

Vancouver's "Red Menace" of 1935: The Waterfront Situation

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The spring of 1935 was a time of dissatisfaction and discontent in the lower mainland of British Columbia. The city of Vancouver was simmering with growing resentment against the social and economic order that was aggravated by a seeming lack of positive government action. Public pressure for reform was strong and vocal, with many organizations — such as the C.C.F. and the communist-led Workers' Unity League, the Relief Camp Workers' Union and the Canadian Labour Defense League — actively involved. One problem that later assumed national proportions was the relief camp "strike" of the single unemployed.¹ Of more importance to the city's business and political leaders, however, was the unrest on the waterfront which threatened to expand into a general strike. Such a threat to commerce prompted Mayor Gerald Grattan McGeer, K.C., M.L.A., to declare that he was prepared "to mobilize 10,000 men to keep the port open and rid this city of the red menace."²

Moderation in public statements was never one of "Gerry" McGeer's virtues, and in that spring of 1935 the newly-elected mayor found himself attempting to govern a city that was a hot-bed of communist activity. Having been passed over for a provincial cabinet post,³ the politically ambitious McGeer set his eyes on the forthcoming federal election. He dared not lose the support of the city's business establishment if he hoped to move into the national political scene. Assuming the role of the defender of law and order came easily to Mayor McGeer.

Vancouver had had a long history of radical unionism, but the Depression pushed many of its residents even further left on the political spectrum. As the rates of unemployment increased so too did the public's sympathy for the "boys" in the government relief camps and for those

¹ For the best account of the strike and its effect on Vancouver see Ronald Liver-
sedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar (Toronto, 1973).

² *Vancouver Sun*, May 27, 1935, 1.

³ Margaret A. Ormsby, "T. Dufferin Pattullo and the Little New Deal," in *Politics of Discontent*, ed. Ramsay Cook (Toronto, 1967), 37.

who advocated fundamental changes in the social and economic order. The established union movement, conscious of its declining membership and influence, remained aloof from the plight of the unemployed, and concentrated its efforts on consolidation rather than activism.⁴ In opposition to the established trade unions, the communists organized a number of industrial unions under the general direction of the Workers' Unity League. In 1932 the WUL's organizational drive (some called it raiding) began and met with success in the merging of a number of small maritime unions to form the Seafarers' Industrial Union (SIU).

Of greater significance was the gradual assumption of power by the left-wing element within the major longshoremen's union, the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers' Association (V&DWWA). The V&DWWA had come into existence in 1923 as a company union organized to break the International Longshoremen's Association strike against the Shipping Federation of British Columbia. The Shipping Federation, an association of Vancouver's shipping, stevedoring, cargo-handling and other seagoing and port interests, had managed to keep the V&DWWA under its control for almost ten years. But the growing militancy of labour and the example of the American Pacific coast longshoremen led the V&DWWA to a more radical attitude.

The year 1934 was a major turning point for the longshoremen on the American Pacific coast. Under the leadership of the radical Marine Workers' Industrial Union a general strike was called along the entire west coast of the United States. It involved three issues: higher wages, union recognition and union control of despatching.⁵ Nowhere was the strike more effective than in San Francisco where labour was almost in complete control. Although the general strike collapsed after three days, the longshoremen and seamen were able to gain most of their demands, including *de facto* union despatching, through arbitration.

In Vancouver, the waterfront unions were not strong enough in 1934 to confront their employers directly as their American counterparts had done. They did, however, effect a federation of Vancouver and New Westminster seamen and longshoremen, the Longshoremen and Water Transport Workers of Canada (L&WTW). In addition, B.C. longshore-

⁴ Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1967), 101-02; Stuart M. Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-66*, Study No. 22 of the Task Force on Industrial Relations (Ottawa, 1968), 214-18.

