions leading to the 1911 strike also help explain the labour revolt of 1918-1919.

Despite its significance, the 1911 building trades general strike has received little attention in recent historical literature on Vancouver workers. It goes unnoticed in P. Roy’s *Vancouver* and in *Working Lives. Building British Columbia* mentions the general strike in a paragraph on the carpenters’ strike that precipitated it, and older sources such as P. Phillips’ *No Power Greater* and S. Jamieson’s *Times of Trouble* devote a handful of lines to the general strike.³

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¹ *Strike Bulletin*, 26 June 1911. The quotation in the title is from the same source.

² H. Tuck, “The United Brotherhood of Railway Employees in Western Canada, 1898-1905,” *Labour/Le Travailleur* 11 (1983): 63-88; P. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1967); on the latter, G. S. Kealey, “1919: The Canadian labour revolt,” *Labour/Le Travail* 13: 11-44; D. Cruikshank and G. S. Kealey, “Canadian strike statistics, 1891-1950,” *Labour/Le Travail* 20 (1987): 85-145; J. R. Conley, “Frontier labourers, crafts in crisis, and the western labour revolt: The case of Vancouver, 1900-1919,” *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (1989): 9-37.

³ P. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto, 1980); *Working Lives* Collective, *Working Lives: Vancouver 1886-1986* (Vancouver, 1985); Carpenters’ Pensioners Association of British Columbia, “*Building British Columbia!*” *The Story of*

The strike's significance goes beyond British Columbia. It was an important but neglected instance of the early twentieth-century struggle of craft workers against the concentration of capital, the reorganization of the labour process, and the formation of national and international labour markets. It was the culmination in Vancouver of a struggle by building trades workers, led by carpenters, to control a labour market being transformed by large general contracting, craft deskilling, and high levels of migration. The history of this strike and the conditions leading up to it contributes to our knowledge of the building trades, which, with a few notable exceptions, have been neglected by the new labour history of the last two decades.⁴

The present paper seeks to accomplish three tasks. The first is to rescue the 1911 building trades general strike from historical oblivion. The second is to show how it was a response to early twentieth century changes in the construction industry, especially as they affected carpenters. The third is to show the significance of the general strike by identifying links between it and the events of the labour revolt of 1917-1919.

The Vancouver Construction Industry

Vancouver emerged from the 1890s depression as British Columbia's metropolis, and growing construction activity followed in the 1900s.⁵ Construction grew slowly and unsteadily from 1900 to 1908, boomed from 1909 to 1912, then fell into severe depression from 1913 to the end of World War I (table 1). Thousands of carpenters, bricklayers, stonemasons, electricians, plasterers, painters, plumbers, other craftsmen, their helpers, and labourers built the city's houses, offices, shops, warehouses, and fac-

the Carpenters' Union and the Trade Union Movement Since 1881 (Vancouver, 1979), 21; P. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1967), 50; S. Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-66* (Ottawa, 1968), 75.

⁴ The exceptions are W. Roberts, "Artisans, Aristocrats and Handymen: Politics and Unionism among Toronto Skilled Building Trades Workers, 1896-1914," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976), 92-121; I. McKay, *The Craft Transformed: An Essay on the Carpenters of Halifax* (Halifax, 1985); M. Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, 1987). As a result of this neglect, the building trades have languished in the grasp of Wisconsin school labour economists, for whom they have been the epitome of purely job conscious business unionists. See M. Kazin, "Review" of McKay, op. cit., *Labour/Le Travail* 19 (1987), 171-73; M. Dubofsky, "Review" of Kazin, op. cit., *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (1989): 341-43.

⁵ R. A. J. McDonald, "Victoria, Vancouver and the evolution of British Columbia's economic system, 1886-1914," in A. F. J. Artibise, ed., *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development* (Regina, 1981).

TABLE 1
Vancouver Building Permits, 1902-1919

<i>Year</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Value (\$)</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Value (\$)</i>
1902	417	833,607	1911	2,775	17,652,642
1903	580	1,426,148	1912	3,221	19,388,322
1904	836	1,986,590	1913	2,020	10,423,197
1905	940	2,653,000	1914	1,314	4,484,476
1906	1,006	4,408,410	1915	615	1,593,379
1907	1,772	5,632,744	1916	444	2,412,889
1908	1,697	5,950,893	1917	561	768,255
1909	2,052	7,258,565	1918	829	1,440,384
1910	2,260	13,150,365	1919	1,233	2,271,411

SOURCE: Vancouver, Comptroller, Financial Statements and Annual Reports, "Report of the Building Inspector," 1936, 91.

Note: Building activity in 1913 was lower than indicated here, because many projects which received permits were never financed. See Bartlett, "Real Wages," 9.

tories. Near the height of the construction boom in 1911, the census reported over 6,000 construction workers living in the city of Vancouver alone (table 2).⁶ About 90 per cent were building trades craftsmen, and the rest labourers. The nearly 3,000 carpenters were by far the largest trade in the city in 1911. Painters, plumbers and steamfitters, bricklayers, masons and stonecutters, and plasterers were the next largest crafts, with hundreds of members each.

Like their counterparts elsewhere, early twentieth century building trades workers in Vancouver faced three challenges: first, a construction industry being transformed by the rise of general contracting and speculative building; second, changes in the labour process and technology; third, the development of national and international labour markets.⁷

⁶ Many construction workers must also have been living in Vancouver's working-class suburbs.

⁷ D. W. Holdsworth, "House and Home in Vancouver: The Emergence of a West Coast Urban Landscape, 1886-1929," Ph.D. thesis (University of British Columbia, 1981), 7; Jamieson, *Times of Trouble*, 74. For the same conditions in nineteenth century England, see R. Price, *Masters, Unions and Men: Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour 1830-1914* (Cambridge, 1980); for San Francisco, Kazin, *Barons of Labour*, 138-42; and for building in general, R. A. Christie, *Empire in Wood: A History of the Carpenters' Union* (Ithaca, 1956), 7-11.

TABLE 2
Construction Workers, City of Vancouver, 1911, 1921

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>1911</i>		<i>1921</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Bricklayers ^a	299	4.8	120	4.8
Carpenters	2,991	48.3	1,128	45.5
Concrete builders	42	0.7	—	—
Electricians	76	1.2	147	5.9
Masons and stonecutters	228	3.7	—	—
Metal workers and roofers ^b	158	2.6	15	0.6
Painters and decorators	719	11.6	345	13.9
Plasterers	412	6.7	67	2.7
Plumbers and steamfitters	584	9.4	189	7.6
Structural iron workers	84	1.4	40	1.6
Labourers	600	9.7	271	10.9
Other ^c	—	—	156	6.3
TOTAL	6,193	100.0	2,478	100.0

SOURCE: Canada, 1911 Census, Vol. 6, Table VI; 1921 Census, Vol. III, Table 40.

^a Includes masons in 1921.

^b In 1921, roofers and slaters.

^c In 1921, apprentices, crane men stationary engineers, other construction workers.

The building industry in early twentieth-century Vancouver had two important features.⁸ First, it was divided among a few large general contractors, concentrated in the commercial-industrial sector, and numerous small builders and subcontractors, mostly in residential construction. Second, it was an intensely competitive, unstable industry highly dependent on financial capital and economic growth in other sectors of the economy.

