

# Working Class Vancouver, 1886-1914: Urbanism and Class in British Columbia\*

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Conventional wisdom holds that in the early years of the twentieth century British Columbia workers expressed a relatively high level of class feeling. Travellers of the period identified relations between capital and labour as British Columbia's distinguishing feature. Once west of the Rockies an easterner "finds himself confronted with a new set of moral and social problems," Rev. S. D. Chown, a leading social critic from Ontario, commented during a west coast visit in 1904; the "most insistent question of the common people is not, what have you to say about temperance or prohibition, but, what is your message in respect to capital and labor; what is your scheme for bettering the material conditions of the people, and producing peace and good will between the employer of labor and his employees."<sup>1</sup> British writer J. A. Hobson concurred: "Nowhere else in Canada is the labour question so prominent, nowhere else is class sentiment of employer and employed so much embittered."<sup>2</sup> Scholarly assessments of British Columbia politics and labour relations during the early 1900s corroborate these contemporary observations. One author characterizes British Columbia as the "company province," where a unique political system based on competing class interests emerged; two others describe it as the "militant province," marked by a higher than average level of strikes; and still another portrays it as the radical province, where workers, led by miners and railroad navvies, embraced revolutionary forms of socialism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. P. Mosher, "The Social Gospel in British Columbia: Social Reform as a Dimension of Religion, 1900-1920" (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1974), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Hobson, *Canada To-day* (London: T. F. Unwin, 1906), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972); essays by Stuart M. Jamieson and Emil Bjarnson in Jamieson et al., *Militancy in the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Vancouver: The Institute of Industrial Relations, University of British Columbia, 1977), pp.

While agreeing that British Columbia's unstable resource economy accounts for working class militancy and radicalism, writers are less clear about Vancouver's role. Except for a brief discussion of the subject by David Bercuson, the urban dimension of British Columbia's class system is either ignored or seen to reflect the regional pattern.<sup>4</sup> According to Ross McCormack, workers in Winnipeg and across the prairie provinces expressed their class identity through "labourism," a moderate form of labour radicalism; by contrast, British Columbia workers espoused revolutionary socialism.<sup>5</sup> Yet this interpretation distorts B.C. history by overlooking the dissimilarity between metropolitan centre and surrounding region. The following paper aims to investigate this difference by examining working class Vancouver from 1886 to 1914. It argues that the city's economy created an urban working class more complex and more moderate than that of the highly polarized mining communities of Vancouver Island and the Kootenays. Vancouver workers, like their Winnipeg counterparts, expressed class feeling more through moderate labourism than doctrinaire socialism. In addition, the city's strike record more closely approximated the pattern of capital-labour strife in Toronto and Saint John than the chronicle of strident conflict in Rossland and Nanaimo.

For the turn-of-the-century period discussed in this essay, class is defined in the Marxist sense as the product of capitalist society's fundamental division between those individuals who owned the means of production (such as land and capital), or whose interests and aspirations (such as professionals and managers) led them to identify with the owners, and those who did not, and who thus had to sell their labour.<sup>6</sup> Wage labour, sold as a commodity in the marketplace, characterized the system. Two types of class relationships resulted. One was an "experienced objective relationship" between capital and labour, a "concrete, material,

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3-8 and 9-11; and A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement 1899-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> David Jay Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review* 58 (June 1977).

<sup>5</sup> McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, passim.

<sup>6</sup> See Rennie Warburton, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment," *BC Studies* 49 (Spring 1981): 79-85; Leonard Beeghley, *Social Stratification in America: A Critical Analysis of Theory and Research* (Santa Monica, Cal.: Good-year Publishing Co., 1978), chap. 1; and Michael B. Katz, Michael J. Doucet and Mark J. Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), chap. 1. The quotations are from Warburton.

lived” relationship defined by one’s place in the productive system. The second was class-motivated action based on a subjective perception of mutual interests, evident when people who shared common interests, experiences and aspirations acted in a class-conscious manner to distinguish themselves from others who did not share these attributes.<sup>7</sup> While accepting the assertion of sociologist Rennie Warburton that the working class must be viewed through its relationship with the property-owning “bourgeoisie,” the following paper concentrates on wage earners primarily and the middle class only secondarily. It asks what influences encouraged or retarded the development of an objective condition of class into a subjective state of class consciousness among Vancouver workers. It suggests that urban influences (or urbanism) significantly moderated the thrust toward militancy and radicalism emanating from British Columbia’s mining hinterland.

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Born as a service and lumber mill community on tree-lined Burrard Inlet, Vancouver blossomed from village to city within a few months of its incorporation in 1886. News of the CPR’s impending arrival sparked a real estate and construction boom that lasted to the early 1890s, generating a wide range of subsidiary business activities typical of urban places. Construction, lumber manufacturing and the CPR’s rail and steamship services dominated the economy, accounting directly for 45 percent of the city’s labour force in 1891 and indirectly for many more. As early as the 1890s the bulk and perishability of many consumer products and the simple technology required to make them had induced local production of candy, canned fruit, bakery goods, beer and tailored clothing. The severe depression of the mid-1890s reversed economic growth and reduced the size of Vancouver’s work force. But prosperity returned with the Klondike gold rush, renewing the process of economic diversification and establishing Vancouver as British Columbia’s metropolitan centre for commerce, lumber manufacturing, transportation and business services. Sustained urban growth to 1907 and another highly inflated real estate and building boom from 1909 to 1913 created thousands of additional construction jobs. By the First World War, then, Vancouver had emerged as a characteristic mid-sized city, offering a wide range of business functions and boasting a varied and complex work force. A January 1891 statistical survey of Vancouver’s economy listed 5,016 employees out of a

<sup>7</sup> W. Peter Ward, “Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939,” *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 17-35; quotation from p. 18.

city population of about 13,000; twenty years later the work force had grown to 50,628 out of 100,401. Two-thirds of the 1911 labour force, or approximately 33,000 employees, formed the wage-earning core of Vancouver's pre-war working class.<sup>8</sup>

TABLE 1

*Urban Growth in Vancouver: Selected Occupational Categories  
Compared for Eight Canadian Cities, 1911*

City	Total work force	% Population increase over previous decade	% of total work force by occupational category			
			Construc- tion	Commer- ce: trade & merchan- dising	Trans- porta- tion	Manu- factur- ing
Vancouver	50,628	271.7	17.6	15.4	9.7	18.5
Calgary	21,320	893.7	20.8	14.4	12.6	15.1
Winnipeg	62,265	221.3	17.2	22.1	13.7	17.6
Toronto	169,520	81.9	12.2	19.2	7.1	34.9
Montreal	183,257	75.7	13.4	17.9	14.3	33.2
Hamilton	37,428	55.7	10.8	12.5	6.5	50.7
London	19,615	21.9	7.6	16.9	9.2	42.2
Halifax	17,909	14.2	9.5	18.3	12.3	20.7

<sup>1</sup> The population statistics for Vancouver refer to Vancouver proper and do not include N. and S. Vancouver and Point Grey.

SOURCE: *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. I, table 13 and vol. VI, table 6.

Table 1 places Vancouver's labour force in comparative perspective. It suggests that Vancouver's employment structure in 1911 approximated

<sup>8</sup> See Robert A. J. McDonald, "City-Building in the Canadian West: A Case Study of Economic Growth in Early Vancouver, 1886-1893," *BC Studies* 43 (Autumn 1979): 3-28 and "Victoria, Vancouver, and the Evolution of British Columbia's Economic System, 1886-1914," in *Town and City*, ed. Alan F. J. Artibise (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, University of Regina, 1981), pp. 31-55; L. D. McCann, "Urban Growth in a Staple Economy: The Emergence of Vancouver as a Regional Metropolis, 1886-1914," in *Vancouver: Western Metropolis*, ed. L. J. Evenden (Victoria: Department of Geography, University of Victoria, 1978), pp. 17-41; and *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. VI, table 6, pp. 286-97. In calculating the wage-earning proportion of Vancouver's work force, I defined typists and stenographers as working class but included commercial and office "clerks" in the middle class. My findings correspond closely to Michael Piva's conclusion that blue-collar workers constituted 66.3 percent of Toronto's work force in 1911; see Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), p. 15.

that of other Canadian cities but departed fundamentally in the area of manufacturing. Vancouver had emerged as B.C.'s principal trade, shipping and railway centre, with commerce and transportation employing one-quarter of the city's workers. Because of the Terminal City's relatively small hinterland market, trade and transportation industry employees formed a slightly less important part of Vancouver's working class than they did of Winnipeg's or Montreal's. Urbanization generated employment for thousands of construction workers across Canada during the Laurier years, with the demand for builders in the rapidly growing west exceeding that in the more settled east.