⁵ For detailed accounts of the strike see Paul Eliel, *The Waterfront and General Strikes, San Francisco, 1934* (San Francisco, 1934); and Mike Quinn, *The Big Strike* (Olema, Calif., 1949).

men refused to handle diverted cargos in support of the American strike. But these developments created apprehension among the shipping interests. Privately, K. A. McLennan, President of the Shipping Federation, advised Attorney-General Gordon Sloan that he feared the situation could get out of hand; "the men [are] becoming more and more aggressive, and the first thing we know, we may have a situation similar to what they have to the South of us."⁶

In October of 1934 the Shipping Federation and the V&DWWA negotiated a new three year agreement. The union had been pressing for higher wages, equal pay for dock and ship workers, and union control of despatching. The Federation was willing to grant some increase in wages, but refused to pay equal rates or surrender control of the despatch system. After a Board of Conciliation reported, the new agreement was signed and came into effect on November 1, 1934. Two clauses which strengthened the hand of the Shipping Federation laid the basis for the 1935 strike. One clause gave the Federation control and supervision over the regulation and employment of all waterfront labour "including the despatch and the distribution of work and earnings." Another clause guaranteed that in the event of a strike or walk-out by any other union the V&DWWA would remain at work.⁷ A week after the agreement was signed the Federation voluntarily increased the base wage by five cents an hour, bringing the minimum pay for ship men to 85 cents an hour (\$1.28 an hour for overtime), and 81 cents an hour for dock men (\$1.22 an hour for overtime).

Within a few months the union began to object to the employment of extra men from New Westminster, and the despatching of its members from the Shipping Federation hall. On February 4, the union introduced a new demand that preference for surplus work be given to members of an affiliated union, the Coastwise Longshoremen and Freight Handlers' Association.⁸ Citing the terms of the November agreement, the Federation refused. On March 12, the union informed the Federation that it had accepted thirteen new men as members without going through the procedures provided by the agreement.

These were minor skirmishes compared to what followed through April and May, and before the major battle in June. On March 31, the Long-

⁶ K. A. McLennan to Hon. Gordon Sloan, June 21, 1934, Attorney-General's Department Papers re Communist Activity, 1933-1935, Provincial Archives of British Columbia (hereafter A.-G. Dept., Papers, PABC).

⁷ This was also a provision of the 1930 agreement; see *ibid.*

⁸ "Report of Royal Commission Concerning Industrial Dispute on Vancouver Waterfront," *Labour Gazette*, XXXVI (November 1935), 986.

shoremen and Water Transport Workers met to discuss strategy. Representatives from affiliated unions in Vancouver, New Westminster, and Chemainus, as well as observers from longshore unions in Victoria and Port Alberni, were present. Together, they called for union recognition, union control of despatch and 95 cents an hour for both ship and dock workers. The delegates also pledged their unions to the support of any local involved in a dispute.⁹ Five days later the pledge was put to the test as the newly organized Vancouver Export Log Workers' Association struck for higher wages and union recognition. Immediately, the V&DWWA declared all logs "unfair" and refused to handle them. Rumours of an imminent waterfront strike began to circulate; but they were premature. The boom workers stayed out for three weeks until the intervention of F. E. Harrison, the western representative of the federal Department of Labour, helped them to achieve higher wages and union recognition.¹⁰

The longshoremen, believing this success to be a crack in the solid front of the Shipping Federation, moved to exploit it. The L&WTW applied for affiliation to the radically-led Maritime Federation of the Pacific, which was being organized on the American coast as an all-inclusive marine union. Colonel R. D. Williams, a member of the Board of Directors of the Shipping Federation, saw a parallel to the troubles twelve years before. "[T]he Red leaders on the Vancouver Longshoremen's Union have been to Seattle conferring with the chiefs of the I.L.A. so it is not impossible that our local union which was created in 1923 when we bust the I.L.A. in Canada, will amalgamate once more with the I.L.A. and then we will have a lovely situation."¹¹ Discussions concerning a new contract between the two parties began in the last week of April, but other events were already making their influence felt on the eventual outcome.

Early in April, the single unemployed from the interior relief camps went on "strike" and converged on Vancouver to demand work and wages, the right to vote, the abolition of military control of the camps and other improvements. The influx of the unemployed greatly worried Mayor McGeer, who was already concerned about the city's shaky financial situation. The mayor reacted to the pressure on April 23, when he read the Riot Act before a demonstration of the unemployed and their sup-

⁹ *Vancouver Daily Province*, April 1, 1935, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, April 25, 20. Mr. Harrison was also active in the later strike.