Major construction projects, such as office buildings, factories and warehouses, were built by a small number of very large general contractors. McDonald and Wilson, stonecutting and general contractors, employed "hundreds" of skilled stonecutters and masons on its contracts for the

⁸ Labour history is not alone in neglecting construction: I am not aware of any scholarly studies of construction business history in British Columbia, and what follows only scratches its surface.

courthouse and Carter-Cotton building in Vancouver, and the parliament buildings in Victoria. Norton-Griffith Steel Construction Company employed 4,000 craftsmen and labourers in Vancouver and Victoria in 1912.⁹

In contrast to general contractors and the few large housebuilders, most builders in residential construction were small, and most specialty subcontractors (for plumbing, electrical work, etc.) smaller still. The 6,193 construction workers in Vancouver in 1911 were employed by 381 builders, contractors, and general contractors, for an average of only sixteen workers per employer.¹⁰ If specialty subcontractors were included, the average would be even lower.¹¹

Little capital was needed to enter the ranks of small contractors and subcontractors. Most specialty contracting required only a licence, the kit of tools which any tradesman would possess, and access to a supplier who would provide materials at a discount or on credit. The line between craftsman and small contractor was narrow, and building trades unionists occasionally started their own contracting firms.¹² Even in residential housebuilding, entry to the ranks of small capitalists was not difficult, as long as mortgages were available. House designs obtained from pattern books permitted precise calculation of material and labour costs, and small contractors or individual builders could construct one or a few houses, using the money from their sale to finance further construction.¹³ Thus Ernest Winch, the future socialist leader in Vancouver, tried his hand as a building contractor at the end of the 1909-1912 construction boom, erecting one heavily mortgaged house in Burnaby and seven in White Rock.¹⁴

Winch's creditors foreclosed on both of his housebuilding ventures, exemplifying the high turnover of small contractors in a competitive industry,

⁹ *Greater Vancouver Illustrated* (Vancouver, 1908), 138-39; H. J. Boam, *British Columbia: Its History, Commerce, Industry and Resources* (London, 1912), 183-85.

¹⁰ Canada, 1911 *Census*, vol. 6, table VI, 286; Henderson's *Greater Vancouver, New Westminster and Fraser Valley Directory*, 1911, 1528-31, 1533-34.

¹¹ For example, in eleven plumbing shops in 1905, the proprietors did all the work, aided only by apprentices. Seven other shops employed a total of forty-five journeymen plumbers, for an average of less than seven each (the largest employed ten). *Province*, 1 May 1905; *Labour Gazette* V (1905), 1384. There were some large subcontractors, however.

¹² See *Independent*, 15 and 22 Feb. 1902, 12 April 1902, for examples from carpentry, painting, plumbing, and electrical work. Mobility could also work the other way, and subcontractors return to union ranks.

¹³ Holdsworth, "House and Home in Vancouver," 122-26, 193, 200.

¹⁴ D. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver, 1960), 25-26.

and their precarious dependence on financial capital.¹⁵ Of twenty-five contractors listed in the city directory in 1905, only twelve were still in business in some form in 1910, suggesting that thirteen failed to weather the 1907-1908 recession.¹⁶ The converse of those failures was the rise of new contractors during the boom: 90 per cent of the construction companies in Vancouver in 1912 had registered with the provincial government after 1909.¹⁷

Since labour formed a large part of building costs, intense competition for contracts pressured both large and small builders to reduce wages or increase productivity.

Controlling wages was one objective of associations of builders and contractors organized in response to the unionization of building trades workers. The most important of these was the Builders' Exchange, formed in 1902 to organize general contractors for negotiations with carpenters.¹⁸ Specialty contractors organized their own associations, such as the Master Painters Association. The leading role in these organizations was played by large contractors, who were critical in determining wages and conditions. Small contractors, who were close to being building trades workers themselves, often stayed out of associations, and were more willing to concede union demands.

To increase productivity, builders transformed the labour process through speed-ups, piecework, and technological change. John Davidson, an Amalgamated carpenter and foreman, described the effects of speed-ups to the B.C. Labor Commission:¹⁹

The men, as a rule, I find are so afraid of not working fast enough to hold their jobs that they will take unnecessary chances. Time and again I have had to order men off the scaffold. They were anxious to get done and they would say

¹⁵ Even large contractors in residential construction were closely tied to speculative financial capital. For example, Prudential Builders, which described itself as "probably the largest home builders under the British flag," was a subsidiary of Prudential Investment Company. See Holdsworth, "House and Home," 181-83, 193-99. The Bungalow Building and Finance Company employed a "small army of workmen" in house construction. Boam, *British Columbia*, 191-93.

¹⁶ Henderson's *City of Vancouver Directory*, 1905, 533; Henderson's *Vancouver and North Vancouver*, 1910, 1344-47. The city directory becomes an uninformative source after 1911, so no further comparisons were possible.

¹⁷ D. McCririck, "Opportunity and the Workingman: A Study of Land Accessibility and the Growth of Blue Collar Suburbs in Early Vancouver," M.A. thesis (University of British Columbia), 1981, 44-45.

¹⁸ Another objective was to protect "bona fide" contractors from "irresponsible" price-cutting competitors. *News-Advertiser*, 18 and 21 November 1902. See also United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJ) 617 Regular Minutes, 13 and 24 August 1902, on the "unionization" of the bosses.

¹⁹ *Proceedings*, vol. 1, 126; cf. 44-45, 64-65.

'It's good enough.' . . . A certain amount of work is required or you lose your job.

Productivity was further increased by purchasing ready-made building components instead of having skilled craftsmen make them on the building site. The brunt of this change was borne by carpenters, as mouldings, trim, doors, and windows were produced in mechanized sash and door factories beginning in the nineteenth century.²⁰ In the words of B. D. Grant of the New Westminster UBCJ local: "the tools of the skilled craftsmen have gradually been, and are still being taken from them and placed in the factories until today the skilled craftsman of other days is becoming less and less necessary to the modern building."²¹ Mechanization in carpentry created the conditions for specialization in the installation of standardized fixtures, making possible the introduction of less skilled men, piecework, and speed-ups.²² New materials such as sheet metal, tile, terra cotta, and plasterboard, and new building methods such as steel frame or reinforced concrete construction had the same effect.

Technological changes opened skilled building crafts up to increasing competition from less skilled workers, and created the conditions for a myriad of jurisdictional disputes between unions. The effects varied by trade, however. Secure crafts such as bricklayers and masons, stonecutters, lathers, and plasterers confronted technological change mainly in the form of new building materials. Because they possessed strong job and labour market control based on skills indispensable to the sequential building pro-

²⁰ B. Reckman, "Carpentry: The craft and the trade," in A. Zimbalist, ed. *Case Studies on the Labor Process* (New York, 1979); Christie, *Empire*, 26-28; Holdsworth "House and Home," 122-26. In 1904 and 1905, the two carpenters' unions unsuccessfully sought to discourage factory work that could be done on the building site. UBCJ Minutes, 23 Nov. 1904, 26 Jan. 1905.

²¹ B. D. Grant, "The Evolution of the Modern Carpenter," *B.C. Federationist*, 3 Aug. 1912, 4; Reckman, "Carpentry," 85-90; Christie, *Empire in Wood*, 25-26. Kazin argues that carpentry was not deskilled, but his only evidence is the diary of one old-time skilled carpenter (*Barons of Labor*, 82-83). The point is not that individual carpenters were deskilled, but that the trade was threatened by technological changes and pressures of capital accumulation that led to growing competition from "green hands," wood butchers, and handymen. See Christie, *op. cit.*, 325, fn. 3, where he makes it clear that the "old time" all-round carpenters were not extinct, only reduced in number.

²² *B.C. Federationist*, 7 Feb. 1913, 4; Christie, *Empire in Wood*, 26-28. In Vancouver, evidence for the introduction of piecework is mainly provided by strikes against it. For example see *Independent*, 3 Jan. 1903, (carpenters), 4 April 1903 (builders' labourers); *Labour Gazette* IV (1904), 772, V (1905), 1217, VI (1905), 517 (lathers); Painters' Minutes, 21 Jan. 1908 (painters); *B.C. Federationist*, 6 May 1912, 4, 7 Feb. 1913, 4 (carpenters). See also UBCJ 617 Minutes, 22 May 1902, 11 June 1902, 18 Sept. 1902, 14 Jan. 1903, 11 Sept. 1905, 9 March 1910.

cess, technological changes were less of a challenge to these smaller, specialized trades than to threatened crafts like carpentry.²³

The impact of changes in the labour process was compounded by the organization of the construction labour market. Its most important features were the temporary nature of employment and the early twentieth-century development of new national and international labour markets.