Industrial production differentiated central from western Canada more sharply. British Columbia enjoyed a comparative advantage in national and international markets for its primary resources, to which only limited value had been added. The huge Hastings Sawmill on Burrard Inlet and the several saw, shingle, and sash and door mills lining False Creek testified to the pervasive influence of forest wealth on Vancouver's economy. But as a thinly populated region far removed from major markets, British Columbia did not experience the scale or locational economies required to manufacture highly processed items competitive beyond provincial boundaries. B.C.'s industrial pattern shaped Vancouver's work force. Small by national standards, the city's consumer goods plants, engineering works and clothing shops met only local and regional needs. Consequently, in 1911 proportionately more than twice as many Vancouver workers as their Toronto counterparts toiled in wood manufacturing and lumber plants, a reflection of the obvious importance of forest-related production in the coast city. By contrast, a Toronto worker was three times as likely to labour in clothing and related industries and twice as likely to find employment in metal-manufacturing firms.<sup>9</sup> Table 1 indicates that, overall, industrial jobs in Toronto and Montreal exceeded manufacturing work in Vancouver by a margin of almost two to one.

In addition to diversifying the city's occupational structure, urbanization differentiated workers by economic condition. Without manuscript census or tax assessment rolls it is impossible to determine accurately economic differences among workers, but census statistics that document the annual earnings of family heads in a select number of occupations (table 2) offer some insight into employment stratification.

Work skills furnished the most obvious source of difference. Highly trained members of the railway running trades, led by locomotive engi-

<sup>9</sup> Calculated from *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. VI, table 6 and Piva, *Condition of the Working Class in Toronto*, pp. 15-25.

neers, formed the working class elite in Vancouver, as elsewhere in Canada, earning almost double per year that of unskilled labourers. Skilled trainmen and electricians earned more than salesmen, despite the latter's higher status as white collar workers. Experiencing less competition from novices learning their trade on the job, bricklayers and plumbers accumulated higher yearly incomes than did carpenters. At the bottom of the income hierarchy were labourers: lacking specialized skills they had to accept lower hourly wages and lower annual incomes than skilled craftsmen.

TABLE 2  
*Average Annual Earnings of Heads of Vancouver Families  
in Specified Occupations, 1911*

Trainmen	\$1,213.59
Electricians	1,022.64
Salesmen	1,022.44
Bricklayers, Masons, and Stonecutters	973.82
Plumbers and Gas Fitters	963.67
Chauffeurs	955.38
Bakers	927.11
Carpenters	914.75
St. Ry. Employees	895.47
Domestic and Personal Workers	868.36
Painters and Decorators	857.24
Labourers	629.30

SOURCE: *Census of Canada, 1921*, vol. III, xx.

Job regularity also influenced total earnings. Certainly, tradesmen could usually expect greater job security and thus higher annual incomes than unskilled workers, but the relationship was not always straightforward. For example, in 1911 carpenters commanded an hourly wage of fifty cents compared to thirty-five cents for street railway conductors and motormen.<sup>10</sup> Yet their annual incomes, as documented in table 2, were almost identical. The difference is explained by the more secure and less seasonal employment offered by the paternalistic British Columbia Electric Railway Company.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Canada, Department of Labour, *Wages and Hours of Labour in Canada, 1901-1921* (Ottawa: 1921), pp. 5 and 18.

<sup>11</sup> Patricia E. Roy, "The B.C.E.R. and its Street Railway Employees," *BC Studies* 16 (Winter 1972-73): 3-24.

Seasonal influences created a pattern of differentiation that overlapped with but did not entirely match that defined by skill. Winter unemployment plagued Canadian workers from Montreal's docks to Cornwall's cotton mills to British Columbia's logging camps. The building trades were especially vulnerable to unemployment, even in Vancouver where rain hampered large street, sewer and water line projects. During a period of four months in 1903 wet conditions restricted Vancouver construction workers and machinists to twelve days' employment in thirty.<sup>12</sup> Both skilled tradesmen and unskilled labourers endured layoffs. Vancouver's status as a regional employment centre intensified these seasonal variations. By 1900 new railroad and shipping ties had solidified Granville's earlier function as a labour distribution and service hub. The Terminal City became the "centralization point for all men seeking work" on the transcontinental railway,<sup>13</sup> as well as the place from which workers headed to coastal fish canneries and logging camps. As Eleanor Bartlett notes, the "province's resource industries were active primarily in spring, summer and early fall. When winter closed these operations, the workers flocked to Vancouver to find other work or to spend their unemployment."<sup>14</sup> Vancouver's mild climate and terminal location further enhanced the city's image during winter as a "mecca of the unemployed."<sup>15</sup> Spring and summer brought their own employment rhythm, with many men leaving for resource jobs while others arrived for construction work. Of the latter the seasonal influx during the pre-war boom of Italian labourers — as many as 4,000 in 1911 — to take up well-paying street excavation jobs offers the most notable example.<sup>16</sup>

Geographic mobility marked the employment histories of most urban workers during the industrial era, with evidence from American cities showing that only 40 to 60 percent of all adult males persisted in the

<sup>12</sup> *Labour Gazette* (hereafter *LG*) 3 (January 1903): 517 and *Daily News-Advertiser* (hereafter *N-A*), 4 June 1892, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 6 August 1912, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Eleanor A. Bartlett, "Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Vancouver, 1901-1929," *BC Studies* 51 (Autumn 1981): 8.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia E. Roy, "Vancouver: 'The Mecca of the Unemployed,' 1907-1929," in *Town and City*, pp. 393-413.

<sup>16</sup> *N-A*, 6 September 1911, p. 1 mentions 5,000-6,000 Italians in Vancouver whereas the 1911 census lists 1,922. I have assumed that most of the difference is accounted for by summer transients. Also see British Columbia, Commission on Labour, 1912-1914, *Transcripts of Evidence* (hereafter *B.C., C. on L., Evidence*), 11 March 1913 [J. H. McVety], vol. 3, file 10, p. 332, RG684, Provincial Archives of British Columbia.

same community for as long as a decade.<sup>17</sup> Preliminary evidence suggests the same pattern for Vancouver.<sup>18</sup> But transiency itself was a complex phenomenon, with seasonal workers experiencing a regular and ongoing pattern of movement not characteristic of others with more stable, if far from permanent, city jobs. The seasonal pattern of regional resource industries and urban construction generated through Vancouver a flow of single, mobile workers who, when in the city, lived in a relatively self-contained world defined by waterfront-area rooming houses and saloons. By contrast, families, detached cottages in residential neighbourhoods and a variety of associational affiliations characterized the lives of more stable urban workers.<sup>19</sup> Whether skilled loggers or unskilled Italian labourers, seasonal wage earners joined Vancouver's work force for only a portion of each year. Seasonally determined transiency meant irregular employment, fluctuating income and marginal integration into the city's working class.

Also poorly integrated were Asians. In 1911, 6 percent of Vancouver's population claimed Asian ancestry; most were single, male and of working age. They included 3,364 Chinese, 1,841 Japanese and fewer than 1,000 Indians, mainly Sikhs.<sup>20</sup> The deeply entrenched racism then pervading white society forced Asians to the margins of Vancouver's economy. Here they sold their labour at one-half to two-thirds the value of white labour or engaged in petty commerce.<sup>21</sup> Probably more than half worked as labourers in resource extractive industries. Some, such as the Chinese cannery workers who butchered salmon prior to canning, had

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880-1970* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 221-27.

<sup>18</sup> David Darling, "Patterns of Population Mobility in Vancouver, 1891-1931" (M.A. extended essay, Simon Fraser University, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Very little has been written about the daily lives of Vancouver workers before 1914. For a brief glimpse of loggers' society see M. Allerdale Grainger, *Woodsmen of the West*, New Canadian Library No. 42 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), pp. 13-17. Deryck Holdsworth discusses working-class housing, emphasizing the residences of more advantaged urban workers, in "House and Home in Vancouver: The Emergence of a West Coast Urban Landscape, 1886-1929" (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1981). A somewhat less sanguine view of working class housing is offered in Donna 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). Also see interviews with several pre-war Italian immigrants in "Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End," *Sound Heritage* 8 (1979).

<sup>20</sup> Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1980), pp. 169-70.

<sup>21</sup> W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), pp. 17, 81 and 112.

acquired considerable skill; most Asians laboured doggedly at routine and unsophisticated tasks. The Asian proportion of Vancouver's lumber industry work force appears to have increased from the 1890s to the First World War; according to one worker, by 1913 they had "practically driven white labour out of the mills."<sup>22</sup> The Chinese became especially prominent as small businessmen, providing service as grocers, laundrymen, pedlars, shopkeepers and restaurateurs either to the white community or exclusively to a Chinese clientele.<sup>23</sup> While ethnocentrism and the single, sojourner status of most Asians undoubtedly helped separate them from white workers, segregation ultimately rested on the hardpan of racial prejudice. The existence of a dual class structure defined by race marked one of the features that most distinguished Vancouver from other Canadian cities.

Women too comprised a distinct part of Vancouver's work force, exhibiting employment characteristics both common in other cities and particular to the west coast. According to widely held middle-class perceptions of the period, women belonged in the home, where they were to support the principal bread-winner and nurture the children. If economic necessity required that women work for wages outside the family, suitable job choices extended from this domestic role into health care and education, personal service, clerical labour and certain kinds of manufacturing.<sup>24</sup> Based on the assumption that "men and women were suited to different types of employment," wage-earning women were segregated into a very few occupations characterized by "low wages, irregular work and dull, dead end tasks."<sup>25</sup> Women also enjoyed few opportunities for promotion to skilled or managerial positions.

