

The Communists and the Unemployed in the Prince George District, 1930-1935

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The worldwide depression prostrated the British Columbia economy in the early 1930s. Production levels dropped and industry stagnated.¹ Unemployment became a pressing problem, and as jobless from throughout Canada rode the trains to the warmer climes of British Columbia's Lower Mainland there was fear that British Columbia was becoming "just a blamed resort for all the hoboos in Canada."² Vancouver was inundated with unemployed workers³ and became the focus of agitation as the jobless organized demonstrations, tag days, and parades in order to gain the ear of governments and improve their circumstances.⁴ The On-to-Ottawa Trek, beginning in Vancouver in the spring of 1935 and culminating in the Regina Riot on 1 July 1935, was the most dramatic event staged by the unemployed in the first half of the 1930s.⁵ Yet Vancouver was not the only place that faced the challenge of coping with militant unemployed workers. In interior centres, where the climate was much less kind, the jobless also launched an attack on the established order. In the Prince George district unemployed workers, led by communists, pressed the local government for higher relief payments, organized demonstrations and parades, initiated strikes in relief camps and

¹ Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto, 1972), p. 235.

² Cited in Margaret A. Ormsby, "T. Dufferin Pattullo and the Little New Deal," in *British Columbia: Historical Readings*, eds. W. Peter Ward and Robert A. J. McDonald (Vancouver, 1981), p. 538.

³ Ian D. Parker, "Simon Fraser Tolmie: The Last Conservative Premier of British Columbia," in *British Columbia: Historical Readings*, eds. Ward and McDonald, p. 523.

⁴ Martin Robin, *Pillars of Profit: The Company Province, 1934-1962* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 17-18; Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1967), pp. 105-07.

⁵ Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar (Toronto, 1973).

at work projects, and even entered the political arena in the 1933 provincial election under the banner of the United Front.

In 1930 Prince George was a city of almost 2,500 souls.⁶ While a Hudson's Bay Company post had existed at Fort George throughout the nineteenth century, urban and economic development began in earnest with the approach of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in the years after 1909. The arrival of the railroad in January 1914 and the establishment of the dominance of Prince George over two other competing townsites at the confluence of the Nechako and Fraser rivers⁷ seemed to presage continuous growth for the city and the region. Farmers settled the arable lands in the region, and within Prince George the Grand Trunk Pacific (later the Canadian National) Railway was the main employer. The backbone of the area's economy, however, was the forest industry that developed along the railway line on a stretch some hundred miles to the east of Prince George. The sawmills and logging operations sprang up in the boom years after 1917 along what was called the East Line, in places like Willow River, Aleza Lake, Giscome, Sinclair Mills, Longworth and Penny. The mills produced lumber for the rail trade in the Canadian prairies and the eastern United States.

The depression had a dramatic effect on the economy of the northern interior. The log scale for the Fort George Forest District in 1929 was almost 103 million board feet. In 1930 production dropped to 50 million board feet, a decrease of over 50 per cent. The log scale decreased a further 54 per cent to 23.5 million board feet in 1931, and dropped by another 35 per cent in 1932 to 15 million board feet. Markets disappeared but lumber prices fell as well. The average price of \$20.21 per thousand board feet in 1929 dropped to a low of \$10.50 per thousand in 1932.⁸ Logging camps closed and sawmills either shut down or operated at less than capacity. In October 1930 the secretary of the Prince George Board of Trade travelled the East Line and took a census of the unemployed. He found fifty unemployed men in Giscome, twelve in Hansard, two in Longworth, twenty-five in Snowshoe, forty in Willow River, thirty in Newlands and forty-six in Sinclair Mills, and commented that "most of these men are married, and virtually all are employed in the timber

⁶ Canada, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931*, vol. II (Ottawa, 1933), p. 105.

⁷ Frank Leonard, "Grand Trunk Pacific and the Establishment of the City of Prince George, 1911-1915," *BC Studies* 63 (Autumn 1984): 29-54.

⁸ Fort George Forest District, "Annual Management Reports," 1933 and 1938, Public Archives of British Columbia (hereafter PABC), Lands Branch, GR 1441, B3401, f. 027391#1-3.

industry when the sawmills are operating."⁹ There were over 400 men without work in the Prince George district by the end of the year.¹⁰

The municipal and provincial governments provided some financial aid to workers and their families in desperate straits, and the police closely monitored the behaviour of the growing number of unemployed workers in anticipation of possible agitation and social unrest. In 1930 the anger and dissatisfaction of the unemployed was not expressed in social activism.¹¹ The hope that the economic downturn would be short in length and the fact that temporary unemployment was not an uncommon feature of working-class life kept the lid on radical responses.