¹¹ R. D. Williams to H. H. Stevens, April 26, 1935, Stevens Papers, Vol. 74, Public Archives of Canada.

porters in Victory Square.¹² During a radio speech later that week he charged that the relief strikers had been told by their leaders that an imminent general strike was to be the forerunner of a revolution to bring about a soviet government. A group of agitators, he said, had decided to make Vancouver the "battleground" for communist propaganda in Canada.¹³ The camp strikers received much support from the radical unions of Vancouver, principally the Street Railway Workers and the longshoremen; the latter left their jobs on April 29 to join in a one hour demonstration.

On May 1, the waterfront was quiet as the affiliated locals of the L&WTW stopped work to participate in the May Day parade. The parade, which ended with an estimated 25,000 gathered in Stanley Park, was impressive: well organized, good humoured and lawful. The Shipping Federation, however, did not appreciate the walkout of its employees and personally informed the longshoremen, through a "tactless" letter, that the April 29 and May 1 stoppages constituted a breach of their agreement.¹⁴ The union replied that "under no consideration will we surrender our freedom in exercising the principles of a labour union." Further, they declared that all their grievances arose from one source, "namely the control of despatching and distribution of work and earnings by the Shipping Federation."¹⁵ The only way to restore confidence, the union maintained, would be to give them control of the despatch system. The Federation replied by another personal letter advising each longshoreman that it would not surrender its right to control and direct waterfront operations. The letter closed by demanding that unless the union offered some "suitable" financial guarantee of abiding by the agreement the negotiations would cease.

As the month wore on the two sides became increasingly estranged. On May 13, the V&DWWA accepted the executive's recommendation to take a ballot on the question of a strike in sympathy with the relief camp strikers who had occupied the Hotel Georgia, the Post Office and Art Gallery on May 11. The meeting also accepted the proposition that the

¹² *Daily Province*, April 24, 2. Earlier, the demonstrators had been evicted from the Hudson's Bay store after a bloody clash with police; see letter from Acting Inspector F. R. Lester to Colonel W. W. Foster, April 25, 1935, in Liversedge, *Recollections*, 151-52.

¹³ *Daily Province*, April 27, 1. On the same page it was reported that Liberals in two Alberta constituencies had offered their nominations to McGeer.

¹⁴ "Report of Royal Commission," 987.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 987-88.

union should affiliate with the Maritime Federation of the Pacific. When the ballots were counted, however, the longshoremen rejected the idea of a sympathetic strike.¹⁶ The idea of the sympathetic strike, while important in putting pressure on government officials to grant concessions to the striking unemployed, was secondary to the ever-present question of who would control despatching. On May 20, the V&DWWA voted 483 to 316 for union despatch. Three days later the union notified the Federation of its determination to institute its own system of despatching on May 27. The Federation replied that it was the duty of the men under their agreement to continue to report to the Federation despatch hall. If they did not and work stopped, the Federation threatened, "the agreement will no longer be in effect."¹⁷

The despatching system was a primary cause of the Vancouver waterfront strike of 1935. The employees, complaining that the employer-operated system led to favouritism and discrimination, claimed that Vancouver was the only major port on the Pacific without union despatching. The Shipping Federation admitted discriminating between the longshore gangs, but alleged that a system of equal rotation destroyed initiative and reduced efficiency, particularly when the registration list was large and the experience and quality of the workers varied greatly. The Report of Mr. Justice H. H. Davis, appointed to inquire into the dispute, observed:

The nature of the despatching system lies at the very root of the longshore industry and for years the world over has been the subject matter of much experiment. . . . In the ultimate analysis I am satisfied that it is a human problem and that given the perfect man it would not matter whether the despatcher belonged to the Union or was employed by the employers. It is the inherent weakness and frailty of human nature that favouritism enters into the problem.¹⁸

However, Mr. Justice Davis denied that the despatching system was the principal cause of the waterfront troubles. Rather, he argued that the dispute was an attempt by the leaders of the waterfront workers to promote the deliberate disruption of the city by using a strike at Powell River as their excuse.