This familiar pattern of economic discrimination determined job choices for Vancouver women. Of the 6,452 female wage earners documented for Vancouver in the 1911 Canadian census, the largest portion worked in domestic and personal service (2,720), the professions (1,484) and trade and merchandising (1,075). "Professional" women, numbering 604 stenographers and typists, 357 teachers and 242 nurses, were little

<sup>22</sup> B.C., C. on L., *Evidence*, 20 January 1913 [T. Turnbull], vol. 1, file 2, p. 162. Also see *The Independent* [Vancouver], 22 September 1900, p. 3 and *Province*, 26 April 1901, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, *White Canada Forever*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974), chap. 3 and Paul Phillips and Erin Phillips, *Women and Work: Inequality in the Labour Market* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1983), chap. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Girl of the New Day: Canadian Working Women in the 1920s," *Labour/le Travailleur* 4 (1979): 135 and 137.

better off than the others, holding positions of relatively limited status and pay.<sup>26</sup> As with Chinese workers, employers valued women's labour at 40 to 50 percent below that of white males. For example, before the First World War the David Spencer department store paid female clerks an average of \$8.60 per week compared to \$14.50 for salesmen.<sup>27</sup> Young women in Ramsay's biscuit factory earned from \$5 to \$8 per week, the equivalent of ten to sixteen cents an hour; unskilled male builders' labourers commanded three times that amount.<sup>28</sup>

While approximating a national pattern, Vancouver's female work force also exhibited regional influences. Table 3 suggests the degree of distinctiveness: women constituted a substantially smaller portion of the work force in Vancouver than in Toronto or Winnipeg. One reason was the greater gender imbalance in British Columbia, where in 1911 working-age men outnumbered women by a ratio of 2.3 to 1. British Columbia was a society of immigrants, and the employment opportunities that attracted immigrants in turn shaped the west's demographic structure. Since the region's resource extractive, construction and transportation sectors required labouring men rather than whole families or women, British Columbia appealed particularly to male immigrants of working age.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, B.C.'s comparative disadvantage as a location for end product manufacturing — the result of a remote location, small population, and discriminatory Canadian tariff and freight rate policies — particularly affected Vancouver, where such industrial activity would have centred. Consequently, clothing, textile, tobacco and food processing industries, which employed large numbers of women in eastern cities and a growing number in Winnipeg, offered limited job opportunities for women on the west coast. As table 3 indicates, women comprised only 9.6 percent of Vancouver's manufacturing work force, compared to 17.2 percent in Winnipeg and 25.5 percent in Toronto. These figures correspond closely to the overall distribution of female wage earners in the three cities.

<sup>26</sup> Star Rosenthal, "Union Maids: Organized Women Workers in Vancouver 1900-1915," *BC Studies* 41 (Spring 1979): 41.

<sup>27</sup> Eleanor Anne Bartlett, "Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Vancouver, 1901-1929" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1980), Appendix 1, "Vancouver Wage Data from Transcripts of the Commission on Labour, 1912-1914," p. 113.

<sup>28</sup> B.C., C. on L., *Evidence*, 7 March 1913 [Miss H. R. Gutteridge], vol. 3, file 2, p. 126 and Canada, *Wages and Hours of Labour*, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> W. Peter Ward, "Population Growth in Western Canada, 1901-71," in *The Developing West*, ed. John E. Foster (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983), pp. 163-72.

TABLE 3  
*Wage-Earning Women: Vancouver  
 Compared to Winnipeg and Toronto, 1911*

	Women as % of total city work force <sup>1</sup>	Women as % of manufacturing portion of work force <sup>1</sup>	Women as % of urban population <sup>2</sup>
Toronto	25.3	25.5	50.6
Winnipeg	18.3	17.2	45.3
Vancouver	12.7	9.6	39.9

<sup>1</sup> Percentages calculated from *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. II, table 6; includes females 10 years of age and older.

<sup>2</sup> Percentages calculated from *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. I, table 1; takes into account women of all ages, including children.

Vancouver's trade union movement exhibited the consequences of internal working class stratification. Unlike British Columbia miners, who joined industry-wide "industrial" unions, Vancouver workers characteristically formed more exclusive "craft" organizations limited to individuals with similar skills. Vancouver's earliest trade unionists belonged to locals of the Knights of Labor, a movement that attempted to join together all workers regardless of skill into units organized by industry. But by the mid-1890s the Knights had disappeared, victims of employers' opposition, jurisdictional disputes with unions of skilled tradesmen, and a visionary idealism many years ahead of its time. In the spring of 1887 bricklayers and typographers formed Vancouver's first craft unions. Two years later, in November 1889, the carpenters, plasterers, painters and Knights of Labor established a city-wide Trades and Labor Council (VTLC).<sup>30</sup> Skilled workers continued to lead the movement. From 1889 to 1913 typographers, machinists and carpenters contributed 75 percent of all VTLC presidents, with various construction unions providing half this total. In addition, building tradesmen comprised the VTLC's most active regular members.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For the early years of Vancouver's labour movement see George Bartley's "Twenty-five Years of Labor Movement in Vancouver," in *The British Columbia Federationist* (hereafter cited as *Federationist*), 6 May 1912, p. 3 and 27 December 1912, pp. 14-15, 24 and 27-32.

<sup>31</sup> For Trades Council presidents see the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council Minutes (hereafter VTLC Minutes), 1889-1914. The role of building tradesmen is suggested in attendance reports published in *The Western Wage-Earner* (Vancouver), February 1909, p. 21 and the *Federationist*, 20 January 1912, p. 1.

Less skilled workers played a more peripheral role. The mid-1890s depression almost destroyed Vancouver's infant labour movement, but starting in 1897 renewed prosperity stimulated a trade union renaissance, giving new life to suspended union locals and generating even among less skilled workers, such as retail clerks, teamsters, civic employees and laundry employees, the enthusiasm and market strength required to organize.<sup>32</sup> However, despite broadening the movement's social base, prosperity failed to shake the dominance of skilled craftsmen. The collapse in 1903 of the United Brotherhood of Railway Employees (UBRE), an industrial union of semi- and unskilled ticket agents, clerks, and freight handlers, re-affirmed that Vancouver's trade union movement would remain fragmented by occupation and dominated by advantaged tradesmen.<sup>33</sup>

Several factors explain the movement's structure, of which the labour market is pre-eminent. Specialized skills protected craftsmen from the competition of unskilled labourers and the opposition of employers.<sup>34</sup> For example, the economic roles assigned to women greatly limited their ability to organize<sup>35</sup> while transiency and job insecurity hampered the unionization of lumber workers. In addition, skilled workers strongly believed in advancement according to merit and thus insisted on wage differentials that "recognized their exalted status over helpers and labourers . . . in this sense they were quite willing to accept some limited degree of hierarchical stratification."<sup>36</sup> This consciousness of economic privilege blunted their enthusiasm for organizing the unskilled; in one instance, the UBRE conflict of 1903, the elite railway brotherhoods actively opposed the less skilled railway strikers.<sup>37</sup> Social attitudes towards

<sup>32</sup> Eugene Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada 1812-1902* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 276; *Federationist*, 27 December 1912, p. 24; *Independent*, 17 May 1902, p. 4 and 5 September 1903, p. 5; and VTLC Minutes, 4 December 1902, p. 99.

<sup>33</sup> For the 1903 United Brotherhood of Railway Employees strike, see McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, pp. 44-48 and Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in B.C.* (Vancouver: B.C. Federation of Labour, 1967), pp. 39-41. The unions of semi and unskilled workers, such as clerks and civic workers, often did not survive long; for the clerks' union see *The Independent*, 16 June 1900, p. 1 and *LG 6* (September 1905), p. 276, and for civic employees, *N-A*, 22 April 1911, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier," pp. 171-73.

<sup>35</sup> Despite structural difficulties, women's attempts to organize were not entirely futile; see Rosenthal, "Union Maids," *passim*.

<sup>36</sup> Craig Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," *Labour/le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984): 59.

<sup>37</sup> J. Hugh Tuck, "The United Brotherhood of Railway Employees in Western Canada, 1898-1905," *Labour/le Travailleur*, 11 (Spring 1983): 82-83.

women had the same divisive effect. Consequently, unionized men either ignored women workers or relegated them to “auxiliaries” on the outer edge of the labour movement.<sup>38</sup> And racism segregated Orientals from white workers and their institutions. Together these influences restricted union membership to 15 percent of the city’s work force at the movement’s peak in 1912,<sup>39</sup> with virtually all Asians, most seasonal migrants and women, and many unskilled workers excluded.