The Prince George City Council met the intertwined problems of unemployment and the rapidly rising expenditure on relief payments by petitioning the provincial government to undertake the construction of a highway from Aleza Lake to Tête Jaune as a relief project. In the late summer of 1931 the highway extension was begun and seven camps were established along the East Line between Aleza Lake and McBride to house 500 relief workers. In the original plan the men were to be paid \$2.00 for an eight-hour day with an allowance of 80 cents per day for dependents,¹² but the actual wage turned out to be much lower.

Among the jobless a social and political movement, led by communists, emerged in the Prince George district in early 1931. Canadian communists were very active on behalf of working-class people in the 1930s, and the National Unemployed Workers Association, a communist organization, co-ordinated agitation activities among the nation's jobless.¹³ A branch of this association was established in Prince George. The

⁹ *Citizen*, Prince George, 30 October 1930.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6 November 1930.

¹¹ W. Spiller, Police Inspector, to Superintendent, B.C. Provincial Police, 5 December 1930, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1931).

¹² "Report on Relief Camps," 30 December 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1933, Unemployment Matters, Part I); *Citizen*, 27 August 1931; 10 September 1931.

¹³ A history of the Communist Party of Canada can be found in Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal, 1981); Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto, 1975). For the activities of Communists in trade unions, see Richard C. McCandless, "Vancouver's 'Red Menace' of 1935: The Waterfront Situation," *BC Studies*, 22 (Summer 1974): 56-70; S. D. Hansen, "Estevan, 1931," in *On Strike: Six Key Labour Struggles in Canada*, ed. Irving Abella (Toronto, 1974), chapter II; Robert Robson, "Strike in the Single Enterprise Community: Flin Flon, Manitoba — 1934," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 12 (Fall 1983): 63-86; James D. Leach, "The Workers Unity League and the Stratford Furniture Workers: The Anatomy of a Strike," *Ontario History* 60, 2 (June 1968): 39-48. Relief camps are

communist appeal to the dispossessed and the fervour of party members in their vision of a better world contributed in moulding a revolutionary challenge to the established order. While the communists had broad political and economic goals, their activities during the 1930s were primarily directed toward securing basic material needs for the working class. In the communist organizations unemployed forest industry workers, single men in relief camps, and family men and women on the dole found a group of people that expressed their immediate concerns and that was willing to work on their behalf.

The first demonstration by the unemployed in Prince George occurred on the afternoon of 11 June 1931 in a George Street store. The action was prompted by the decision of the City of Prince George to suspend direct relief payments because of municipal financial difficulties.¹⁴ Approximately 175 unemployed men and one police constable were present at the meeting and the premises were crowded to capacity. The men wanted immediate aid for the needy and relief work. Delegations were appointed to wait on Dr. R. W. Alward, the local Conservative member of the legislature, and George Milburn, the government agent. Alward came to the meeting and announced that the highway relief project would begin shortly. Milburn promised to forward the men's demand for immediate action on relief payments to officials in Victoria. The meeting was orderly, but the police inspector noted that "the unemployment situation here is reaching the stage where anything may be expected to happen."¹⁵ However, the beginning of the highway extension and the resumption of municipal relief payments diffused organization among the unemployed for the duration of 1931.¹⁶

In the spring of 1932 discontent in the highway construction camps along the East Line manifested itself. The men went on strike in April, demanding an increase in the scale of pay. They stated that they wished to work but that the remuneration of only free room and board and \$7.50 a month for pocket money was insufficient. Extra policemen were

examined in Lorne A. Brown, "Unemployment Relief Camps in Saskatchewan, 1933-1936," *Saskatchewan History* 23 (1970): 81-104; Ronald Liversedge, *Recollections of the On to Ottawa Trek*, ed. Victor Hoar.

¹⁴ *Citizen*, 16 April 1931.

¹⁵ Radiogram, 12 June 1931, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1; *Citizen*, 18 June 1931.