The Powell River Company operated a pulp and paper mill seventy miles up the coast from Vancouver. Altogether it employed approximately

¹⁶ The vote was 360 for and 447 against the strike; see the *Sun*, May 17, 1.

¹⁷ "Report of Royal Commission," 988.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 989-90.

1,600 workers.¹⁹ From 1912 to 1931 the company used its regular employees to load the newsprint ships. The Depression forced the company to lay off a number of men, but it continued to give them casual employment on the docks. In May of 1935, about fifty of these men, organized with the assistance of the V&DWWA, formed their own union and affiliated with the L&WTW. They demanded union recognition and the same wage as Vancouver workers, but the company simply ignored them. On May 17, the union declared a strike and notified the longshoremen of Vancouver. Although only a small number of the Powell River dock workers left their jobs, the L&WTW informed its locals that all ships from Powell River would be declared unfair. The longshoremen refused to handle the Powell River newsprint, but opened negotiations with the Shipping Federation in an attempt to resolve the matter.

At the same time a dispute arose between the Union Steamship Company and the Seafarers' Union and the Coastwise Longshoremen, over higher wages for the former and union recognition for the latter. When the company declared it would negotiate only with its own men the two unions struck.²⁰ The Union Steamship quarrel appeared to be the beginning of the general waterfront strike that had been expected after the longshoremen determined to institute union despatching.

On the first day of the strike Mayor McGeer, already under some pressure as a result of the relief campers' occupation, declared that communists controlled both the waterfront and the relief camp strikers. He predicted inevitable trouble and advised the people of Vancouver that they would have to choose between "constituted authority" or "Communism, hoodlumism and mob rule."²¹ The next day he led an "unusual police demonstration" consisting of 350 men on foot and 51 mounted, drawn from city, provincial and Royal Canadian Mounted Police units. In an inflammatory radio speech on May 26, McGeer warned he would not tolerate further trouble from the longshoremen. The time for a "showdown" had arrived: "We are up against a Communist revolution and we are going to wipe it out without delay."²²

Despite the mayor's outbursts, the next morning was tense but quiet on the waterfront. The union opened its own despatching hall and both sides fell into a loose working arrangement whereby the Federation despatched

¹⁹ For a more detailed summary of the Powell River strike see *ibid.*, 990-92, and the *Sun*, May 22, 22.

²⁰ *Daily Province*, May 23, 1; *Sun*, May 23, 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Daily Province*, May 27, 1.

the gangs and the union sanctioned the choices. One observer believed that this period of calm was a deliberate attempt by the Shipping Federation to keep the waterfront quiet while the relief camp strikers debated their future actions.²³ Then, on May 29, a full page advertisement in the Vancouver newspapers declared that business had the right to fight the way back to prosperity "unhampered by ruthless Radicals." It was signed by the Citizens' League of British Columbia, a group of prominent Vancouver residents headed by Colonel Edgett, the former chief of police. On May 30, the relief camp strikers' situation was eased somewhat with their decision to trek "On to Ottawa" although the Post Office and Art Gallery remained occupied until June 20. On that same day the strike against the Union Steamship Company was settled. Newspaper editorials happily proclaimed that tolerance, forbearance and compromise had won; the *Vancouver Sun* went as far as saying that only a few minor differences remained to be solved on the waterfront. The Citizens' League, however, resolved to fight on until the "Red Menace" was stamped out, and in a sharp about-face the *Sun* later denounced the communists as "nameless vagabonds of chaos."²⁴

With the relief camp strikers' situation somewhat improved the mayor could direct more attention to the waterfront situation, where the issue of union vs. employer despatching and the refusal to unload Powell River products threatened to erupt at any moment. On June 1, the Ship Lining and Fitting Workers' Association and the Seafarers' Industrial Union advised the Shipping Federation that any firm sending a ship to Powell River after June 8 would be declared unfair. The Export Log Workers later sent a similar letter. Such action would have had a serious effect on the small community, but the unions never had a chance to enact their threats.