To summarize, then, Vancouver’s working class exhibited a number of traits distinctive to the region: the exaggerated importance of construction work, the relative weakness of industrial employment, the seasonal labour flow to and from hinterland mining, logging, construction and fishing sites, the unusually low number of women wage-earners, and the divisive force of race. Yet these west coast peculiarities only modified an employment structure that was fundamentally urban, replicating among Vancouver workers the labour functions and economic differentiation evident in other major centres. This structural base influenced the urban character of another feature of working class life in pre-war Vancouver: labour militancy.

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“Militancy” infers “a propensity to act,” “a willingness or propensity to fight and struggle.”<sup>40</sup> In studies of class relations the term is often employed to indicate workers’ readiness to strike — that is, to withdraw their labour in an attempt to extract concessions from bosses; in this sense it is viewed as a subjective measure of class feeling. Contrarily, capitalists could pressure workers by refusing to allow them to work. Labour conflicts in early Vancouver took the form almost entirely of strikes rather than lockouts, though many strikes were instigated by employers.

Strikes reflected fundamentally different views within the middle and working classes about the economic role of labour. Employers urged that

<sup>38</sup> Elaine Bernard, *The Long Distance Feeling* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1982), p. 18 and “Last Back: Folklore and the Telephone Operators in the 1919 General Strike,” in *Not Just Pin Money*, ed. Barbara K. Latham and Roberta J. Pazdro (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984), pp. 279-86; and Marie Campbell, “Sexism in British Columbia Trade Unions, 1900-1920,” in *In Her Own Right*, ed. Barbara Latham and Cathy Kess (Victoria: Camosun College, 1980), pp. 167-86.

<sup>39</sup> This figure, calculated from the number of unionized Vancouver workers in 1912 as a percentage of the city’s 1911 work force, undoubtedly over-represents the proportion of organized workers. See *LG* 14 (July 1913): 46 and *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. VI, table 6, p. 286.

<sup>40</sup> Stuart M. Jamieson, “Militancy in the British Columbia Labour Movement,” in Jamieson et al., *Militancy*, p. 3.

an ample supply of cheap labour be available to ensure economic growth. Of particular concern to managers were labour shortages during periods of rapid growth; these favoured workers, allowing them a choice of jobs and driving up wages. Thus in 1901 and 1906 industrialists lamented the dearth of cheap labour for B.C.'s resource industries, claiming that a tight labour market slowed the influx of capital and made local products uncompetitive.<sup>41</sup> By contrast, a plentiful labour supply favoured employers. Even more threatening for some middle-class observers was the shortage of inexpensive domestic workers, which menaced "the stability of the home" and retarded the "physical and social development of white residents."<sup>42</sup> A reserve labour supply would keep the wheels of industry turning smoothly and maintain middle-class social standards.

Essential to preserving a competitive labour market was an open immigration policy. From the time of CPR construction in the 1880s, Asians had provided the most readily available pool of semi- and unskilled workers, and controversy about their role in British Columbia's development continued to resonate through the province's history. In 1890 Vancouver alderman James Fox, a contractor, articulated the assumptions that underlay the capitalist class's demand for Asian labour:

We have an extensive province without a population. Shall it remain in its primeval state . . . , with its forests of wealth rotting, with its vast treasures of riches lying hid(den), with its pastoral lands arid wastes, with its waters stinking with fish undevoured . . . ? Shall we linger along ambitionless . . . and pass away without employing that power that Heaven has placed in our hand . . . (?)<sup>43</sup>

Certainly not, asserted Fox. But the province lacked sufficient labour to carry out this development. He suggested as the solution an influx of up to two million Chinese workers who would open B.C.'s treasure house and generate untold wealth. CPR president William Van Horne similarly supported an open immigration policy and sharply criticized anti-Oriental legislation that prevented it. Looked at from "a practical and selfish point of view," he argued, restricting competition from Chinese labour retarded development of British Columbia's resources "to the material disadvan-

<sup>41</sup> *Province*, 25 April 1901, p. 1; *N-A*, 10 October 1906, p. 2; and R. H. H. Alexander to Sir T. G. Shaughnessy, 20 November 1906, Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) Archives, RG2 [Correspondence Inward], File 82481.

<sup>42</sup> May Fitz-Gibbon to Sir T. G. Shaughnessy, 21 November 1907, CPR Archives, RG2 [Correspondence Inward], File 85132.

<sup>43</sup> *N-A*, 12 February 1890, p. 3.

tage of the very working-men it is intended to help . . . It is sad to see our laws prostituted to a race prejudice."<sup>44</sup>

In addition, owners demanded complete control over the work process. For them capital's economic role superseded labour's. Consequently, the owners of capital should be left alone to determine whom they would employ, the level of remuneration, and working conditions. Whether the proprietor of a small tailoring shop or the manager of an American-controlled fishing company, capitalists iterated that they refused to be dictated to by workers.<sup>45</sup> In the words of a Vancouver sheet metal shop owner, "we have a right to run our own businesses along lines to suit ourselves."<sup>46</sup> They especially opposed trade unions, which challenged their economic authority.

On the other hand, workers recognized that capitalism had reduced labour to a commodity to be bought and sold for its exchange value. For this reason they strongly rejected the owners' demand for an open and unregulated labour market and forcefully opposed the immigration of unskilled workers. In 1913 J. W. Wilkinson, secretary of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, explained why market vulnerability led workers to oppose immigration:

We are working men and the only way we have of getting our livelihood is by selling ourselves from day to day, wherever we can find someone to hire it . . . the price we can get will determine to a large extent the standard of living we shall enjoy.<sup>47</sup>

Whether comprising Asians arriving on their own resources or "the industrial garbage of the Old Country" sent by benevolent societies, an influx of unskilled labour threatened to undermine the job security and living standard of settled white workers. This attitude may seem selfish, Wilkinson conceded, "but in the struggle for existence matters are very often reduced to the ethics of the jungle."<sup>48</sup>

Some wage-earners, particularly the more advantaged skilled tradesmen, articulated a sharply different role for labour than that advanced by

<sup>44</sup> W. C. Van Horne to [Francis Carter] Cotton, 6 October 1896, Public Archives of Canada, Canadian Pacific Railway Collection, Letterbook 51 [Correspondence Outward], Microfilm, no. M2287.

<sup>45</sup> *Vancouver World*, 12 April 1899, p. 4 and Canada, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts Files, Public Archives of Canada, [hereafter cited as Strikes and Lockouts], RG27, Microfilm, Roll 3, file 3159A. These files were later revised; the latter are hereafter cited as Strikes and Lockouts, RG27 (revised).

<sup>46</sup> Strikes and Lockouts, RG27, Microfilm, Roll 3, file 3235.

<sup>47</sup> B.C., C. on L., *Evidence*, 7 March 1913 [J. W. Wilkinson], vol. III, file 8, p. 180.

<sup>48</sup> Quotations in last two sentences are from *loc. cit.*

employers. Reflecting the influence of their artisanal past, they argued that it was not the capitalist who supported the worker, but rather the worker who supported the capitalist.<sup>49</sup> Workers contributed as much to the economy as capitalists. Consequently, workingmen wanted to "be on equal terms with their employers."<sup>50</sup> This required that wage-earners be protected from undue competition for their jobs, that they be paid "fair" and "proper" wages determined by traditional payment practices, and that they retain substantial control over the work process.<sup>51</sup> Crucial to attaining this relationship with capital was the owners' recognition of trade unions, through which workers could voice their concerns and protect their interests.

The substantial number of strikes in early Vancouver testifies that the objective reality of class relations differed markedly from the workers' ideal. The inherently antagonistic condition of capital and labour generated a recurring pattern of labour conflict. The city's strike history remains cloudy to 1901, before the federal government began systematically to record strikes and lockouts. But for the 1901-14 period, federal Department of Labour data and local newspapers reveal seventy-six strikes, ranging in duration from one-half hour to more than a year and engaging from a mere half-dozen to more than 5,500 workers (table 4).

Vancouver's strike pattern is explained first by fluctuations in the provincial labour market, which it closely followed. The four strikes in 1889 came at the peak of the city's early construction boom. Unable to find substitute workers, contractors and sash and door factory owners were forced to accept the carpenters' demand that nine hours constitute a normal working day. But already by June 1891 40 percent of city carpenters and 20 percent of bricklayers were without work, and the full onset of depression in 1893 further eroded job security and wages.<sup>52</sup> Local newspapers record only seven strikes during the bleak years from 1890 to 1898, with no strikes in five of them. Yet improved conditions in the late 1890s soon produced a labour shortage in B.C., leading a local labour journal to proclaim in May 1902 that "so far as demand for men and wages go things were never better in Vancouver."<sup>53</sup> An improved

<sup>49</sup> *Independent*, 31 March 1900, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 April 1902, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> *N-A*, 10 May 1894, p. 1 and 16 January 1897, pp. 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> For the carpenters' strike see the *N-A*, 5-17 July 1889 and the *World*, 5-11 July 1899; on advancing unemployment see the *N-A*, 25 June 1891, p. 1 and 2 December 1894, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Independent*, 3 May 1902, p. 8.