Building contractors and subcontractors limited labour costs and maintained flexibility by employing tradesmen and labourers casually, hiring and laying them off according to immediate, fluctuating requirements.²⁴ Casual employment was made easier for contractors by a constant influx of building trades workers from the British Isles and the western United States.²⁵ The secretary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters local wrote in 1905, "this city seems to be the last jumping-off place for all the people who imigrate [*sic*] from European countries and from Eastern Canada. These people being strangers here are generally falling into the hands of unfair employers who do everything in their power to down unionism."²⁶ To counter this, the union posted notices with the location of the labour hall at restaurants, the railway station, and wharves.²⁷ As in Halifax, non-union workers in the surrounding area were also a problem. In New Westminster, North Vancouver, and South Vancouver in 1911, half to three-quarters of carpenters were reportedly non-union.²⁸ As a result, complained the Vancouver local, "we are hampered by the large number of non-union men flocking to this city from outside districts whom we are compelled to organize in order to safeguard the advantages we have gained."²⁹ Deskillng intensified competition, and carpenters in particular were increasingly vulnerable to competition from low-wage "handymen." In response, carpenters and other tradesmen sought control over the labour market through the union shop.³⁰ According to one carpenter, "al-

²³ Roberts, "Artisans, Aristocrats and Handymen," 110-13; on bricklayers and the threat from cement, see *Western Wage Earner*, Sept. 1909, 7; on stonecutters and terra cotta, *Western Wage Earner*, Dec. 1910, 1; VTLC Minutes, 15 Dec. 1910.

²⁴ See Christie, *Empire in Wood*, 14-16, for a good description.

²⁵ *World*, 8 April 1911.

²⁶ *Carpenter*, July 1905, 31.

²⁷ UBCJ 617 Executive Minutes, 10 Dec. 1910, UBCJ 617 Minutes, 15 March 1911.

²⁸ UBCJ District Council Minutes, 19 May 1911. On Halifax, see McKay, *The Craft Transformed*, 34-35.

²⁹ *Carpenter* December 1910, 40. For more in a similar vein, see *Carpenter*, February 1912, 26 October 1913, 35.

³⁰ *B.C. Federationist*, 7 Feb. 1913, 4; B.C. Labor Commission, *Proceedings*, vol. 4, 45; Reckman, "Carpentry," 85-87; Roberts, "Artisans, Aristocrats and Handymen," 93-100; W. Galenson, *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters: The First Hundred Years* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 18, 26, 112-13.

most any Union of any size is an employment bureau in itself," a primary task of union business agents being to keep in touch with contractors and supply them with men.³¹ The only way in which decent working conditions could be maintained was union control of the labour market.

Changes in the labour process and labour market meant that craft unionism in the building trades embodied a tension between an exclusivism based on particular craft interests and a more inclusive type of unionism based on interests shared with other skilled and unskilled workers. Craft exclusivism had two sides: it was both "a wall of exclusion" against other workers and a barrier to capitalist control over the labour process.³² Exclusivism's divisive side emerged in response to technological change as jurisdictional squabbles with other unions, in response to the changing labour market as racism, and in response to deskilling as restriction of union membership to skilled men.³³ Its combative side arose primarily in resistance to new technologies or forms of labour control such as piecework. Inclusivist tendencies appeared mainly in attempts by all crafts to jointly control the labour market through union shops, and to defend union institutions against aggressive employers. Job control issues were associated with exclusivism, and labour market control issues with inclusivism.³⁴

The concentration of capital, the transformation of the labour process, and the expansion of the labour market came to a head in the 1909-12 boom. In the decade leading up to that boom, Vancouver building trades workers developed their collective responses in struggles to control the labour market.

Prelude: The Struggle for Control, 1900-1909

Beginning with carpenters, every major building trade in the Vancouver area was unionized by the early 1900s.³⁵ The new unions concentrated on

³¹ This was true at least of the unions of carpenters, painters, plumbers, and electricians. See B.C. Labor Commission, *Proceedings*, vol. 3, 171-72.

³² McKay, *Craft Transformed*, 23.

³³ For evidence of racism among building unions, see UBCJ Minutes, 13 Sept. 1900, 11 Sept. 1907; IBEW 213 Minutes 24 Aug. 1905, 22 Aug. 1906; Painters Minutes 8 Oct. 1907, 3 Dec. 1907.

³⁴ The same relationship held in shipbuilding during the wartime boom, when wage and union shop issues led to large strikes involving all shipyard workers, but job control issues such as the training of apprentices led to narrow actions by individual crafts. See J. Conley, "Class Conflict and Collective Action in the Vancouver Working Class, 1900-1919," PhD. thesis (Carleton University, 1986), ch. 8.

³⁵ A branch of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ) was formed in Vancouver in 1889, and a branch of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJ) was organized in 1890, the same year that stonemasons and bricklayers were also organized. Unions of plumbers, plasterers, and bricklayers dissolved

achieving higher wages and shorter hours, and controlling the labour market either individually or collectively through Building Trades Council (BTC) "universal working cards." The card system was in effect and intention a union shop in the building trades, in which no union tradesman would work on a construction site where any other building trades worker was not a union member in good standing.³⁶ When it was effective, the system allowed the weaker trades to benefit from the power of the stronger to control the labour market and working conditions. But the card system faced several obstacles and required continual enforcement by BTC business agents and union job stewards. Contractors sometimes insisted that unions withdraw from the BTC and tried to keep business agents off work sites.³⁷ Some union men were reluctant to take out or show their cards, and the casual labour market enabled non-union men to jump from job to job.³⁸

The first twentieth century Building Trades Council in Vancouver was formed on 1 March 1901, on the initiative of carpenters and in response to increasing immigration. After a false start in 1901, a card system was successfully enforced in early May 1902.³⁹ It resulted in an immediate rise in the number of union jobs, and every union belonging to the BTC grew.⁴⁰ The card system continued to be effective until 1905, when an influx of labour from outside Vancouver led to increasing employment of non-union workers, loss of confidence in the BTC business agent, and inability to enforce the card system.⁴¹ The BTC dissolved in November.⁴² Attempts

in the 1890s recession, but as economic conditions improved at the end of the decade, they were reorganized and new unions founded by bricklayers and plumbers in 1898, and by painters and plasterers in 1899. Builders' labourers and sheet metal workers were organized in 1902, and lathers in 1904. Electricians were organized with electrical linemen in IBEW 213 in 1901, forming a separate local in 1908. E. Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto, 1982), 185-200; VTLC Minutes, 20 Nov. 1902; *Independent*, 18 Oct. 1902; 5 Sept. 1903; *Labour Gazette* III (1903), 482, IV (1904), 1276, IX (1909), 961-65; *B.C. Trades Unionist*, June 1908, 3.

³⁶ "Union shop" and "closed shop" were not distinguished in this period, so the two terms will be used interchangeably here.

³⁷ See Painters Minutes 26 Feb. 1903, and for the withdrawal of plumbers for that reason, *Independent*, 27 June 1903; *Province*, 25 and 29 June 1903; *World*, 29 June 1903. On employers refusing business agents access to jobs, see UBCJ 617 Minutes, 23 Dec. 1903.

³⁸ On the former, see Painters Minutes, 12 Feb. 1903; UBCJ 617 Minutes 11 and 25 Feb. 1903, 28 Nov. 1903; on the latter, see UBCJ 617 Minutes, 9 May 1906.

³⁹ *Independent*, 16 March 1901, 15 June 1901, 5 September 1903; UBCJ 617 Minutes, 8 and 22 May 1902.

⁴⁰ *Independent*, 22 March 1902, 17, 24 and 31 May 1902, 14 and 28 June 1902, 16 Aug. 1902; *Labour Gazette* II (1902), 735.