On June 4, Vancouver longshoremen refused to transfer a cargo of Powell River newsprint to the S.S. *Anten*. Soon afterward, a launch filled with non-union men left the Vancouver Yacht Club under police protection to move the load. Union members continued to work for the rest of the day, but the Shipping Federation — now that many of the longshoremen's relief camp allies had gone — chose to move against the overconfident longshoremen. The V&DWWA was informed that the agreement was cancelled and was told to vacate its offices in the Shipping

²³ Unaddressed and unsigned memorandum, May 28, 1935, Vancouver City Police Department, in *Liversedge Recollections*, 169.

²⁴ *Sun*, May 31, 6.

Federation hall.²⁵ Later, the Federation posted a notice that longshoremen who wanted work should apply directly to the Federation. The next morning when union men reported for work as usual they were called off by their officials, pickets were thrown up and a mass meeting was arranged. The union denounced the Federation's action as a deliberate attempt to smash the union, which had been engaged in a two year battle to stop the "speed-up" and the wholesale discrimination of the employer hiring hall. Nevertheless, a union press release announced there would be no violence on their part: "Let the police and the other armed forces of the state arrayed against us remember that we are workers, our fight is with our employers, not with the police, and it will be up to them to say whether there will be any violence."²⁶ Mayor McGeer, however, was quick to promise the waterfront employers that their working employees would have police protection.

Talk of a general strike began again. Over 900 members of the V&DWWA voted to ask their central organization, the Longshoremen and Water Transport Workers, to poll its affiliates on their attitude to a general waterfront strike. On June 6, the Shipping Federation announced it had just signed an agreement with another union, the Canadian Waterfront Workers' Association (CWWA). It appears that the CWWA had been formed the previous year in anticipation of a strike, but its services were not required by the Federation until 1935. The V&DWWA labelled the new union the "offspring" of the Citizens' League, and CWWA workers constantly required police protection to pass through picket lines at the docks. Even though some men continued working, deep-sea shipping in the port of Vancouver was virtually at a stand-still. Coastal shipping continued to operate as the Coastwise Longshoremen and Freight Handlers decided to honour their recently signed agreements.

Public sympathy for the strikers developed slowly, as the city was suffering from the strains of the relief camp occupation. One of the first to voice support was Bob Bouchette, a columnist for the *Vancouver Sun*. He said communism was not the issue; the real issue was whether or not the union would be broken. "Middle-class folk — the white collar crowd — would probably welcome the smashing of the union, for white-collar wearers love taking it on the chin from the boss." As for the talk of revo-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, June 5, 1, 5; *Daily Province*, June 5, 1, 2, 18. After the union had accepted the working arrangement on despatching, Chief Constable Foster informed McGeer that unless the Shipping Federation changed their policy the longshoremen would remain at work; (Mayor G. G. McGeer to Hon. Gordon Sloan, May 28, 1935, A.-G. Dept., Papers, PABC).

²⁶ *Daily Province*, June 5, 2.

lution, Bouchette had nothing but scorn. "Some 800 of Vancouver's longshoremen are men married, with families. One hundred per cent of the membership of the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers' Association have worked continuously on the Vancouver docks for periods of from five to forty years. Are these the men who, we are told, are helping fomenters of revolution? The question does not merit a reply."²⁷

To Mayor McGeer, the reasons for the port tie-up were unclear. What was clear was that the longshoremen were disrupting the commerce and the financial stability of the city. Writing to the Attorney-General, McGeer forecast: "If we do not take steps to protect constitutional Democracy against Communistic activities, we are going to run into a great deal of very costly interference and disruption of normal business" which would, in turn, be harmful to the re-establishment of prosperity.²⁸ He appealed for 200 additional provincial police specially chosen by members of the Citizens' League to deal with the communists in a "positive and aggressive manner."

We may have to deal with a situation along the waterfront which will include North Vancouver, Burnaby, New Westminster, Powell River etc. I feel reasonably certain that absolutely reliable men can be supplied through General Victor Odlum [a prominent member of the Vancouver Liberal party].