TABLE 4  
Yearly Level of Strikes in Vancouver, 1901-1914

Year	No. of strikes	No. of strikers <sup>1</sup>	Striker-days <sup>2</sup>	Largest strikes (and striker-days) <sup>3</sup>
1901	3	165	1,773	3 strikes (unknown)
1902	11	524	3,782	tel. linemen/operators (420)
1903	10	1,311	51,719	UBRE [sympathy] (38,075)
1904	3	99	2,324	halibut fishermen (1,300)
1905	5	189	2,873	painters (1,425)
1906	4	159	5,709	tel. operators/elect. linemen (4,082)
1907	5	1,440	30,585	carpenters (27,000)
1908	0	0	0	—
1909	6	428	5,896	longshoremen (2,700)
1910	7	627	12,077	machinists/engineers (7,170)
1911	6	6,046	257,112	bldg. trades [sympathy] (241,216)
1912	9	1,168	78,818	halibut fishermen (74,200)
1913	5	416	5,864	granite cutters (2,500)
1914	2	80	691	sheet metal (100)
TOTALS	76	12,652	459,223	

SOURCE: Canada, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts Files (original and revised), Public Archives of Canada, RG27; *Labour Gazette* 1-15 (1901-15); and local newspapers and labour papers.

<sup>1</sup> These yearly figures are based on hard data for 53 strikes and a statistical average of 55 workers for each of the remaining 24 for which no information was available. In calculating the average I deleted the 10 largest strikes (each involving more than 199 workers) and averaged the number of strikers in the remainder.

<sup>2</sup> I employed the same technique for 26 strikes for which striker-days information was unavailable, calculating an average of 591 striker-days for the 40 conflicts that resulted in the loss of no more than 2,499 striker-days of work.

<sup>3</sup> Only hard data, not the calculated averages, are listed.

labour market and higher expectations triggered renewed demands from workers for better wages, hours and working conditions. Local tailors, whose union was broken in an unsuccessful strike in 1893, regained recognition from master tailors in 1899<sup>54</sup> and initiated a period of labour struggles that peaked with eleven strikes in 1902 and another ten the following year. The economic downturn of 1907-08 ended the labour

<sup>54</sup> Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada*, pp. 262-63 and *World*, 12 April-27 May 1899.





*Dupont  
[Pender] Street,  
ca. 1899*



*Louis D. Taylor*



*Rev. George R. Maxwell*

market conditions that for several years had favoured workers; not surprisingly, no strikes were recorded for 1908. But renewed prosperity once again gave workers the confidence and market power to challenge employers. Consequently, the pre-war years featured an increased number of labour conflicts, including a huge construction workers' walkout in 1911 and a substantial halibut fishermen's strike in 1912.<sup>55</sup> By 1914 the familiar pattern of bust following boom had once more drained Vancouver's workers of the economic strength to confront employers on the picket line.

Changes in the structure of Canadian capitalism also shaped relations between capital and labour in Vancouver. The trend towards increased capitalization of companies, greater concentration of ownership and further centralization of control reduced the influence of small, regional entrepreneurs while increasing that of more highly bureaucratic and powerful corporations in metropolitan cities such as Toronto, Montreal and New York. The trend to capital concentration extended to British Columbia, especially to the province's resource industries. The Kootenay mining boom of the 1890s opened a whole new region to heavily capitalized corporations, and the resulting tension between managers and miners turned the Kootenays into a centre of labour militancy at the century's turn. Even in Vancouver evidence of capitalism's new structure came after 1900 in a series of takeovers of local businesses by outside firms. The 1902 consolidation of much of the coast salmon canning industry into one large Vancouver-based corporation exemplified the trend.

Accompanying the emergence of large-scale, or "monopoly," capitalism was a new management offensive to curb the growth of trade unions. Strikebreaking represented the most obvious denial of workers' claim to equal status with capital. All workers were affected, whether skilled machinists and tailors or unskilled longshoremen and street labourers. Companies recruited strike-breakers externally as well as locally, finding Puget Sound cities a particularly convenient source of labour. Longshoremen in 1889 and 1900, tailors in 1899, ship carpenters and caulkers in 1901 and electrical workers in 1909 shared the experience of facing strike-breakers imported from Port Townsend or Seattle.<sup>56</sup> The transcontinental railway broadened the labour market and increased the area from which

<sup>55</sup> For the construction workers' strike see *Strikes and Lockouts*, RG27 (revised), files 3335, 3356 and 3378; for the halibut fishermen, *ibid.*, file 3637.

<sup>56</sup> *World*, 27 September 1889, p. 2, 12 April 1899, p. 4 and 3 May 1899, p. 7; Forsey, *Trade Unions in Canada*, pp. 263, 340 and 342; and *Strikes and Lockouts*, RG27, Microfilm, Roll 2, File 3123 and Roll 3, File 3152.

large companies could draw substitute workers. In 1903 during the UBRE strike the CPR imported workers from eastern Canada to replace striking freight handlers.<sup>57</sup> In July 1910 an employing contractor forced Italian street construction labourers back to work by threatening to import Galician replacements from the east.<sup>58</sup>

To diminish trade union influence, city capitalists in May 1903 formed the Employers' Association of Vancouver.<sup>59</sup> Fraser River salmon canners had anticipated the Vancouver organization in the late nineties, establishing associations to lobby the federal government for favourable fish licensing arrangements and to control the price and production of salmon. By 1905 B.C. employers had formed twenty-six associations.<sup>60</sup> The coincidental appearance of similar bodies in eastern Canada and the United States, including Pacific Coast organizations with which the Vancouver Employers' Association became affiliated, seems to support the view of local trade unionists that employers had launched a broadly based attack on unionized workers.<sup>61</sup>

The Employers' Association proposed to return managerial power to the owners and representatives of capital. To achieve this goal they aimed to terminate "closed shop" agreements, thus opening unionized firms to both unorganized and organized workers. In each case where the unions have secured the closed shop they have driven up wages and "imposed numerous working conditions which are very unpalatable to the employers," argued R. H. Sperling, general manager of the British Columbia Electric Railway Company.<sup>62</sup> To end this condition the Employers' Association vowed to import and subsidize strikebreakers, lobby governments in opposition to union demands, and pursue legal action against "the leaders of mobs" and people who threatened business property.<sup>63</sup> In 1904 the Association listed 103 members, all of whom employed five or

<sup>57</sup> Phillips, *No Power Greater*, p. 40. In "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914," *Acadiensis* 13 (Autumn 1983): 21-28, Ian McKay describes the labour market transformation that accompanied the consolidation of Canadian capitalism.

<sup>58</sup> *N-A*, 22 July 1910, p. 4 and 23 July 1910, p. 15.

<sup>59</sup> *Independent*, 11 April 1903, p. 2 and 9 July 1904, p. 1 and *LG* 4 (July 1903): 8.

<sup>60</sup> Harry Keith Ralston, "The 1900 Strike of Fraser River Sockeye Salmon Fishermen" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1965), pp. 83 and 92-96 and Phillips, *No Power Greater*, p. 41.

<sup>61</sup> *N-A*, 26 May 1911, p. 2; *Federationist*, 9 December 1911, p. 1; and Piva, *Condition of the Working Class in Toronto*, pp. 150-56.

<sup>62</sup> R. H. Sperling to Hiram Williams, 12 April 1911, British Columbia Electric Railway Papers, Special Collections, University of British Columbia, General Managers' Letter Books, A x B 3-4 (January-June 1911).

<sup>63</sup> *Independent*, 9 July 1904, p. 1.

more "hands," and in 1911 it claimed as members "ninety percent of the representative business houses in the city."<sup>64</sup> While the latter figure may be questioned, the Employers' Association clearly represented a broad consensus of middle-class opinion about organized labour. Starting in 1903, this attitude further strained relations between "the two great classes"<sup>65</sup> and increased the number and intensity of labour conflicts in Vancouver.

Perhaps the best-known Vancouver example of employer intimidation is the UBRE strike of 27 February - 27 June 1903, which precipitated formation of the Employers' Association. While the strike has been documented elsewhere, its importance as an example of the objective reality of class relations deserves emphasis. The UBRE, which had formed a Vancouver local in 1902, represented an attempt to broaden the labour movement to include less skilled workers and to organize all wage-earners by industry. This the CPR refused to accept. Vowing to limit unionization on the railway to the more elite skilled tradesmen,<sup>66</sup> the CPR in early 1903 embarked on a form of secret warfare against the UBRE using the tactics of wholesale intimidation and discrimination against union members.<sup>67</sup> It eventually forced the union to strike in defence of an unfairly dismissed worker. Not even the concurrent walkouts of longshoremen, messengers, teamsters and steamshipmen, constituting B.C.'s first sympathetic strike, could limit the force of corporate power. Faced with the CPR's aggressive tactics, including espionage, the importation of strike-breakers and the killing of labour leader Frank Rogers, the Vancouver-centred strike collapsed, destroying the UBRE with it.