⁴¹ UBCJ 617 Minutes, 22 March 1905, 26 April 1905, 14 June 1905, 12 and 19 July 1905, 9 Aug. 1905, 27 Sept. 1905; IBEW 213 Minutes, 27 April 1905, 14 Dec. 1905.

⁴² The council had already been weakened by the withdrawal of the plumbers in 1903

to revive it in 1906 failed when carpenters refused their support, and although a branch of the Structural Building Trades Alliance was formed in 1907, no attempts were made to enforce a card system until 1909.⁴³

While they struggled collectively to control the labour market through the BTC, members of individual building trades also fought for their own craft objectives. Carpenters were the largest and most militant craft. Strongly organized in the first few years of the century, they won major concessions from the Builders Exchange in 1900, and the two unions tripled their membership in the first two years of the new card system.⁴⁴ About 300 carpenters won higher wages and the eight-hour day in a 1903 strike, by quickly securing the agreement of independent contractors to the unions' schedule. An attempt by the Builders' Exchange to deny them lumber supplies through "an unholy compact" with the Lumbermen's Association failed, and the tactic of weakening the Exchange by settling first with independent contractors was repeated in 1906.⁴⁵ The two carpenters' unions were strong and united in this period.⁴⁶

Despite their successes, carpenters were still threatened by labour surpluses and growing employment of non-union labour in a fluctuating labour market.⁴⁷ After 1906, many contractors were simply waiting for an opportunity to impose open shops. One trade journal reported at the time: "Several builders say that it will be impossible to live under the agreement for long, and another year will see very few builders tied down to the

and of bricklayers in 1905. The defeat of a strike against the employment of non-union painters precipitated the disbanding of the BTC. According to its leaders, the council folded because its members were unable to maintain the card system. *Labour Gazette* V (1905), 1270, VI (1905), 276, 337, 583-84; *Province*, 5 Oct. 1905, 11 Nov. 1905; UBCJ 617 Minutes, 25 Oct. to 22 Nov. 1905.

⁴³ UBCJ 617 Minutes, 24 Oct. 1906, 14 Nov. 1906, 3 Feb. 1907 to 14 April 1909.

⁴⁴ The nine-hour day, a Saturday half holiday, and a wage increase were won without a strike in 1900. *World*, 20 Jan. 1900; *Province*, 2 April, 1900; *Independent*, 7 April 1900, 16 Aug. 1902.

⁴⁵ *Province*, 31 March 1903, 2, 4, 9 and 23 April 1903; *Independent*, 4, 11 and 25 April 1903; Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes, *Evidence*, 743. On the development of secondary boycotts by builders, see Christie, *Empire in Wood*, 71, and for other examples of its use in Canada, *Labour Gazette* III (1903), 1027.

⁴⁶ The 700 members of the UBCJ and ASCJ formed the United Carpenters Council (UCC) in 1905, established joint trade rules, hired a business agent, and set up a working card. New ASCJ branches were formed in Vancouver and New Westminster in 1906. UBCJ 617 Minutes, 22 Nov. 1905 to 27 Dec. 1905; *Labour Gazette* VI (1905), 54, 275, VII (1907), 885-88. The UCC dissolved in 1908 when the ASCJ withdrew.

⁴⁷ See UBCJ 617 Minutes, 18 Oct. 1903, 26 Jan. 1905. Reports from the local in *The Carpenter* (March 1905, 30-31, July 1905, 31) indicate "considerable idleness and even distress" among its members.

union.”⁴⁸ Carpenters defeated an attempt by the Builders’ Exchange to impose an open shop during a strike for higher wages in 1907, but the victory was temporary.⁴⁹ The business slump beginning in the summer led to severe unemployment throughout 1908, “practically” an open shop, and pre-strike wage levels.⁵⁰

Secure, well-organized and well-paid crafts such as bricklayers and masons were less militant than carpenters, and since their job and labour market control was not threatened, they maintained an exclusivism based on the possession of irreplaceable skills. The bricklayers’ union was slow to join the BTC in 1902, and left in 1905 to avoid becoming involved in the strikes of other building trades.⁵¹ In 1907, union bricklayers were accused of scabbing during the carpenters’ strike.⁵²

In the period from 1900 to 1909, strong building trades unions struggled to control the labour market through their individual and combined efforts. Carpenters took the lead in collective attempts to establish a closed shop through the card system, because deskilling and the expanded national and international labour market made them especially vulnerable to competition from non-union workers. The efforts of the building trades to control the labour market were largely successful until the minor depression of 1907-08, when contractors’ attempts to impose open shops began to prevail over weakened unions. As economic conditions improved in 1909, the stage was set for a full-scale confrontation over labour market control.

From Construction Boom to General Strike, 1909-1911

Every building trade was weakened by the 1907-08 recession, but the unions rebuilt when the construction boom began in 1909. Carpenters had maintained strong organizations through the slump, and when economic recovery began in 1909, they were eager to lead the renewed struggle of

⁴⁸ *Lumberman and Contractor*, April 1906, 17. Cf. *Province*, 2 Jan. 1906, 31 March 1906.

⁴⁹ National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 27, vol. 294, file 2842; *Province*, 2, 11, 15, 19, 20, 22, 29 and 30 April 1907, 1, 2 and 17 May 1907; VTLC Minutes, 1 May 1907; *Labour Gazette* VII (1907), 1430.

⁵⁰ VTLC Minutes, 21 May 1908, 4 June 1908; UBCJ 617 Minutes, 9 Oct 1907 to 8 April 1908; Carpenter, July 1908, 32, Nov. 1908, 39; *Western Wage Earner*, April 1908, 16; *Province*, 3 and 14 May 1909; *B.C. Federationist*, 7 Feb. 1913, 4.

⁵¹ UBCJ 617 Minutes, 14 June 1905. Stonecutters, another secure craft, had left the BTC in early 1904. UBCJ 617 Minutes, 1 Jan. 1904, 2 Feb. 1904.

⁵² VTLC Minutes, 18 April 1907. Bricklayers stayed out of the BTC in subsequent years as well. E.g., *B.C. Federationist*, 20 June 1913. In the same year (1913), plasterers, stonecutters, and granite cutters were also absent from the BTC.

the building trades to control the labour market.⁵³ The BTC was reorganized with ten of thirteen eligible unions as members, and on 1 May 1909 it reintroduced a working card system.

Contractors were hostile to the rehabilitated card system, and sought to preserve the open shops to which many had become accustomed during the 1907-08 recession. Opposition was spearheaded by the Vancouver Employers Association, whose members met with building contractors on 14 May and resolved

that it is not in the best interests of the building trades or beneficial to the city in general, that the card system should be recognized in any way, and we pledge ourselves to assist each other in every way possible to carry on our business on the 'open shop' principle, which gives an opportunity to every capable man to earn a living, whether a member of a union or not.⁵⁴

On 9 June they instituted a free labour bureau for workers willing to work under open shop conditions.⁵⁵

A series of large and small disputes involving carpenters, plasterers, electricians, and sheet metal workers followed from the employers' open shop offensive in 1909 and 1910. A few carpenters and plasterers failed to alter one contractor's open shop policy,⁵⁶ and twenty-five electricians lost a six-week strike for the closed shop after well-organized contractors imported non-union electricians from Seattle and eastern Canada with the assistance of the Employers' Association.⁵⁷ In April 1910, members of the Master Sheet Metal Workers' Association posted open shop notices putting into practice the ideology expressed by one contractor: "As owners we simply think that we have the right to run our own businesses along lines to suit ourselves." Immediate walkouts by about eighty sheet metal workers in twenty-eight of the thirty-one shops employing union labour were unsuccessful because contractors had no trouble filling the strikers' places.⁵⁸

⁵³ A second UBCJ local in the area was formed in North Vancouver, and the ASCJ continued to maintain three branches. Both carpenters' unions reported growing membership in 1909; the ASCJ added a fourth branch in June, and gained 310 members during the year. VTLC Minutes, 1 and 15 April 1909, 3 June 1909, 20 Jan. 1910; *Western Wage Earner*, April 1909, 16, May 1909, 24, July 1909, 6, Nov. 1909, 5; *Labour Gazette* IX (1909), 961-65; *B.C. Federationist*, 27 Dec. 1912, 3.