¹⁶ Radiogram, Spiller to B.C. Police Commissioner, 24 June 1931, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1.

brought into the area, but the men remained in the camps and acted peaceably as they awaited the response of the Department of Public Works.¹⁷ The strike was soon settled and the men returned to work. The terms of the settlement were a thirty-hour work week, \$7.50 a month in wages, and the provision of work clothes by the government. By early July the promised clothes had not been provided and the number of hours of work had increased to forty-four per week with no raise in wages. The men went on strike again, this time demanding \$4.00 for a seven-hour work day and the guarantee of three days' work per week. The Department of Public Works refused to meet these demands and closed the camps. The men decided to evacuate the camps, and beginning on 5 July 1932 the strikers rode the trains into Prince George.¹⁸

The infusion of strikers into the unemployed population in Prince George invigorated the local branch of the National Unemployed Workers Association (NUWA). The activists from the East Line camps took a leading role in the NUWA, and on 11 July 1932 a deputation appeared before Prince George City Council, delivering a communication that set out the demands of the organization. They wanted the city to guarantee single men three eight-hour days of work per week at \$4.00 per day and married men four days per week at the same wage with further allowances for dependents. They also demanded no discrimination against workers because of race, colour, creed or political conviction, as well as free housing, light, fuel and clothing for the unemployed. The city council, strapped for financial resources, viewed the requests as remarkable and impossible to meet.¹⁹

In late July 1932 the NUWA began to take its struggle to the streets of Prince George. On the morning of the 28th of July the striking camp workers sent a committee to visit the government agent requesting that he communicate with officials in Victoria regarding the government position on the strike. Victoria replied that there was no change in the conditions offered the camp workers, and upon hearing this the men decided to take direct action. At 11 o'clock in the morning about a hundred men entered the grocery store of C. C. Reid and asked him to supply them with food. They told Reid that the provisions were to be charged to the provincial government. Reid attempted to negotiate with

¹⁷ Radiogram, Spiller to B.C. Police Commissioner, 11 April 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932); *Citizen*, 14 April 1932.

¹⁸ *Citizen*, 7 July 1932.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14 July 1932.

the men and a number of police constables arrived. Finally the men left the store, but only after Reid had donated fifteen dollars' worth of food to the unemployed men.²⁰ That evening the NUWA held a meeting, and Inspector Spiller and Sergeant McKenzie of the Provincial Police spoke to the crowd, warning the men that their action in demanding food was unlawful and must not occur again. The leaders of the NUWA replied that they did not advise the breaking of man-made laws but that their advice was to obey the laws of the stomach.²¹

On the morning of 3 August 1932 the provincial government presented an ultimatum to the striking camp workers. The strikers were informed that the twenty-five cent per day sustenance allowance they were receiving in Prince George was suspended, and that to receive room and board they would have to go to non-work relief camps. The camps were those that had been previously used for the highway construction crews, and the strikers did not want to return to these isolated camps to while away the time. The NUWA and the strikers promised stronger action in dealing with the government: "To date we have been dealing with the government on a more or less fair basis, but from now on it is going to be Direct Action."²² That afternoon the police patrolled the city streets to prevent demonstrations, and authorities feared disturbances. About ninety men were involved in the refusal to go to the relief camps, but according to Inspector Spiller the number of "malcontents" in Prince George numbered about 250.²³

It was over a week before the NUWA acted. On the morning of 12 August 1932 sixty men arrived at the police office and demanded to be arrested as vagrants. Inspector Spiller told the men that they had the option of moving to the non-work relief camps and as such could not be arrested as vagrants. In the afternoon twenty-six of the men went into the government agent's office and demanded food and shelter. On being refused, the men stated that the building belonged to them, as they were the people, and proceeded to sit down and occupy the office. The men were then arrested and charged with unlawful assembly.²⁴

²⁰ Radiogram, Spiller to B.C. Police Commissioner, 24 June 1931, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932); *The Unemployed Worker*, Vancouver, 6 August 1932.

²¹ Radiogram, Spiller to B.C. Police Commissioner, 29 July 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932).

²² *The Unemployed Worker*, 13 August 1932.

²³ Radiogram, Spiller to B.C. Police Commissioner, 8 August 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932); *Citizen*, 11 August 1932.

²⁴ Radiograms, Spiller to B.C. Police Commissioner, 12 August 1932 (11:45 a.m.);

Three days later a preliminary hearing was held and the twenty-six men appeared before George Milburn, the government agent and acting stipendiary magistrate. Before any evidence was presented, Milburn, who had witnessed much of the affair, commented that there was little doubt that the men would be committed to trial. NUWA leaders who had been involved in the incident — Henry Vorberg, John Ward, Leo McCaffery, Frank Stager and Frederick Newton — skilfully cross-examined the witnesses on behalf of the accused and argued that no weapons had been involved, that the men were weak and hungry and as such incapable of physical violence, and that while in the government agent's office the men had caused no trouble.²⁵ The men were committed for trial, and bail was set at \$400 for each of the accused. Bail was raised only for Fred Newton, and the other twenty-five men remained in prison. A defence fund was organized, and donations came in from throughout the district, a logging camp at Sinclair Mills making an especially large contribution.²⁶