Trade union militancy might also be seen as a source of increased strike activity after 1900. The growth of socialism produced a new group of ideologically motivated trade union leaders, including Will MacClain and Frank Rogers, who organized the Fraser River fishermen's strikes of 1900 and 1901 respectively. In addition, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a union essentially of unskilled workers intent on fundamental social change through direct confrontation with capital, also exerted some influence in Vancouver. Its lumber handlers and longshoremen's union, which embraced men of eighteen different nationalities, was

<sup>64</sup> VTLC Minutes, 19 May 1904 and *Federationist*, 9 December 1911, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> *Independent*, 2 November 1901, p. 1.

<sup>66</sup> Tuck, "United Brotherhood of Railway Employees," pp. 77-78 and 88.

<sup>67</sup> *The Daily Columbian* [New Westminster], 3 March 1903, p. 1. Other sources for the UBRE strike include: references in note no. 33, cited above; the monthly reports of the *Labour Gazette*; *Strikes and Lockouts, RG27* (revised), vol. 2333; and Tuck, "United Brotherhood of Railway Employees."

“the first IWW local to conduct a strike in western Canada.”<sup>68</sup> And during the July 1910 walkout of unorganized street construction workers, the strikers’ spokesmen proudly wore IWW buttons.<sup>69</sup> However, to say that “agitators” were mainly responsible for labour disputes, as businessmen and their political friends were quick to do,<sup>70</sup> would be to miss the fundamental source of strikes: different class perceptions about the economic role of labour.

Table 5, which documents the issues at stake in sixty-eight strikes for which causes are known, clearly illustrates the objective reality of class

TABLE 5  
*Issues in Vancouver Strikes, 1901-1914<sup>1</sup>*

<i>Category I: Economic</i>	
For higher earnings	34
Against wage reductions	3
<i>Category II: Control</i>	
For recognition of union	10
For shorter hours	14
Sympathy	4
Apprenticeship control	4
Objection to new work system	0
Change in work conditions	2
Demand for, or defence of, the closed shop	19
Adjustment of wage payment procedures	2
Against dismissal of worker or supervisor	1
Other/unknown	9

<sup>1</sup> The number of times strike issues are recorded (102) exceeds the number of strikes for which causes are known (68) because individual strikes often centred on more than one major issue. Consequently, some strikes are recorded in the table more than once.

conflict in early twentieth-century Vancouver. Over half the strikes centred on economic issues, with the two sides contending in an ongoing struggle about the value of labour. Countervailing pressures constantly

<sup>68</sup> McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, p. 102.

<sup>69</sup> *N-A*, 22 July 1910, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Craven, *'An Impartial Umpire': Industrial Relations and the Canadian State 1900-1911* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 246-52.

threatened hard-won wage increases, the product of employer intransigence and cyclical growth. As one Vancouver carpenter observed:

In 1907 we had a strike and settled for \$4.25 under an agreement which lasted until 1908. Conditions got bad and the contractors gave notice that wages would be reduced to \$3.50, but things were in such shape with men out of work so long during the winter and trade affairs so bad in general that men had to accept this. They got \$4.00 (per day) in 1909 and \$4.25 in 1911,<sup>71</sup>

the latter resulting from a major strike. By 1913 renewed depression had again reversed the fortunes of city carpenters.

Perhaps more revealing are the larger number of strikes, almost three-quarters of those for which causes are known, that involved control of the labour process. "Control" is defined broadly to include all aspects of the nature of work.<sup>72</sup> The subject of working hours endured throughout the pre-war period, with the issue of nine and then eight hour daily maximums for civic workers providing a popular focus.<sup>73</sup> Issues more specific to the work process, such as the control and training of apprentices or alterations to working conditions, were less important, both absolutely and comparatively. The reason is to be found in Vancouver's economic structure: the smaller proportion of secondary manufacturing workers and greater demand for semi- and unskilled labour in Vancouver than in Toronto or Montreal made the scientific techniques of labour management then being applied in the East less attractive to employers in the west. By contrast, control over entry to the labour market was controversial in Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts. Employers and workers in Vancouver battled persistently over the issue of the exclusive employment of union members: in November 1902 building trades workers struck briefly against contractors Robertson and Hackett to preserve the "closed shop" at a hotel construction site; their success contrasted with the failure in 1904 of unionized boilermakers and machinists to prevent the Vancouver Engineering Works, backed by the newly

<sup>71</sup> B.C., C. on L., *Evidence*, 17 January 1913 [J. A. Key], vol. 1, file 1, p. 69.

<sup>72</sup> The issue of workers' control of the work process is discussed in McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes"; Craig Heron and Bryan D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14," *Canadian Historical Review* 58 (December 1977): 423-58; and Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), chap. 3.

<sup>73</sup> *N-A*, 17 August 1890, p. 8, 19 April 1892, p. 3, 1 May 1892, p. 8, 23 February 1909, p. 2, and 11 April 1909, p. 8; *Independent*, 12 May 1900, p. 2; and *Province*, 26 November 1908, p. 18.

formed Employers' Association, from opening its plant to non-union tradesmen.<sup>74</sup>

While Vancouver's pre-war labour record reveals a society inherently divided by class, does it also show that Vancouver wage earners defended and promoted their class interests more aggressively than urban workers elsewhere in Canada? A comparison of strike statistics for other urban centres, though at best very tentative, suggests that the frequency and scale of strikes in Vancouver were not unusual. Based on strike data published for Ontario cities by Craig Heron and Bryan Palmer,<sup>75</sup> the number of strikes between 1901 and 1914 per 1,000 members of the work force in 1911 indicates a ratio of 2.46 for Hamilton and 1.16 for Toronto. Vancouver's 76 strikes produce a ratio of 1:50 per 1,000 people employed. The lesser number for Toronto can be accounted for in part by the different sources used; Heron and Palmer included only strikes listed in the *Labour Gazette*, a much less complete source of information than the updated records of the Canadian Department of Labour utilized for Vancouver. Consequently, the incidence of strikes in Toronto per 1,000 members of the work force was probably no less than that in Vancouver; the proportion in Hamilton was far greater. In addition, a comparison of employment lost by strikers in Saint John and Halifax (examined by Ian McKay)<sup>76</sup> and in Vancouver suggests a similar conclusion: for the period 1901-14 the total number of striker-days of work lost when divided by each 1,000 persons employed in 1911 produces ratios of 12,088 in Saint John, 9,071 in Vancouver and 3,584 in Halifax. Again, despite the rough nature of this statistic, the data's general thrust clearly indicates that Vancouver wage-earners, when compared with workers in other Canadian cities, were militant but not exceptionally so. Nor were they particularly radical.

\* \* \*

"Radicalism" implies a commitment to "fundamental or extreme change," specifically "a design for modifying society...based ultimately on a Marxist analysis of capitalism."<sup>77</sup> The term is a relative one that can be employed to describe either the essentially moderate "labourism" or more

<sup>74</sup> *LG* 3 (December 1902): 430, 4 (April 1904): 1002, and 4 (May 1904): 1140-41; and *Independent*, 9 July 1904, p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> Heron and Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike," p. 425.

<sup>76</sup> McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes," p. 14.

<sup>77</sup> Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier," p. 155 and McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, p. ix.

doctrinaire forms of socialism. According to Craig Heron's summation of existing historical literature, before 1920 labourism had evolved as the main ideological current in independent working-class politics east of the Rockies.<sup>78</sup> By contrast, radicalism in British Columbia history is usually associated with the Marxist-based socialist movements that emerged at the turn-of-the-century.<sup>79</sup> Whereas labourists accepted capitalism but sought to reform it, B.C. socialists aimed to destroy it. One socialist group tried to achieve this through direct confrontation with capital, organizing workers into revolutionary industrial unions and employing strikes as political weapons. This approach is associated with the IWW. While having some influence in Vancouver, the Wobblies found their support primarily among unskilled itinerants in hinterland logging, mining and construction camps. The other socialist group worked through the political system to educate workers about the need for fundamental social change. Represented by the Socialist Party of Canada, which was founded as the Socialist Party of British Columbia in 1901, the B.C.-centred movement was "one of the most starkly revolutionary organizations on the continent."<sup>80</sup> Because it advocated a highly theoretical and completely uncompromising approach to capitalism, critics viewed its aims as unrealistic and branded its philosophy as "impossibilist." Electoral support for doctrinaire socialism, represented by the election in mining areas of three MLAs in each of 1903, 1907 and 1909 and two in 1912, is seen as the principal evidence of class sentiment in British Columbia. To summarize, historians have concluded that the Marxist socialism of the IWW and the Socialist Party of Canada constituted radicalism in the Pacific province; labourism and more pragmatic forms of socialism belonged to other areas of the country.

In this literature urban places are divided into two groups: the "closed and polarized" mining communities where "class divisions were stark," few restraints mediated relations between workers and companies, and the Socialist Party gained substantial electoral support; and larger western Canadian cities where class tensions found more moderate expression.<sup>81</sup> According to Ross McCormack,

<sup>78</sup> Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," p. 45.