I do not want you to think that I am unduly apprehensive, but I feel that it is much less costly to take ample precautions than it will be to stamp out an open breach between the Communistic element and constituted authority.²⁹

Throughout most of the strike there were at least 200 provincial police guarding the waterfront. The attitude of their Commissioner, Colonel J. H. McMullin, toward the striking longshoremen was one of incredulity. Referring to the strike he noted that: "Generally the handiwork of paid and professional agitators was to be discerned in these expressions of disaffection, and it was curious to observe how men, totally unconnected with the trade concerned, were able to induce the real and qualified workman to leave his job."³⁰ Any charge of outside agitation was refuted by the union in the early stages of the strike. The three men most involved with the longshore unions were Ivan Emery, President of L&WTW; George Brown, its Secretary; and Oscar Salonen, Business Agent of the

²⁷ *Sun*, June 6 and 7, 6.

²⁸ Mayor G. G. McGeer to Hon. Gordon Sloan, June 13, 1935, A.-G. Dept., Papers, PABC.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ British Columbia, Department of Attorney-General, *Report of the Commissioner of Provincial Police, 1935* (Victoria, 1936), 14.

V&DWWA. Emery, the strike committee declared, had been on the waterfront for twelve years, Brown for twenty and Salonen for ten — all had the utmost confidence of the men.³¹

As part of their tactics, the L&WTW announced that affiliates in Vancouver, New Westminster and Chemainus had voted overwhelmingly for a sympathetic strike. The Shipping Federation, for their part, issued daily shipping reports showing that the port was returning to normal conditions. On June 14, it announced that 325 men were working 7 ships. The Federation also broke off talks with the union and declared it would only deal with the individual men.³² This was too much for the L&WTW. A general strike called the next day closed the ports of New Westminster and Chemainus. In an attempt to divide the shipping interests, the L&WTW exempted coastal shipping firms. Longshoremen at Victoria and Port Alberni did not walk out, but declared Vancouver cargo unfair and waited for further results. Nevertheless, some 2,500 longshoremen and seamen were now on strike, and longshoremen in San Francisco, and seamen as far away as Sydney, Australia, indicated their support.³³

The general strike was not complete. Deep-sea ships were still being loaded by gangs recruited by the Shipping Federation. The V&DWWA demanded permission to go on the docks to “address” those working. At a mass meeting on June 16, Ivan Emery warned that if the longshoremen were not allowed this right the strikers would force the issue by advancing on the police. “In the war,” he thundered, “many of us faced the guns of the German army. Now we are faced with a squad of mounties with machine guns behind them. I believe there are enough returned men among us willing to listen to the rattle of machine gun fire again.”³⁴ Mayor McGeer, decrying the statement as “the most brazen and open inciting to riot” he had ever heard, promised the authorities would “deal with it accordingly.”³⁵ The call to the longshoremen to “bring off the strike-breakers” prompted the *Daily Province* to advise that “violence was not to be tolerated,” and that if the strikers carried out their threats they would lose any public sympathy that they now had.

³¹ “Waterfront Strike Bulletin, No. 8,” June 14, 1935, catalogued, PABC.

³² *Daily Province*, June 14, 1. In an open letter to the men on December 7, 1933, the Shipping Federation declared its sympathy with the principle of an amalgamated union and joint representation, “so long as it is not used as a militant lever with which to dictate unacceptable conditions, or as a means to bring chaos to the Waterfront.” (See K. A. McLennan to Hon. Gordon Sloan, May 21, 1934, A.-G. Dept., Papers, PABC.)

³³ “Report of Royal Commission,” 993.

³⁴ *Daily Province*, June 17, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Undaunted and ignoring the warnings of Police Chief Colonel W. W. Foster, approximately 1,000 strikers — some wearing their war medals — led by a Victoria Cross winner, and the Union Jack, marched toward Ballantyne Pier in the early afternoon of June 18. They were met by tear gas and a combined force of city, provincial and Royal Canadian Mounted Police who attacked with batons. The crowd retaliated by throwing bricks and stones. Bob Bouchette, an eyewitness, wrote: "Screams and shouts and curses. Rocks are flying from behind me. Everyone begins running. The sight of galloping horsemen is truly terrifying."³⁶ The riot broke up into small skirmishes, but two hours passed before calm was restored. Sixty people, both police and civilians, were injured and twenty were arrested in one of the worst street riots in the history of Vancouver. Ivan Emery was charged under Section 98 of the Criminal Code with inciting to riot, and Oscar Salonen was charged with engaging in a riot.