The men were tried on the 22nd day of September, and the case was dismissed on the grounds that there was no fear that the peace was about to be broken. On the following morning the men and their sympathizers celebrated by gathering in front of the government office and singing Red Songs. Then they marched to the Prince George Grill and demanded to be fed: the bill was to be sent to Prime Minister R. B. Bennett. The police arrived and forty-three men were arrested, including the twenty-six who had just been released. At the trial the accused were acquitted on the same grounds as the previous case involving the NUWA.²⁷

With the release of the most active NUWA members from jail and the success of the NUWA tactics in embarrassing the government and judicial system, organizational work among the unemployed was intensified and prosecuted with increased vigour. The events of late September 1932 buoyed the spirits of NUWA organizers, and plans for disturbances and demonstrations were discussed, pamphlets and radical working-class newspapers were disseminated, and organizational work was revived.²⁸

12 August 1932 (2:45 p.m.), PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932); *Citizen*, 18 August 1932.

²⁵ Preliminary Hearing Report, PABC, GR 419, v. 399, f. 96/1932.

²⁶ *Citizen*, 8 September 1932; 22 September 1932; 29 September 1932.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 September 1932.

²⁸ *The Unemployed Worker*, 22 October 1932; 5 November 1932.

Provincial authorities were not idle, and in October an official of the Canadian Immigration Department was brought to Prince George to investigate the possibility of deporting some of the more militant NUWA members. The immigration official spent two days in the city and interviewed eight men: Frank Stager, John Ward, Frederick Newton, Carl Anderson, Arthur Negard, Ragner Olson, Victor Hagen and Nels Hedlund. All of the men except Hedlund had been arrested in the sit-in at the government agent's office on 12 August 1932. Police Inspector Spiller was confident that the deportations would be executed, and he only regretted that the federal immigration officer had been able to interview so few potentially deportable men during his short stay.²⁹

During October the government was successful in removing the unemployed activists from Prince George to non-work relief camps along the East Line. With no relief payments forthcoming in Prince George, the men were forced to go to the camps in order to receive food and accommodation for the coming winter. The NUWA was angry at this turn of events and promised that "these unfortunate victims who are, through starvation, forced to go and bury themselves for the next six months, are not going to tolerate for one moment, such vile conditions as existed in those so-called camps last winter."³⁰ If the authorities thought that moving the single unemployed from Prince George to isolated East Line camps would ensure harmony, they were sorely mistaken.

The relief camp at Penny, some seventy-five miles east of Prince George was the largest camp on the line and the scene of conflict. In November 1932 Camp 808 at Penny housed sixty-four men, many of whom had been involved with the NUWA in Prince George during the previous summer. About the middle of November an epidemic of dysentery and flu broke out at the camp, and there was no medical treatment to allay the suffering of the men. A delegation was appointed to approach the camp foreman, and early on the morning of 19 November 1932 John Ward, a man named Powell and D. C. Dickinson waited upon Andrew Forrest, the camp foreman. The men inquired about medicine available in the camp, as well as the clothing disbursement and rations. Forrest told the men that medicine would not be procured for men suffering from dysentery. A heated argument followed in which the men threatened to take over the camp and Forrest belittled the political

²⁹ Spiller to B.C. Police Commissioner, 19 October 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932).

³⁰ *Citizen*, 20 October 1932.

affiliation of the delegates. Forrest then ordered the men to leave the office but they refused. Forrest picked up a double-bladed axe and struck Ward with the flat of it to encourage their departure. The men left the office and called a meeting of the unemployed, and at this gathering they decided to go in a body to the office and order the foreman out of the camp. About forty men returned with Ward, Powell and Dickinson to the foreman's office; Forrest packed his belongings and rode the next train to Prince George.

The following morning the men in Camp 808 were awakened by the stopping of the mail train at Penny. Five policemen and a new foreman disembarked, but the camp was quiet and Harry Brawn took over the foreman duties without incident, except that he soon contracted dysentery. Two men were transported to Prince George for medical treatment, and later a doctor was sent to treat the men who were ill at Penny. An investigation by the police recommended that no charges be laid against the men in their treatment of Forrest; in fact, the evidence suggested that a charge of assault might be upheld against Forrest in his attack on John Ward. The police report stated that it would do more harm than good to pursue the issue of Forrest's treatment at the hands of the men.³¹