<sup>79</sup> McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, chaps. 2-4 and 6; Ross Alfred Johnson, "No Compromise — No Political Trading: The Marxist Socialist Tradition in British Columbia" (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975); and Ronald Grantham, "Some Aspects of the Socialist Movement in British Columbia, 1898-1933" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1942).

<sup>80</sup> Ross McCormack, "Socialism and Militancy in the British Columbia Labour Movement," in Jamieson et al., *Militancy*, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier," *passim*.

impossiblism was directly relevant to the experience of BC coal and hard-rock miners and, given this power base, had a general relevance in a largely proletarian province experiencing a rapid transition to industrial capitalism. But these conditions were peculiar. Not confronted with the same ruthless capitalism which B.C. miners faced, workers in places such as Calgary, Edmonton, and Winnipeg did not develop a similar degree of class consciousness.<sup>82</sup>

Missing from this analysis are west coast cities. Did Vancouver workers respond to capitalism in the radical manner of B.C. miners or in the more moderate style of their prairie counterparts?

Early in Vancouver's history labourism emerged as an ideological form of political expression sharply at odds with the philosophy of British Columbia's governing elites. Initially labourism united both working- and middle-class reformers. The movement began when a middle-class group, led by newspaper editor Francis Carter-Cotton, formed to oppose David Oppenheimer in the December 1889 mayoralty election and the provincial government, with which Oppenheimer and his supporters had close ties, in 1890.<sup>83</sup> The Trades and Labor Council (VTLC) endorsed a carpenter in January 1892 and a bricklayer one year later for aldermanic office, establishing an independent voice for working people in civic affairs. Both candidates were elected, as were two other carpenters later in the decade.<sup>84</sup> Labourism blossomed in 1894 when the Nationalist Party, British Columbia's "first real 'labor party,'" was formed.<sup>85</sup> Its nominee for the British Columbia election that year, Robert Macpherson, won his contest. So too did party member Rev. George Maxwell, elected in 1896 to the House of Commons with the help of federal Liberals and the Labor Council. Macpherson, a carpenter, and Maxwell, formerly a British coal miner and now an eastside Presbyterian minister, were re-elected in 1898 and 1900 respectively. Ironically, principal labourists in the nineties, including Nationalist Party leaders, came mostly from the

<sup>82</sup> McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, p. 75.

<sup>83</sup> For the 1889 civic election see the *N-A*, 24 November-24 December and the *Province*, 15 November 1924, p. 24. For the 1890 provincial contest, see the *N-A* and *World*, 30 May-14 June 1890.

<sup>84</sup> VTLC Minutes, 8 January 1892, p. 166, 6 January 1893, p. 283, and 21 December 1894, p. 422 and *N-A*, 4 January 1895, p. 7 and 15 January 1898, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> For the Nationalist Party's history, see Thomas Robert Loosemore, "The British Columbia Labor Movement and Political Action, 1879-1906" (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1954), pp. 64-66 and 71-87, quotation from p. 64, and VTLC Minutes, 1 March 1895, p. 433, 10 April 1896, pp. 495-96, and 8 November 1895, pp. 460-67.

middle rather than working class. The decade's severe depression had driven away many of the city's best workers,<sup>86</sup> stunting the full development of working-class institutions and limiting organized labour's role in politics to an essentially secondary one of support for middle-class reformers.

Class collaboration gave way to class conflict after 1900. The same economic prosperity and consolidation of capital that had accompanied growing labour tension in mining communities also inspired new confidence among Terminal City workers.<sup>87</sup> The important legislative victories of pro-labour MLAs in Victoria after 1898 may have had a similar short-term effect. Working-class activists repudiated their earlier alliance with middle-class reformers, sharpening labourism's focus as a vehicle of class expression. Unlike 1894, when he ran as a Nationalist Party candidate, Robert Macpherson in 1900 strongly asserted his working-class identity and promised to serve as a "straight Labor man."<sup>88</sup> Another leading labourist of the period, Francis Williams, urged that the Vancouver Labor Party (VLP), founded in 1900 as the political arm of the Trades and Labor Council, "be out and out for class legislation."<sup>89</sup> Even the intensely anti-socialist J. H. Watson, an American Federation of Labor union organizer, encouraged workers to recognize that they had "certain distinctly class interests."<sup>90</sup> Reflecting this new aggressiveness, the VTLC nominated two candidates for the 1900 provincial election, endorsed Macpherson in 1901, and, through the VLP, ran three additional labour candidates in 1903. Working-class feeling received its strongest political expression in Vancouver before the 1930s when, offended by the CPR's role in the UBRE strike, electors in the October 1903 provincial contest cast more than one in five votes for labour and socialist candidates.<sup>91</sup> Labourists then disappeared from provincial and federal slates in Vancouver until the war years.

Displacing labourists were socialist candidates who in 1900 first challenged the formers' right to speak for workers electorally. Soon radicals and moderates had split openly, with an articulate and aggressive cadre

<sup>86</sup> *N-A*, 28 March 1896, p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> Loosemore, "British Columbia Labor Movement," p. 99 and *Federationist*, 27 December 1912, p. 24.

<sup>88</sup> *Independent*, 24 November 1900, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 July 1900, p. 1 and 26 September 1903, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 May 1900, p. 6.

<sup>91</sup> Loosemore, "British Columbia Labor Movement," pp. 193-94.

of socialist leaders coming to dominate working-class institutions.<sup>92</sup> They edited the *Western Clarion* from 1901, the *Western Wage-Earner* from 1909 to 1910 and the *British Columbia Federationist* thereafter. They presented the only distinctly "leftist" candidates in regional and federal, but not municipal, elections and participated actively in the Labor Council, despite Socialist Party of Canada policy to the contrary. Socialists James McVety and Parm Pettipiece dominated the VTLC from 1905 to the war, while Jack Kavanagh and Victor Midgely played supporting roles. Socialists in the Council also promoted industrial unionism, thus challenging the conservative "business unionism" philosophy that dominated the national labour movements in Canada and the United States. Socialists led the VTLC out of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada in 1903 and "sponsored the Vancouver resolution that sparked the second B.C. campaign for industrial unionism in the years before World War I."<sup>93</sup> This multi-faceted activity has led most historians to suggest, either implicitly or directly, that the doctrinaire radicalism characteristic of the region also typified working-class politics in Vancouver. For several reasons, this notion should be questioned.

To begin with, this impression of Socialist Party strength in Vancouver is based more on organizational influence than on popular appeal to urban workers. As British Columbia's metropolitan centre, Vancouver served, in the words of the *Western Clarion* in 1916, as "the nerve centre from which Socialism radiates" throughout the region,<sup>94</sup> providing a convenient location for the national party headquarters and for party conventions. The small cadre who worked from Vancouver thus exerted inordinate influence over labour institutions within it. Yet the party's electoral support, ranging to 10 percent of the votes cast in Vancouver before 1914, while respectable, was not substantial. Ross Johnson points out that the party faced "a constant struggle (in Vancouver) to inspire the membership to action and to increase the size of the membership body." Its regular Sunday night meetings for the study of Marxist economics drew large numbers of transient workers "during the winter months of logging and construction camp shut-downs." But like the party's electoral strength, this support came mainly from hinterland workers who, while spending time in Vancouver, were only marginally

<sup>92</sup> For example, see *ibid.*, pp. 138, 157, 190-92; the *Federationist*, 27 December 1912, p. 24, and the *Independent*, 4 April-6 June 1903.

<sup>93</sup> McCormack, "Socialism and Militancy in the British Columbia Labour Movement," p. 21.

<sup>94</sup> *Western Clarion*, October 1916, p. 1.

integrated into the city's work force. As Johnson suggests, evidence hardly supports the view long held by revolutionary socialists that Vancouver "was the cradle of socialism in Canada."<sup>95</sup>

In addition labourism, the political expression of skilled wage-earners, did not disappear from Vancouver but continued to thrive at the civic level. The Socialist Party's ascendancy after 1903 had put moderates on the defensive and ended labourism in its institutionalized form. In this sense B.C. radicalism extended into Vancouver. But lack of party organization, which historians have taken to mean the disappearance of non-Marxist labour politics, did not, in fact, preclude the continued influence of labourism as an expression of working-class attitudes and values. Rather, aldermen John MacMillan, a builder, John Morton, a carpenter and contractor, Robert Macpherson, a carpenter, and Francis Williams, a tailor, worked together as an identifiable pro-labour clique on city council for a total of sixteen council years from 1903 to 1911.<sup>96</sup> Sitting for wards distinguished by upper working- and lower middle-class voters, they provided an opposition minority to council's pro-business majority.

The four articulated a distinctively labourist view of civic affairs, reiterating policy positions publicized a decade earlier by the VTLC and the Nationalist Party.<sup>97</sup> Drawing on the long established culture of British skilled artisans, they defined work very differently from employers. As noted earlier, their ideas centred on notions of "just" employment practices and "fair" compensation. The idea of honest labour, fairly recompensed, accounts in part for the racist tone of their criticism of Chinese immigrants who willingly accepted low wages and deplorable conditions. Labourists expressed faith especially in what Craig Heron calls the "full promise of liberal democracy."<sup>98</sup> Hoping to transform society's institutions through the universal application of democratic principles, they called for the widest acceptance of free speech, free assembly and a universal franchise, including the vote for women.<sup>99</sup> Labourists on city council in both the 1890s and 1900s argued in vain that all property qualifications be removed from the civic franchise and that aldermen be paid for their work. Otherwise only the elite could afford to participate in local govern-

<sup>95</sup> Quotations in this paragraph are from Johnson, "No Compromise — No Political Trading," pp. 236 and 378.