⁵⁴ *Labour Gazette* IX (1909), 1320; *News-Advertiser*, 15 May 1909; *Province*, 15 May 1909; *Western Lumberman*, July 1909, 15-16.

⁵⁵ *News-Advertiser*, 10 June 1909; *Western Wage Earner*, June 1909, 9, July 1909, 6, August 1909, 11.

⁵⁶ *Province*, 7 May 1909.

⁵⁷ NAC, RG 27, vol. 296, file 3152; *Province*, 19 and 21 May 1909; VTLC Minutes, 3 June 1909; *Western Wage Earner*, June 1909, 9, July 1909, 15-16.

⁵⁸ The union recovered after a labour shortage in August, showing that neither side could completely control the volatile building trades labour market. *News-Advertiser*,

Despite the open shop offensive, many individual members of the Builders' Exchange were signed to union shop agreements by the BTC, and in May 1910, it again began to enforce the card system.⁵⁹ The carpenters' unions benefited immediately, because many carpenters arriving in Vancouver from eastern Canada were already union members, making it more difficult for contractors to resist the card system by hiring non-union men.⁶⁰ This was not true of all trades, however. Painters complained in the fall that the BTC was not as energetic as it had been, so that "a lot" of the union's members walked the streets while non-union painters worked.⁶¹

Controlling the labour market through the card system required a co-operation and solidarity that did not always exist in a crowded labour market, and even when acting together, the unions did not necessarily have the power to force union conditions on large, determined employers. For example, a December 1910 strike against the large general contractor Smith and Sherbourne was won only when Vancouver's pro-labour mayor and manager of the *Daily World* newspaper, J. D. Taylor, threatened to refuse to award the firm the contract on the new World Building. This was celebrated as a great victory for the building trades unions, but it also revealed their weakness, because success against an intransigent large employer depended on unique political circumstances.⁶²

The fight against the open shop drive culminated in the general strike of building trades workers in 1911. The main opponents were the BTC and a handful of large, anti-union general contractors, who had recently formed the Master Builders' Association (MBA).⁶³ The events leading to the general strike began on 11 April when carpenters struck for a fifty-cent-

9, 21, 22 and 23 April 1910; *Province*, 9 April 1910; NAC, RG 27, vol. 297, file 3235; *Labour Gazette* XI (1910), 317; VTLC Minutes, 20 Oct. 1910.

⁵⁹ Carpenter April 1910, 44, June 1910, 42.

⁶⁰ See UBCJ 617 Minutes, 11 May 1910 and *passim* for the large number of new members admitted on clearance cards. The carpenters' unions added over 300 members on the first day of the card system's operation; by July, the UBCJ alone had 800 members, and it was the smaller of the two unions. The ASCJ added a fifth branch in Vancouver in 1910, and the UBCJ a local in New Westminster. *News-Advertiser*, 21 April 1910, 3 May 1910; VTLC Minutes, 20 Oct. 1910, 3 Nov. 1910; *Labour Gazette* XI (1911), 960-63.

⁶¹ *Western Wage Earner*, Nov. 1910, 8.

⁶² *Western Wage Earner*, Jan. 1911, 5, VTLC Minutes, 15 Dec. 1910.

⁶³ The membership of the MBA included the contractors Smith and Sherbourne, Skeene and Christie, E. J. Ryan, Disette and Dean, Baynes and Horie, Norton Griffith Steel Construction, and, later, McDonald and Wilson. They held contracts for entire large buildings, mostly in the business section, leaving smaller residential builders and carpentry contractors to the Builders Exchange. *Province*, 11, 12 and 28 April 1911, 3 June 1911; *News-Advertiser*, 14 April 1911.

a-day wage increase to \$4.50 a day.⁶⁴ By 20 April most carpenters were working for the many small contractors who agreed to the demand,⁶⁵ but four members of the new MBA refused to pay more than a twenty-five cent increase, and when it was refused, declared open shops effective 17 April.⁶⁶ Their wage offer promoted the deskilling of carpentry, as it apparently applied only to skilled carpenters with several years' apprenticeship, leaving rough carpenters with a lower scale.⁶⁷

The BTC escalated the strike on 25 April by calling on all building trades workers to cease work on buildings where strikebreakers were being employed.⁶⁸ Plasterers, tile layers, plumbers, builders' labourers, cement workers, and even bricklayers (whose union was not affiliated to the BTC) walked out at seven jobs where the four MBA firms were employing strikebreakers.⁶⁹ Construction was delayed, but when the contractors still refused to come to terms with the carpenters, support from bricklayers and plasterers began to fall away.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, strikes by other trades erupted. On 1 May more than 200 building labourers struck for a closed shop and a fifty-cent wage increase. Although plasterers' labourers and then plasterers joined the strike, it

⁶⁴ Carpenters had last won a wage increase in 1909, to \$4.00 a day, still less than their 1907 wage rate. There had been no agreement in the trade after the 1907 strike, and the minimum wage had settled at \$3.50. *Province*, 14 May 1909; *Western Wage Earner*, June 1909, 9. Meanwhile, the cost of living had been rising.

⁶⁵ The ASCJ reported that 1,600 of its 1,800 members were working at the new scale, as were nearly all of the UBCJ's more than 800 members.

⁶⁶ The firms involved were Smith and Sherbourne, Skeene and Christie, E. J. Ryan, and Dissette and Dean. *Province*, 22 Feb. 1911, 31 March 1911, 1, 11, 13, 15 and 28 April 1911; *World*, 8 April 1911; VTLC Minutes, 20 April 1911; *Labour Gazette* XI (1911), 1300.

⁶⁷ On 18 April 1911 the *Province* reported that the MBA was demanding two pay scales. In 1912, wages of \$4.00 a day for rough carpenters and \$4.25 a day for skilled carpenters were reported. Canada, Department of Labour, Wages and Hours of Labour Report No. 1, *Wages and Hours of Labour in Canada 1901-1920* (Ottawa, 1921).

⁶⁸ This should have been happening anyway, if the building trades card system was working properly. Evidently it was not. Later, during the general strike, painters attributed the need for it to "the untenability of [the BTC's] position through the lack of a sufficiently strong card system." *Strike Bulletin*, 26 June 1911. Painters were among the strongest supporters of the card system in the city. Even before the carpenters' strike, they endorsed a BTC resolution for a 1 May general strike to enforce the card system, later voting 99 to 0 in favour of enforcing it. The BTC delegation that discussed the upcoming general strike left the painters' union meeting "amid applause," and those present voted 150 to 4 in favour of the strike. Painters Minutes, 2 and 9 March 1911, 25 May 1911; *World*, 2 June 1911.

⁶⁹ The struck jobs included the Holden building on Hastings, the telephone exchange on 10th and Yew, the addition to the Hotel Vancouver, and an apartment building.