With a new foreman and treatment for the dysentery outbreak, Camp 808 returned to a normal existence, and by the end of the month the Penny camp held its full complement of 108 men. NUWA organizers remained active: "we are arranging our forces for the next skirmish and the men are going about the job of educating themselves along class lines so that we may have concerted action against the 'Iron Heel' being displayed in this district."³² For Harry Brawn, the camp foreman, discipline was not a problem, but he was alarmed at the influence of the communist agitators on the young boys in the camp and wanted to see John Ward and other leaders deported or put in a camp by themselves under close watch. Brawn was indignant that the "Red Flag" was sung at camp committee meetings, a form of behaviour he had never expected to observe in Canada.³³

Provincial authorities monitored the situation at Penny very closely and followed up all rumours involving potential activities by communist

³¹ Radiograms to B.C. Police Commissioner, 21 November 1932; 22 November 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932); *Citizen*, 24 November 1932; *The Unemployed Worker*, 3 December 1932.

³² *The Unemployed Worker*, 3 December 1932.

³³ H. Brawn to Dr. R. W. Alward, 10 December 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2301, f. L-125-1 (1933, Communistic File).

agitators on the East Line. A main goal of the police was to keep the single, unemployed men isolated in the non-work relief camps and away from Prince George. On 25 November 1932 three men, Powell, Dickinson and Hazuka, were taken off the train at Foreman and charged under the Railway Act for riding the rails without a ticket. The three activists from Camp 808, who had been on their way to Prince George, each received a one-month prison sentence, and the police hoped that "their conviction may have a sobering effect on the others in that camp."³⁴ The police also worried that the new camp to be established at Willow River, eighteen miles east of Prince George, would cause "a great deal of trouble with men 'Beating their way' backwards and forwards on the trains."³⁵

The provincial government pestered federal officials to proceed with the deportation of activists among the unemployed. John Ward was the focus of much communication between Victoria and Ottawa.³⁶ In January 1933 a federal immigration officer spent two days at Camp 808 investigating communist inmates. John Ward, who had come from Scotland with the scheme that brought 10,000 British miners to work the prairie harvest in 1928, Gus Hedlund, who had come from Sweden in 1928, Pete Onoprychuk, a Pole, and Victor Hagen, a Finn who had been in Canada for almost five years, were all ordered deported on the grounds that they were public charges. All except Hagen appealed the deportation order. While the official reasons for the deportations were the economic circumstances of the men and the fact that they had not been domiciled in Canada for five years, the political activities of the men were the overriding concerns of the authorities.³⁷

The NUWA was active in the city of Prince George during the winter of 1932-33. Meetings were held, resolutions were drafted, and petitions were organized to protest the arrests and imprisonments of Canadian communist activists such as Tim Buck and Arthur Evans.³⁸ The death

³⁴ Police Report, 30 November 1932, PABC, GR 1323, B2300, f. L-125-1 (1932).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Telegrams, H. H. Stevens to H. R. Pooley, 29 December 1932; H. R. Pooley to H. H. Stevens, 27 December 1932; letter, J. H. McMullin to H. R. Pooley, 27 January 1933, PABC, GR 1323, B2301, f. L-125-1 (1933, Communistic File).

³⁷ Police Report, 21 January 1933, PABC, GR 1323, B2301, f. L-125-1 (1933); Canada, Immigration Branch, Public Archives of Canada, C-10288, RG 76, v. 396, f. 563236, pt. 15; *The Unemployed Worker*, 4 February 1933.

³⁸ *The Unemployed Worker*, 31 December 1932; 14 January 1933; *Citizen*, 26 January 1933.

of Steve Berlinic, a communist who had been involved in the demonstrations in the summer of 1932, prompted a large Red funeral in Prince George. Men travelled from as far away as Penny to attend the event. The man's grave was decorated with a large, concrete headstone that was three and a half feet high, and in chiselled lettering, outlined in red, was the following inscription:

TO THE MEMORY OF A PROLETARIAN
COMRADE S. BERLINIC
DIED FEB. 27, 1933
A VICTIM OF RELIEF CAMPS
THIS MONUMENT HAS BEEN ERECTED BY HIS COMRADES
AS A WARNING
MAY 3, 1933
ONE FOR ALL
ALL FOR ONE.³⁹

The first demonstration of the 1933 season took place on 1 May. The open-air meeting at Duchess Park was preceded by a procession through the streets of Prince George by 150 participants. Banners were everywhere: "Free '8' and All Class War Prisoners," "Down With Fascism and Iron Heel," "Bennett Must Go," "More Milk for Children," "We Demand Non-Contributory Unemployed Insurance for Unemployed," "Abolish Slave Camps," "Smash Sec. 98," "No More Deportations," "For Defense of Soviet Union and Chinese People," and "International Labour Day, May 1st, 1933. Workers of the World Unite." Three speakers addressed the gathering on international, national and local themes.⁴⁰

Throughout the summer of 1933 the NUWA and its local allies, the Russian Workers Club, the Workers Sports Association, and the Canadian Labor Defense League, held meetings, organized picnics, and represented people who had concerns regarding the administration of the relief program.⁴¹ For those without work these organizations provided a haven and a sense of hope during extremely difficult times.