On the next day Mayor McGeer banned all picketing. He was confident the city could now look forward to a restoration of "normal business." "We have the situation absolutely in hand and our port is going to be kept open."³⁷ In a telegram to R. B. Bennett, McGeer reported that the mob's attempt to flout constitutional authority had been "effectively suppressed," and that he wished to express the appreciation of all "law abiding" citizens for the efforts of the R.C.M.P.³⁸

The strikers viewed the riot in another light. They called the "exhibition of fascist brutality" a threat to all trade unionists in the province. "The police attack on the mass picket line . . . was more than an attack on the longshoremen. It was aimed at every trade unionist, since it denied the right of workers to picket, and the right of organization."³⁹ However, Colin McDonald, President of the Vancouver, New Westminster and District Trades and Labour Council, disapproved of a mob parading and causing trouble. The Council protested the use of police on the docks and demanded the right to peaceful picketing, but declared its neutrality on the issue of the strike.

The Labour Council's action was symptomatic of a new attitude on the part of the general public. By June 20, there were approximately 500 men working on ten ships and port activity seemed to be returning to normal.

³⁶ *Sun*, June 19, 2; also see a report by Torchy Anderson, *Daily Province*, June 19, 3.

³⁷ *Daily Province*, June 19, 2.

³⁸ Canada, Parliament, House of Commons *Debates* (Ottawa, June 20, 1935), 3817-18.

³⁹ "Waterfront Strike Bulletin, No. 12," June 19, 1935, catalogued, PABC.

Unlike the American maritime strike of 1934, the longshoremen did not win the essential support of the truckers or railway operators.⁴⁰ And, in contrast to the communist-led coast loggers who struck the previous year, the waterfront strikers could be replaced with relatively unskilled workers. This was vividly demonstrated on June 22, when the New Westminster City Council moved to re-open their port. They officially recognized the recently formed Royal City Waterfront Workers' Association and notified the strikers that picketing or interference of any kind would not be tolerated.⁴¹ In Vancouver, the Shipping Federation defended its actions through newspaper advertisements which described the seaport traffic as the city's largest industry, the value of trade being more than \$400 million a year. As for the charge that they were attempting to break the labour unions, the Federation replied that it was a "staunch defender" of organized labour. They required only that labour "play the game."⁴²

The Federation did not specify who devised the rules of the game — it did not have to. The riot of June 18 was the climax of the struggle and from that point on the strike was essentially over. The waterfront workers stayed out for another five months which, to say the least, was a tribute to their determination and solidarity. However, on December 9, 1935, the Central Strike Committee announced that all restrictions were lifted. That morning, the men appeared at the Shipping Federation hall to register as individuals for employment. Picketing had continued for most of the five months, and donations had been received from the C.C.F., other unions, American longshoremen and even French longshoremen. But the Shipping Federation, supported by the city, provincial and federal governments, had remained firm in their refusal to negotiate with the unions. Both provincial and federal labour department officials attempted to bring about a settlement, but when it became apparent that both sides were committed to their positions a federal Royal Commission, consisting of Mr. Justice Davis, was appointed to inquire into the reasons for the dispute. The main conclusion of his Report was that the longshoremen and allied workers had been misled by their leaders.

Leadership that seeks moderately and fairly to overcome real grievances of the workmen is quite legitimate and well recognized. Leadership that deliberately repudiates contracts made by organized labour through collective bar-

⁴⁰ The more conservative trade unions looked upon the communist organized unions as enemies rather than allies; see Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 98.