⁷⁰ NAC, RG 27, vol. 298, file 3335; *World*, 24, 28 and 29 April 1911; *Province*, 25, 26 and 28 April, 1911; UBCJ Minutes, 26 April 1911.

failed to achieve its objectives and was called off on 19 May.⁷¹ On 30 May electricians struck against the open shop declared by nine contractors, and for a wage increase.⁷²

The intransigence of the five MBA contractors who were by then fighting the carpenters set the stage for the general strike.⁷³ At a mass meeting of carpenters and other building trades workers on 20 May, fears were expressed that the large contractors were defeating the carpenters' wage demands and imposing open shops as part of a broader fight against unionism, and on 22 May the BTC decided in favour of a general strike. In the next few days, the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council (VTLC) executive, the board of union business agents, and a special VTLC meeting approved the measure, in what was seen as a life-and-death struggle to preserve the closed shop, and even the existence of unions in Vancouver. "The fight was on a broad principle of closed shop versus open shop, capital arrayed against labor," declared the ASCJ business agent, J. W. Wilkinson.⁷⁴

Several conditions contributed to the unions' interpretation of the situation. The actions of employers made it appear to building trades workers that they were involved in a class conflict in which the survival of their organizations was at stake. The MBA was supported against what it called "the unreasonable demands of the men" by the Employers' Association of Vancouver, the Federated Employers' Association of the Pacific Coast, and the owners of the buildings its members were erecting. All of them were determined "to avoid the establishment in Vancouver of labor conditions such as exist in San Francisco at the present time . . . due to the unreasonable demands on the part of organized labor."⁷⁵ J. W. Wilkinson observed that the carpenters were fighting an organization that "may count as its supporters practically all the moneyed interests of the country."⁷⁶ Coming in the second year of a strike of machinists against large contract metal

⁷¹ NAC, RG 27, vol. 298, files 3356, 3365, 3365A; *World*, 1, 3 and 8 May 1911; *Province*, 1 May 1911.

⁷² *Province*, 30 May 1911, 1 and 5 June 1911; *World*, 2 June 1911; *Labour Gazette* XII (1911), 134-35.

⁷³ The latest firm to become involved was McDonald and Wilson. *Province*, 1 May 1911.

⁷⁴ *World*, 22, 23, 26 and 27 May 1911; *Province*, 23, 25, 26 and 27 May 1911. The carpenters' fears may have been exaggerated, because three-quarters of the smaller contractors belonging to the old Builders' Exchange had agreed to the wage increase. *Province*, 4 and 5 May 1911. However, given the competitiveness of the construction industry, the other contractors might be forced to reduce wages to MBA levels.

⁷⁵ *Province*, 12 and 21 April 1911. On conditions in San Francisco, see Kazin, *Barons of Labor*.

⁷⁶ *World*, 10 April 1911; *News-Advertiser*, 14 April 1911; *Province*, 19 and 25 April 1911, 22 May 1911.

shops,⁷⁷ and in the midst of the successful open shop campaign being led in Los Angeles by newspaper publisher H. G. Otis, the MBA's insistence on the open shop contributed to class polarization. "Employers Would Los Angelize Vancouver," read a notice in the *Vancouver Strike Bulletin*, and J. H. McVety speculated "that a general plan is on foot — emanating from General Otis and followed up in the Coast cities — to put down the closed shop. . . ." R. P. Pettipiece recalled that Otis had sent his congratulations to the Pacific Coast Employers Association in February, when it had declared itself in favour of the open shop. That meeting in Portland had included representatives from Vancouver and other coast cities, and was cited repeatedly as evidence that employers had a concerted plan to break the unions. The subsequent organization of the MBA, its hostility to the carpenters, and the support given it by the Employers Association lent additional credence to this interpretation of events.⁷⁸

Other grievances contributed to the sense of class conflict. Until stopped by an injunction, the president of the MBA, F. W. Nicholson of Norton-Griffith Steel Construction, violated his company's contract with the VLTC, and deliberately insulted all Vancouver unionists by putting non-union men to work on the new Labour Temple. Later in the spring, the MBA and Employers Association succeeded in having the union labour clauses in South Vancouver civic contracts removed. Open shops were declared by plumbing contractors, painting contractors, members of the Builders' Exchange, and independent general contractors, in addition to those who had done so previously. It was alleged that open shop contractors were discriminating against union members and that larger contractors were intimidating smaller ones who were sympathetic to unions.⁷⁹

As final proof of the concerted attack by employers on unionism, the official *Strike Bulletin* published a circular sent by the Vancouver Employers Association to businesses that were not members. It included extracts from the constitution and by-laws of the association that amounted to the maintenance of blacklists and the open shop:

... the objects of the association are: First, To protect its members in their rights to manage their respective businesses, in such lawful manner as they may deem proper. Second, The adoption of a uniform system whereby members may ascertain WHO IS AND WHO IS NOT WORTHY OF EMPLOY-

⁷⁷ See Conley, "Class Conflict and Collective Action," 349-50.

⁷⁸ NAC, RG 27, vol. 298, file 3378; *Strike Bulletin*, 26 June 1911; *Province*, 25 and 27 May, 6 June 1911; *World*, 4 February 1911, 25 May 1911, 6 June 1911. On Otis's campaign, see Kazin, *Barons of Labor*, 203-06.

⁷⁹ *Province*, 25 April, 4, 15, 22 and 27 May, 3, 5, 8, 10, 15, 16, and 19 June 1911; *World*, 31 May 1911; 8, 19 and 24 June 1911; *Strike Bulletin*, 26 June 1911.

MENT . . . Fourth, To endeavor to make it possible for any person to obtain employment without being obliged to join a labor organization. . . .

The circular later stated that Association members were drawn principally from "prominent firm(s) in the City that [employ] skilled workmen," strongly suggesting that its overall objective was to break craft controls over the workplace and the labour market.⁸⁰ An accumulating weight of circumstantial evidence led unionists in Vancouver to see the struggle in the construction industry as a city-wide battle between the open shop and the survival of unionism.⁸¹ Since the closed shop was central to craft unionism, the open shop was a threat to the existence of this form of unionism at least. Ironically, in order to defend it, craft unionists had to adopt forms of organization and action that went beyond craft boundaries.

The overall threat to unionism in the city gave rise to plans for a general strike of all unions affiliated with the VTLC, but support from unions outside the building trades eroded in the week leading up to the strike. The experience of Electrical Workers Local 213 at the telephone and electric power companies illustrates what may have been happening. On 29 May its members voted 90 to 15 in favour of a general strike, but eight dissenting members forced a lively special meeting a few days later. In a foretaste of 1919, a telegram from the International President was read, instructing members to live up to their agreements with employers. Amid considerable disorder, in which a sergeant-at-arms and three assistants were appointed to quell the uproar, those present voted to rescind their support for the strike, leading in turn to the resignations of an officer and two VTLC delegates at the next meeting.⁸²

With support strongest in the building trades, the walkout on 5 June was limited to 4,000 building trades workers, including many non-unionists, in Vancouver, South Vancouver, and North Vancouver.⁸³ The prominent absence of 300 to 400 bricklayers from the ranks of strikers was widely condemned.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ *Strike Bulletin*, 26 June 1911 (emphasis in original). See also *Labour Gazette* XII (1911), 43.

⁸¹ See the opening sentence of this paper, and similar statements by J. H. McVety at a mass meeting of 4,000 to 6,000 unionists on 3 June. *Province*, 5 June 1911; *World*, 5 June 1911.

⁸² IBEW 213 Minutes, 29 May to 5 June 1911; *World*, 2 June 1911. Several electrical workers at B.C. Telephones nonetheless joined the strike on 5 June.

⁸³ Although not all the building trades workers in Vancouver joined the strike, it was still "general" because it was industry-wide, not confined to a particular trade or employer.