³⁹ Police Report, 25 July 1933, PABC, GR 1323, B2301, f. L-125-1 (1933); radiogram, Prince Rupert Police office to B.C. Police Commissioner, 1 March 1933, PABC, GR 1323, B2301, f. L-125-1 (1933, Communistic File).

⁴⁰ *The Unemployed Worker*, 10 May 1933.

⁴¹ *Citizen*, 13 July 1933; *The Unemployed Worker*, 27 September 1933.

In October 1933 the relief camp at Penny was closed, and despite the government's plan to transfer all of the inmates to a camp at Spences Bridge, many of the men refused to go and congregated in Prince George.⁴² The men who resisted the move to Spences Bridge were soon cut off relief in Prince George. On the afternoon of 16 November 1933, seventy-six men entered the office of the government agent, demanded relief and refused to leave until their request was satisfied. At 5 o'clock the office closed but the men remained, and the police, using batons, cleared the building. During the fracas a policeman received a bloody nose and four of the demonstrators were arrested for obstructing the police officers in the carrying out of their duties. The trials of Ragner Lindal, Ole Olson, Charles Peterson and David Dickinson were set for May 1934. Lindal was tried first, and after he was found innocent the cases against the other three men were dropped.⁴³

Throughout 1934 and 1935 the various working-class organizations in Prince George, which now included the Yugoslav Workers Club, The Unemployed Married Men's Organization and the Russian Workers' Farmers' Club,⁴⁴ continued to provide succour to workers without jobs and to show their dissatisfaction with the failing economic system, but no major incident occurred until the spring of 1935. By this time many of the unemployed were working for the city in recompense for their relief, and it was this group of men that staged the final confrontation with authorities in Prince George during the 1930s.

On the morning of 5 April 1935 some of the men doing municipal relief work notified the mayor that they had gone on strike. Fifty workers demanded increased wages to reach parity with other provincial relief workers and the right to free medical attention.⁴⁵ The city considered the demands and agreed to increase relief wages to \$3.20 per eight-hour work day, 60 per cent of which would be paid by the province, and to provide medical treatment at no expense in extreme circumstances. The mayor explained that the city was not in a position to employ all the men on relief at once but that anyone willing to work when called upon

⁴² *Citizen*, 12 October 1933; 2 November 1933.

⁴³ Radiogram, Prince Rupert Police to B.C. Police Commissioner, 17 November 1933, PABC, GR 1323, B2301, f. L-125-1 (1933); *The Unemployed Worker*, 22 November 1933; 29 November 1933; Preliminary Hearing, Rex vs. Ragner Lindal, Ole Olson, Charles Peterson, and David Dickinson, PABC, GR 419, v. 418, f. 22/1934; *Citizen*, 17 May 1934.

⁴⁴ PABC, GR 1222, v. 102, f. 1; GR 1222, v. 4, f. 2.

⁴⁵ *Citizen*, 11 April 1935.

would be paid the same as those performing work. The relief strikers, however, were not willing to accept the favourable terms proposed by the city. Instead, they demanded fifty cents per hour for single men, a six-hour work day, a guarantee of sixty-four hours' work per month, and complete coverage under the Workmen's Compensation Act.⁴⁶ Confrontation became inevitable.

One group of some fifteen relief workers not on strike was doing road and bridge work near Salmon River under the supervision of the Department of Public Works. On Saturday, 11 May 1935, strikers arrived at the Salmon River work site and began to harass the men at work. The police, expecting trouble, were on hand; the strikers were routed and returned to Prince George.⁴⁷ Rather than easing the tension, the skirmish set the stage for a major battle two days later.