⁴¹ *Daily Province*, June 22, 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

gaining and recklessly creates trouble and calls strikes for their destructive effect is not legitimate leadership.⁴³

Leadership was certainly a factor in the strike in which 2,375 men were directly involved and a total of 63,000 man days lost,⁴⁴ but other issues were also important. Had the Shipping Federation been less adamant in their opposition to the union and its desire to affiliate with the Maritime Federation of the Pacific, the dispute might have been resolved. As it was, the Vancouver waterfront was again on strike during the winter of 1936-1937, and again over the questions of union recognition and affiliation with the American longshoremen. The later strike was also defeated after the Shipping Federation created a new union. The despatch system was certainly important to the waterfront workers; their very livelihood depended on the decision of the despatcher. Union despatching had been won by American west coast longshoremen and, although there were some difficulties, it continued in effect.⁴⁵

A significant factor in the Vancouver waterfront strike of 1935, and one not considered in the Davis Report, was the militant atmosphere created in general by the Depression, and particularly in Vancouver by the presence of the relief camp workers. As Stuart Jamieson has written of the period:

The conciliatory "hat-in-hand" policy of the conservative business unionism of the 1920's had proved disastrously ineffective in that decade, and even more in the depression 1930's. Effectiveness of unions thus came to be identified with militancy. The severe hardships and deprivations of the unemployed, the vulnerability of employed workers to exploitation by their employers, the apparent indifference of the more favoured sections of the community to the plight of both groups, and the inability or unwillingness of government at all levels to provide them adequate protection and maintenance, all led to acts of desperation on a widespread scale. It seemed all too apparent, to many, that "you won't get anything in the world unless you fight for it" — if necessary, by illegal and violent means.⁴⁶

A further contributing factor that heightened the intensity of the relief camp workers' and the longshoremen's strikes was the attitude and the actions of Mayor McGeer. McGeer was viewed with suspicion by the eastern business community for his unorthodox views on monetary reform, but it was from these same interests that McGeer hoped to raise a

⁴³ "Report of Royal Commission," 994.

⁴⁴ Canada, Department of Labour, *Labour Gazette*, XXXVII (January 1936), 129.

⁴⁵ See Paul Eliel, "Labor Peace in Pacific Ports," *Harvard Business Review*, XIX (Summer, 1941), 429-37.

⁴⁶ Jamieson, *Times of Trouble*, 269.

loan to stabilize the city's finances. The mayor believed that by taking a firm stand against the strikers he could quiet some of the suspicion. Writing to Mackenzie King, who later appointed him to the Senate, McGeer admitted this motive. "Having successfully maintained order in Vancouver in the face of a definite attempt of Communism to disturb our peace, order and good government here, I feel that my friends in the East will no longer look upon me as a dangerous demagogue and a radical with uncontrollable revolutionary tendencies."⁴⁷

To some sections of the Vancouver community the "red menace" was a real threat — at least in economic terms. After the Ballantyne Pier riot, H. R. MacMillan congratulated McGeer for his "prompt and effective action," advising that "your policy in this respect is strongly supported by the business community."⁴⁸

Others saw the "menace" as no more than a cry to stampede the public into supporting certain business interests in their labour problems, and to aid certain politicians in their quest for office. It was never denied that the relief camp workers and the longshoremen were led by communists and other left-wingers, but there was no indication that they planned to use the waterfront strike to overthrow "constituted authority" and establish a proletarian dictatorship in Vancouver. Mayor McGeer, however, continued to denounce the communists and socialists as he campaigned for the federal constituency of Vancouver-Burrard. The results showed that the citizens were not stampeded by the mayor's vehemence. When the votes were first announced the relatively unknown C.C.F. candidate, Arnold Webster, had defeated McGeer by 10,270 to 10,139. A judicial recount later gave McGeer a six vote edge, but the C.C.F. still won the ridings of Vancouver North and Vancouver East, and came close in Vancouver Centre.⁴⁹ The results indicated the widespread dissatisfaction present in Vancouver in 1935. But detailed studies of the waterfront and the relief camp strikes demonstrate that the "Red Menace" — although convincing to some — was more hyperbole than fact.

⁴⁷ Mayor G. G. McGeer to Rt. Hon. W. L. Mackenzie King, May 7, 1935, Mackenzie King Papers, Vol. 208, Public Archives of Canada.

⁴⁸ H. R. MacMillan to Mayor G. G. McGeer, June 21, 1935, McGeer Papers, Vol. 3, PABC.

⁴⁹ *Sun*, October 15, 1, and November 14, 1.