⁸⁴ *Province*, 31 May 1911, 2 and 5 June 1911; VTLC Minutes, 1 June 1911; Painters' Minutes, 15 June 1911; *World*, 16 June 1911. The bricklayers had withdrawn from

Despite some sabotage and violence, the 1911 building trades general strike was largely orderly. Displaying the same caution that was to prevail in the 1919 general strike, the UBCJ executive even recommended that saloons be closed for the duration "in the best interests of both the public and our membership and also a protection against the rabble which is always to be found when a general strike is pending."⁸⁵ In the first few days strikers engaged in turnout actions, hundreds of men marching from building site to building site to force workers still on the job (especially bricklayers) to cease work, but the effects were temporary, and the tactic was discontinued after some minor violence and several arrests. After nearly three weeks in which strikers apparently obeyed VTLC instructions to stay off the streets, the main scene of confrontation shifted to the Exhibition Grounds, where as many as 1,000 men picketed in a festival atmosphere. They held picnics, played football, and amused themselves first by jeering strikebreakers, then loudly counting the number of hammer-strokes it took them to put up siding (cheering those who were fastest).⁸⁶

But the labour market was glutted ("... carpenters seem to have sprung up from everywhere," reported the UBCJ in early July), and the strikers were unable to halt construction.⁸⁷ They held out for over a month (by which time the carpenters had been off the job for three months) thanks to strike pay and donations from other Vancouver unions. The carpenters' relief committee was kept busy, especially as, in this city of homeowners, "the next [mortgage] payment became a night mare [*sic*] with the union executive."⁸⁸

Attempts to settle the general strike by a committee of city council and later by the Industrial Peace Association all failed. The MBA would not

the BTC before September 1909, and would not rejoin in 1911, despite the threat (never carried out) of expulsion from the VTLC; they were still not members in 1912. VTLC Minutes, 2 Sept. 1909, 15 June 1911, 20 July 1911, 2 Nov. 1911; *Province*, 5 and 19 May 1911; *B.C. Federationist*, 20 March 1912, 3; 13 Dec. 1912, 1. Bricklayers in Toronto were similarly exclusive; see Roberts, "Artisans, Aristocrats and Handymen," 111-13.

⁸⁵ UBCJ 617 Executive Minutes, 27 May 1911. Dynamite was detonated at an apartment being built by E. J. Ryan, an MBA contractor, near the end of April, and some damage was reported at an open shop construction site in South Vancouver at the end of June. *Province*, 26 April 1911, 30 June 1911.

⁸⁶ NAC, RG 27, vol. 298, file 3378; *Province*, 6, 8, 10, 13, 17, 21 and 30 June 1911, 7 July 1911; *World*, 6 June 1911, 7 July 1911.

⁸⁷ *Carpenter*, Aug. 1911, 45.

⁸⁸ J. W. Wilkinson, B.C. Labor Commission *Proceedings*, vol. 3, 168. It was rumoured that many young married street railway employees had just purchased houses and were reluctant to strike for fear of not being able to meet payments. *Province*, 3 June 1911.

move away from its insistence on the open shop and, confident that it was winning, refused to attend any meetings involving union representation. The BTC was open to mediation and even arbitration by outside parties, but was equally insistent that contractors agree to the closed shop throughout the industry. The settlement proposed by the civic committee responded to VTLC allegations of discrimination against union members by guarantees against it, but otherwise favoured the large contractors, who accepted it.⁸⁹

As the strikers showed they were able to hold out, old divisions in the ranks of contractors began to reappear. Beginning in the middle of June, a series of meetings involving growing numbers of independent contractors (outside both the MBA and Builders Exchange) took a position close to the MBA, in favour of the open shop without discrimination against unionists. But as the strike wore on into July and their financial position became increasingly precarious, they became more conciliatory. The independents offered the closed shop to carpenters, but their fledgling organization was divided between general contractors and subcontractors, and would not guarantee it for other trades. The offer was rejected by the BTC, which insisted that general contractors sublet contracts only to union contractors, and by the MBA, which considered the offer too close to the union position. After more discussions, the independent contractors broke off negotiations with the unions, and left matters in the hands of the ineffectual Industrial Peace Association.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, the strike was beginning to fall apart. Solidarity was collapsing, and after individual trades started to return to work in the second week of July,⁹¹ the BTC bowed to the inevitable, and left settlements in the hands of individual unions on 18 July. Carpenters resumed work two days later, and most other trades had returned to work within a week.⁹²

⁸⁹ *Province*, 29 and 30 May 1911, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 14, 28 and 30 June 1911, 3 July 1911; *World*, 31 May 1911, 2, 8 and 30 June 1911, 4 July 1911.

⁹⁰ *World*, 14, 15, 19 and 30 June 1911, 3, 7, 11, 12 and 13 July 1911; *Province*, 19 and 30 June 1911, 3, 7, 10 and 11 July 1911.

⁹¹ Tile layers and marble workers returned on 11 July, plasterers (who withdrew from the BTC) on 13 July, plasterers' labourers and stonecutters on 14 July, and iron workers and lathers on 17 July. Individual carpenters and sheet metal workers were also drifting back to work.

⁹² *World*, 14, 30 June 1911, 7, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 29 July 1911; *Province*, 15, 19 and 30 June 1911, 3, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17 and 18 July 1911; VTLC Minutes, 20 July 1911, 3 Aug. 1911, 19 Oct. 1911; Painters' Minutes, 27 July 1911, 3, 17, 24, 26 and 31 Aug. 1911, 7 Sept. 1911; *Labour Gazette* XII (1911), 134-35; *B.C. Federationist*, 23 Dec. 1911, 1. Only plumbers and painters held out for closed shops in the whole trade. The former settled before the end of July, but painters remained on strike against open shop contractors until September, in a losing cause (there were still only three union shops in December).

The building trades unions tested their strength against the large employers in the 1911 general strike, and were defeated. They were not destroyed, and individual unions retained enough power to preserve closed shops with some contractors. But they could not prevent serious erosion of the closed shop, especially in the weaker trades.⁹³ Their inability to control the labour market began to affect other conditions: several contractors tried to lengthen hours by working Saturday afternoons, and carpenters' wages fell back to their 1906 level.⁹⁴ The BTC slowly built up again after the strike, and by March 1912, sixteen out of twenty eligible unions were members. It dissolved that summer, however, a victim of jurisdictional disputes and a new influx of building trades workers that, as in 1905, member unions had difficulty assimilating.⁹⁵

Building activity plummeted during the prewar depression, leading to high levels of unemployment and out-migration for every trade. By 1915, "the almost complete unemployment of building tradesmen" was reported, and 5,000 were estimated to have left Vancouver between 1914 and 1916.⁹⁶ They were consequently unable to resist the wage reductions and longer hours imposed by employers. Only when the labour market became tighter during the wartime boom beginning in 1916 were building trades workers able to reorganize and demand wage increases to compensate for both the losses incurred during the depression and the rising cost of living. As UBCJ Business Agent "Jimmie" Robinson stated in 1916:

The employers have had their innings for the past three years. We are at last in a position where we can go after a piece of the 'prosperity' resulting from

⁹³ For example, the Master Painters' Association remained an open shop organization, and despite modest gains in the painters' battle for labour market control, there were still sixteen open shops in May 1913. *B.C. Federationist*, 6 May 1912, 1; 10 Aug. 1912, 4; 5 May 1913, 4; VTLC Minutes, 18 April 1912, 2 May 1912.

⁹⁴ *B.C. Federationist*, 20 May 1912, 2; 20 June 1913, 3; *Province*, 1 Aug. 1912; *Sun*, 1 Aug. 1912; *Carpenter*, Aug. 1912, 33.

⁹⁵ VTLC Minutes, 17 Aug. 1911; *B.C. Federationist*, 20 March 1912, 3; 3 Aug. 1912, 3. It was revived again in late September, suspended meetings in January, and was resurrected in April. It was on the brink of dissolution again in May 1914. *B.C. Federationist*, 5 and 12 Oct. 1912, 1; 25 April 1913, 2; 2 May 1913, 3; 9 May 1913, 1; 23 May 1913, 4; 1 May 1914; VTLC Minutes, 2 Jan. 1913, 17 April 1913.