On Monday morning a group of relief workers left the local Public Works Department garage, travelling in trucks to do road work outside of Prince George. A confrontation with the strikers was anticipated, and provincial officials accompanied the workers. At the head of the convoy was a car containing the police inspector and two game wardens, and following the four trucks carrying the workers was a police car in which four policemen rode. On Six Mile Hill, about one and a half miles east of town, approximately forty strikers were waiting. They had constructed a barricade across the road. At shortly after 8 o'clock in the morning the convoy arrived at the barricade and a barrage of stones was thrown by the strikers at the cars and trucks. The two game wardens leapt from their car to remove the barricade and were immediately set upon by a group of strikers. One of the game wardens had his arm broken and the other was badly cut on the face. The police at the rear of the convoy began shooting bullets over the heads of the strikers and the disturbance was soon quelled. The barricade was then removed and the strike-breakers were transported to their destination. At the place of the battle Frederick Barker was arrested and later in the day three other strikers were taken into custody: Heitman Johnson, Jack Rutledge and Gus Edvall.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 April 1935; 9 May 1935.

⁴⁷ Radiograms, Prince Rupert Police to B.C. Police Commissioner, 13 May 1935, PABC, GR 1222, v. 7, f. 5; Prince Rupert Police to B.C. Police Commissioner, 11 May 1935, PABC, GR 1323, B2302, f. L-125-3 (1935).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; *Citizen*, 16 May 1935.

The local police viewed the outbreak with alarm and fully expected further disturbances:

Situation serious. Need reinforcements badly. Previous estimate of four men not good enough. Need ten to fifteen. There is talk of strikers raiding and smashing up Government building today or tomorrow and also talk of raiding stores. It will be necessary for me to engage specials meantime. Necessary to have city shifts doubled or trebled and have mobile force in reserve.⁴⁹

The fifteen policemen were quickly dispatched to Prince George, but no incidents occurred.⁵⁰

Prince George City Council and much of the local citizenry were outraged at the incident of 13 May. On the Monday following the clash city council passed a bylaw to regulate all street demonstrations. Under the terms of the bylaw a permit was required to hold any parade or demonstration on a public street or in a public area.⁵¹ On Empire Day, 24 May, the local population found an opportunity to show their rejection of the growing communist influence in Prince George, and they wrapped their sentiments in the cloak of patriotism, British traditions, and the desire to maintain law and order. A large patriotic parade was organized, and 1,300 people marched through the streets of Prince George. At the end of the parade the Union Jack was run up amid cheers, and the school inspector delivered the flag address. The crowd then joined in singing "God Save the King."⁵² The editor of the local newspaper pointedly outlined the significance of the Empire Day demonstration:

The parade of the citizens of Prince George on Friday should carry its lesson to the men who have been persistently fomenting trouble, supposedly in the interests of the unemployed. . . . The parade on Friday made it clear the people of Prince George have lost patience with the men who have been directing the strike of the unemployed. . . . The strikers may elect not to give their labor in return for relief, but they will not be permitted to interfere with the liberty of action of men who desire to go to work.⁵³

For the relief strikers and the communist organizations the events of May 1935 were the last major incidents that they were involved in

⁴⁹ Radiogram, Prince Rupert Police to B.C. Police Commissioner, 13 May 1935, PABC, GR 1222, v. 7, f. 5.

⁵⁰ J. H. McMullin, B.C. Police Commissioner, to Attorney General, 13 May 1935, PABC, GR 1323, B2302, f. L-125-3 (1935, Prince George Strike).

⁵¹ *Citizen*, 23 May 1935.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30 May 1935.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 30 May 1935.

around Prince George during the depression years. In early June the striking men returned to work on the terms originally set down by the governments.⁵⁴ The four men arrested on assault charges on 13 May were found guilty; one man was sentenced to eighteen months in prison while the other three were each given six-month sentences.⁵⁵ The Workers' Defence League, the Canadian Labour Defense League and the Workers' Protective Association continued to petition on behalf of the unemployed, but the direct action of the previous years was no longer used as a tactic.

The quiescent behaviour of local radicals after 1935 cannot be attributed to patriotism or the diligence of the police and the judicial system. Increased activity in the East Line lumber industry put a larger portion of the unemployed to work after 1935. The smashing of the On-to-Ottawa Trek in Regina on 1 July 1935 left the camp workers' union in disarray, and the election of the Mackenzie King Liberal government four months later led to the closure of the relief camps. The new Liberal government also expanded expenditure on the two national railways, and by the summer of 1936 over 250 men were employed doing maintenance work for the Canadian National Railway near Prince George.⁵⁶ There was also a change in the direction of the international communist movement. From 1935 onwards the Comintern gave priority to the struggle against world fascism. As part of this policy the previous emphasis on building communist-led organizations in the 1920s and early 1930s was replaced by a communist strategy to create a broad anti-fascist alliance with social democrats, moderate union leaders, and even the Liberal Party against perceived fascist and reactionary elements in Canadian society. As a result, some of the communist-led organizations were disbanded and militants became active in a wide range of non-communist groups.

Besides direct action in government offices and organizational work in the relief camps and among the unemployed, the communists also entered the political arena, offering a candidate in the 1933 provincial election. In August 1933 a meeting chose William Mahoney to run under the United Front banner.⁵⁷ In a backhanded manner, the government agent acknowledged the skills of the United Front candidate:

William Mahoney is a born agitator, of Irish descent, with all the objectionable qualities, none of the good ones, of the Irish. He is engineering all the

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6 June 1935.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6 June 1935; 13 June 1935.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9 July 1936; 12 August 1936.

⁵⁷ *The Unemployed Worker*, 20 September 1933.

meetings and demonstrations and as he is one of the few educated of the men, I think he writes all the resolutions, and his object is to embarrass [*sic*] the Government, financially, and in any other way, as his continuance as leader depends upon keeping in the limelight.⁵⁸

Another new party on the left of the political spectrum, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, also ran a candidate for the first time in the election. The communists looked on the CCF with disgust. They perceived the democratic socialist party as a bulwark of capitalism that intended to save the capitalist system through reforms which would remove blatant injustices but not transform the whole social and economic structure. To the communists only wholesale change and the victory of the working class would ensure the creation of a just society. As significant as the doctrinal differences between the United Front and the CCF was the ethnic composition of their supporters. The people who nominated the CCF candidate were named Robertson, Hutchison, Crassweller, Peckham, Saunders, Strom, Gibson, Cadden, Olds, Kelly, Somerton, Clapperton, Anderson, McInnis and Ellis. The British Isles were the homeland of the bulk of the CCF supporters. The people who signed Mahoney's nomination papers were named Goethals, Radakovich, Hue-lordh, Gustafson, Lindquist, Warren, Sikstrom, Paradis, Dickinson, Johnson, Baker, Lindal and Barker. Scandinavians and non-British Europeans were the core of the United Front supporters.⁵⁹ Throughout the campaign the United Front attacked the CCF unmercifully.⁶⁰

H. G. Perry, the Liberal candidate, easily won the Fort George riding. The CCF finished second with 625 votes, 952 behind the leader. The United Front gained only 192 votes, 7 per cent of the total number cast.⁶¹ For the communists electoral success was a dream, but the campaign had allowed for proselytizing.

The communists were a presence in the Prince George district in the early 1930s. They addressed serious issues on behalf of the unemployed, often remedying immediate complaints, and they attacked the relief camp system which imprisoned young men in isolated settings, a concern that was shared by many British Columbians. In early 1934 H. G. Perry presented a memorandum to the Minister of Labour sug-

⁵⁸ G. Milburn to E. W. Griffith, 24 January 1934, PABC, GR 1222, v. 127, f. 2.

⁵⁹ *Citizen*, 12 October 1933.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31 August 1933.

⁶¹ British Columbia, *Statement of Votes by Electoral Districts, 1928-1945* (Victoria, n.d.).

gesting changes in the administration of relief, claiming that the present method "is fast breaking the morale of the greater portion of our people, and is not sufficient in itself to give satisfactory sustenance in many cases." Perry wanted the government to offer work to the unemployed so that self-respect would be retained, and he concluded with a warning:

One thing is certain, we cannot drift in the way we are doing, just carrying on with the old relief agreement, which is unsatisfactory to the recipient in most cases, disastrous to the future welfare of society and I believe the immediate welfare too, and objectionable to the taxpayer. No state of society can do other than collapse if this is continued.⁶²

While the communists fought for concerns that had the sympathy of large segments of the British Columbia population, they also saw themselves as part of a world revolutionary movement destined to overthrow the economic and social order in Canada. The worldwide depression of the 1930s seemed to signal the demise of capitalism; with a little push capitalism would surely tumble. Prince George communists directed their actions in concert with international developments, and in the context of this logic no compromises with the capitalist state were acceptable. In the municipal relief workers' strike in the spring of 1935 it is doubtful whether the government could have satisfied the communists at all. Capitalism, however, did not fall, and it was not until the 1940s — this time within the lumber workers' union, the International Woodworkers of America — that the communists regained a high profile in the Prince George district.⁶³

⁶² H. G. Perry to George S. Pearson, 8 January 1934, PABC, GR 1222, v. 3, f. 11.

⁶³ Ken Bernsohn, *Slabs, Scabs & Skidders: A History of the I.W.A. in the Central Interior* (Prince George, 1978), pp. 11-27.