⁹⁶ *Labour Gazette* XV (1915), 1293; *B.C. Federationist*, 19 January 1917. For other reports on unemployment in the building trades, see *B.C. Federationist*, 21 March 1913, 1; 25 April 1913, 2; 13 June 1913, 1; 12 Dec. 1913, 10; 20 Feb. 1914, 1; 17 April 1914, 1; 23 Oct. 1914, 1; 27 Nov. 1914, 4; 25 Dec. 1914, 1; 25 March 1915, 1; VTLC Minutes, 5 March 1914, 25 Sept. 1914, 17 Dec. 1914, 21 Jan. 1915, 6 May 1915; Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Attorney-General Correspondence 1911-18, Roll 66, file 8560-14-14, M. J. Reid to W. D. Scott, 4 Sept. 1914, and 23 Dec. 1914 (the latter in M. J. Reid to W. J. Bowser, 28 Dec. 1914).

a slight increase in the available work, with more than a corresponding decrease in the number of available men. And we intend to make the best of it.⁹⁷

The BTC was reorganized in 1916, and individual unions slowly rebuilt their memberships.⁹⁸ Carpenters were even able to reassert some control over the labour market by winning closed shops in 1918.⁹⁹

Conclusion: The General Strike in Historical Perspective

The 1911 building trades general strike was an important incident in the formation of the working-class in Vancouver between 1900 and 1919, for three reasons. First, the building trades which played a central role in 1911 were also active participants in the labour revolt of 1917-1919; second, after 1911 the tactic of the general strike became an integral part of the repertoire of working-class collective action in Vancouver; and third, when examined in comparison to the general strike in 1919, the 1911 strike sheds further light on the conditions of radical working-class collective action.¹⁰⁰

Because of their own numerical decline and the upsurge of militancy in other industries, the building trades in Vancouver were not leaders of the working-class revolt of 1918-1919. Building trades workers nonetheless participated in the strike in sympathy with the Winnipeg general strike, and in the formation of the One Big Union (OBU). All building trades workers employed by large contractors, including 1,100 carpenters, joined the general strike that began on 3 June 1919, and with the exception of one trade, they stayed out until the strike was called off on 3 July.¹⁰¹ Every building trades union that voted was in favour of affiliation with the OBU, but old crafts which retained their skills and job control intact, such as bricklayers and stonecutters, were indifferent to the appeal of the OBU and did not hold votes.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ *B.C. Federationist*, 18 Aug. 1916, 1.

⁹⁸ *B.C. Federationist*, 18 Feb. 1916, 4; 21 April 1916, 4; 4, 11 and 18 Aug. 1916, 1; 5 Jan. 1917, 3; 19 Jan. 1917, 1; 16 Feb. 1917, 1, 4; 20 April 1917, 1; 27 April 1917, 5, 6; 18 May 1917, 1, 6; 1 June 1917, 5; 6 July 1917, 1; 20 July 1917, 6; *Labour Gazette* XVI (1916): 1543; *Province*, 13 April 1917.

⁹⁹ *B.C. Federationist*, 6 Sept. 1918, 1.

¹⁰⁰ "Working-class radicalism" is used here to refer to support for socialism and for the organization and action of workers as a class. The labour revolt in Vancouver consisted of actions opposing conscription, general strikes in 1918 and 1919, and support for the One Big Union. See Conley, "Frontier Labourers."

¹⁰¹ Sheet metal workers decided independently to return to work on 27 June. *B.C. Federationist*, 6 June 1919, 8; *Sun*, 20, 26 and 27 June 1919; *Province*, 5 and 27 June 1919.

¹⁰² University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections, One Big Union vertical file 213.

Carpenters formed the largest trade, and were among the most radical in 1919. All carpenters' locals but one voted strongly in favour of the OBU, and resolutions were passed earlier in the year demanding the six-hour day, an end to censorship, the recall of allied troops from Russia, and a complete change in the social system, replacing production for profit with production for use. They also supported the general strike as a tactic to force an end to restrictions on free speech and assembly, and in unsettled industrial disputes.¹⁰³

The 1911 building trades general strike was the largest sympathetic strike in Vancouver to that time, surpassing the 1903 UBRE strike by far. It was originally intended to be a city-wide general strike, and despite its failure in 1911, the general strike was thereafter an integral part of the collective action repertoire of Vancouver workers.¹⁰⁴ General strikes to support striking Vancouver Island miners were proposed several times in 1913-14 and were rejected by the VTLC solely because of the high level of unemployment.¹⁰⁵ Calls for general strikes were revived in 1917 and 1918 over registration and conscription, and in sympathy with strikes by individual unions.¹⁰⁶

Finally, comparison of the 1911 general strike with the 1919 general strikes in both Vancouver and Winnipeg sheds light on the conditions of radical working-class collective action. In both cases, general strikes occurred when the gains won by organized workers after a period of recession, and their organizational forms themselves, were attacked by employers or the state.¹⁰⁷ And in both cases, craft workers threatened by changes in the labour process played a leading role. Craft workers in this period were engaged in a struggle for power on the job, in the labour market, and in society at large.

¹⁰³ *B.C. Federationist*, 3 Jan. 1919, 4; 7 Feb. 1919, 1.

¹⁰⁴ On the concept of repertoires of collective action, see C. Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, 1978), 151-59.

¹⁰⁵ VTLC Minutes, 4 September 1913, 8 and 15 January 1914, 16 July 1914, 6 August 1914. On the building trades general strike as the precursor of others, see Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 50.

¹⁰⁶ In January 1918, Vancouver union members voted on and rejected a general strike to protest the arrest of one of their number for refusing to be conscripted, but in August, a one-day general strike protesting the murder of Ginger Goodwin was held. There were also calls for general strikes to support striking electrical and street railway employees early in July, and postal workers later in the month.

¹⁰⁷ The immediate sources were similar in both cases: in 1911, the imminent defeat of the carpenters' strike in Vancouver; in 1919, the strike of Winnipeg building and metal trades. Other similarities include the orderliness of the strikers and the opposition of International headquarters.

Yet in 1911 only the building trades struck, while in 1919 workers in nearly every trade and industry joined. What accounted for the difference? First, in 1919 Vancouver workers were more familiar with the idea of a general strike, arising from the experience of the 1911 general strike itself, and from the recurrent calls for general strikes after it. Second, in 1919 workers in nearly every trade and industry had endured severe setbacks in the prewar depression. In the 1907-08 slump, employers had attacked and eroded union conditions in the building trades; in the depression of 1913-15, nearly every trade and industry suffered wage cuts, deteriorating working conditions, and weakening of union protection. Third, the prewar depression was followed by an upsurge of working-class power in the wartime boom and strike wave. In 1918-19 workers had unprecedented power flowing from wartime labour shortages, but at the same time they faced the threat of another depression when the war ended and the labour market was flooded with returned soldiers. They had seen what employers would do in a depression — was 1919 a last-chance grasp at power? In the strike wave beginning in 1910, in contrast, working-class power was not as great, and they had no way of anticipating the 1913-15 depression.¹⁰⁸ Fourth, in 1919 workers in Vancouver faced a more powerful, interventionist, and repressive state. In the small strike wave from 1909 to 1911, the state played a minor role in strikes, limited to actions by the police in only five strikes out of a total of twenty-eight (18 per cent) in the Greater Vancouver area.¹⁰⁹ In the 1916-19 strike wave the state, especially the federal government, played a prominent, anti-labour role in industrial relations, banning strikes in essential industries, censoring radical publications and banning radical organizations. In a marked increase from past practice, the state intervened in twenty-three of eighty strikes from 1916 to 1918 (29 per cent), mostly in the form of federal conciliation. In the events leading up to the 1911 building trades general strike, only the power and organizing ability of building trades unions were directly threatened, by a small number of employers and employer organizations; in 1919, the newly restored power of all workers was threatened by a federal government acting in concert with employers in an economic conjuncture of exceptional (but fast-disappearing) opportunities and looming threats. In

¹⁰⁸ On working-class power in the strike waves, see Conley, "Frontier Labourers," 31-32.

¹⁰⁹ Two of those strikes were the carpenters' strike and the building trades general strike in 1911. Strike data are from the author's study of working-class collective action in the Vancouver area between 1900 and 1919. They are available in machine-readable form at the Social Science Data Archive, Carleton University. For information on sources, coding, etc., see Conley, "Class Conflict and Collective Action," Appendix A.

response to a more general threat, Vancouver workers engaged in a more general strike.

The 1911 general strike of building trades workers thus helps us to understand the conditions for broad working-class action. It invites further research comparing the Vancouver strike with building trades general strikes in other cities in North America in this period, and with the general strikes in other Canadian cities in 1918 and 1919.