<sup>96</sup> MacMillan was elected for Ward 6 in 1906, 1908 and 1909; Morton for Ward 5 in 1903-06 and 1908-09; Macpherson for Ward 4 in 1903-04 and 1910-11; and Williams for Ward 6 in 1904-06.

<sup>97</sup> VTLC Minutes, 8 November 1895, pp. 460-67.

<sup>98</sup> Heron, "Labourism and the Canadian Working Class," p. 55.

<sup>99</sup> *N-A*, 25 March 1894, p. 3 and *Independent*, 3 November 1900, p. 1.

ment.<sup>100</sup> Economic privilege was as unacceptable as political inequality, and concentrations of economic power, whether through land monopolies or large corporations, were against the public interest. The CPR constituted a favourite target of criticism.<sup>101</sup> The single tax would remove unearned profits from land speculators while the public ownership of urban utilities, including the street railway and electric light companies in the 1890s and telephone company in the following decade, would limit the unjust concentration of economic influence.<sup>102</sup> Labour aldermen fought particularly hard to stop large private companies from controlling street ends and water lots on False Creek.<sup>103</sup> The same egalitarian impulse conditioned sharp criticism of social privilege. Working people's contempt for the social elite found expression in demands that Vancouver's City Hospital be managed by elected officials and not by charitable "Lady Beautifuls" to whom nurses and hospital officials "would be expected to bow and smile and smirk." The poor needed real jobs, not "insulting and degrading charity."<sup>104</sup> Education should be as "free as the air," not a privilege of the rich.<sup>105</sup> And recreational space, such as the beach at English Bay, should be made freely available to the masses.<sup>106</sup>

Wage-earners also expressed their class interests by voting for candidates affiliated with, or members of, the federal Liberal Party. Leading Vancouver labour leaders around 1900 were invariably Liberals, among them Robert Macpherson, Harry Cowan, J. H. Watson, George Bartley and Chris Foley.<sup>107</sup> In addition, George Maxwell had Liberal Party support in 1896 and ran as a joint Liberal-labour candidate in 1900. For the provincial contest that year Macpherson had joined the provincial faction of Joseph Martin, a federal Liberal who openly promoted labour causes in B.C. Macpherson's nomination came from a meeting of 200 to

<sup>100</sup> VTLC Minutes, 31 January 1896, p. 480 and *N-A*, 18 February 1902, p. 5.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 October 1898, p. 7, 5 April 1907, p. 4 and 9 February 1909, p. 5.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 March 1895, p. 5, 21 February 1904, p. 2, and 17 August 1906, p. 4; VTLC Minutes, 4 July 1891, p. 135; and *Independent*, 6 October 1900, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> *N-A*, 10 December 1895, p. 3 and *Independent*, 8 February 1902, p. 1 and 14 February 1903, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 22 February 1901, p. 1. Also see VTLC Minutes, 8 November 1895, p. 466 and *World*, 28 August 1909, p. 12.

<sup>105</sup> *Independent*, 7 May 1902, p. 1. Also see *ibid.*, 19 January 1901, p. 2 and 22 August 1904, p. 10.

<sup>106</sup> Robert A. J. McDonald, "'Holy Retreat' or 'Practical Breathing Spot'?": Class Perceptions of Vancouver's Stanley Park, 1910-1913," *Canadian Historical Review* 65 (June 1984): 127-53.

<sup>107</sup> *N-A*, 26 September 1897, p. 5; *Province*, 16 November 1900, p. 9 and Loosemore, "British Columbia Labour Movement," pp. 165-66.

300 unorganized workers.<sup>108</sup> Except for division of the working-class vote between Martinites, labourists and socialists, Macpherson would have won re-election handily. A decade later the mayoralty campaigns of another federal Liberal, Louis D. Taylor, again emphasized working-class issues. Described as "the dominant power in the local liberal camp,"<sup>109</sup> Taylor challenged C. S. Douglas, a prominent member of Vancouver's business and social elites, in 1909 and 1910, failing the first time but succeeding the second. Taylor's campaigns centred on such popular labour issues as the eight-hour day for civic workers, the exclusion of Orientals from city jobs, and the need to retain public control of waterfront street ends.<sup>110</sup> Douglas and his principal supporter, the business-oriented *Vancouver Province*, concluded that he owed his 1910 victory to "the solid Socialist vote" from eastern and southern wards; the *Western Wage-Earner* agreed that "Taylor's victory was due in no small measure to the support of . . . members of organized labor."<sup>111</sup>

In other words, the extent to which Vancouver politics expressed class feeling among wage-earners went beyond the minority of electors, ranging after 1903 from 12 to 18 percent in federal and provincial elections, who voted for third party labour or socialist candidates.<sup>112</sup> Together with evidence of labourist strength at the civic level and the Socialist Party's rather tenuous political base in the city, it suggests that moderate expressions of class identity far surpassed radical ones in extent and significance. From the broader perspective of political support, then, labour radicalism in Vancouver appears little different from that in Winnipeg. Just as the careers of Arthur Puttee, Fred Dixon and Dick Riggs have become synonymous with Winnipeg's "reform" tradition of working-class politics, so too should the careers of Rev. George Maxwell, Robert Macpherson, Francis Williams and L. D. Taylor symbolize the strong labourist presence in the coast city. Generalizations about labour radicalism in Vancouver, as about labour militancy, must emphasize big city rather than resource hinterland parallels.

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<sup>108</sup> *Independent*, 28 April 1900, p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> S. J. Gothard to Richard McBride, 20 October 1909, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Premiers' Papers, Private Correspondence, Doc. 892/1909. Also see *N-A*, 13 November 1908, p. 1 and 17 March 1912, p. 28.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 December 1908, pp. 1-2 and 13 January 1909, pp. 1-2 and *World*, 11-12 January 1910.

<sup>111</sup> Quotations from *Province*, 10 January 1910, p. 6 and 14 January 1910, p. 1 and *Western Wage-Earner*, February 1910, p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> Ward, "Class and Race," p. 23.

One issue remains unresolved. The urban patterns of militancy and radicalism described here indicate a dichotomy between objective and subjective manifestations of class. Workers defended their class interests through actions that accepted the continued existence of capitalism. Most workers struck in small units defined by skill or occupation; only rarely did they confront capital by joining together across occupational lines. In addition, most expressed political support either for leftist candidates who advocated evolutionary rather than revolutionary change or for candidates of the two main national parties. In other words, the fundamental contradiction within the productive system between those who owned or managed capital and those who sold labour did not generate among workers a commensurate level of class-based economic or political action. Workers' subjective perception of class relations differed from the objective reality of Vancouver's economic structure. Several factors limited the evolution of class condition into class consciousness.

First is what Rev. Dr. Alfred Garvie, a British "social activist," referred to as "the universal materialism of Canada."<sup>113</sup> Signs of the untrammelled quest for individual economic betterment were especially obvious during the Laurier period in western Canada, nowhere more so than in rapidly growing western cities. On the prairies speculation in real estate, the most obvious manifestation of exaggerated growth, was mainly limited to urban centres but in British Columbia the whole province experienced a "wild orgy of speculation."<sup>114</sup> Vancouver businessmen directed much of the commerce in hinterland mining claims, land and timber limits, fueling real estate hysteria in the metropolitan area. Between 1909 and 1913 a highly inflated real estate boom engulfed the entire lower mainland.

Fragmentary evidence suggests that Vancouverites on both sides of the class line embraced the materialist ethos of the boom. In 1909 the booster element captured the local government of suburban South Vancouver, a working-class community described as "home of the industrial classes." In the words of one contemporary observer, "From the artisan who owned a 33 foot lot, to the large speculator who owned 50 and 100 acres, the slogan (in South Vancouver) was progress."<sup>115</sup> In 1912 the *British*

<sup>113</sup> George Feaver, " 'Self-Respect and Hopefulness': The Webbs in the Canadian West," *BC Studies* 43 (Autumn 1979): 59.

<sup>114</sup> W. G. Cameron and Thos. Kidd, "First Report," in Robert M. Haig, *Reports of the Board of Taxation With A Report on Taxation in the Province of British Columbia by Robert Murray Haig* (Victoria: Wm. H. Cullin, 1919), p. Q6.

<sup>115</sup> Alfred H. Lewis, *South Vancouver: Past and Present* (Vancouver: Western Publishing Bureau, 1920), pp. 16 and 18.

*Columbia Federationist* reported that the "fever of speculation has seized the workers as well as the rest, many of them having invested their scant savings in a house and lot."<sup>116</sup> As owner of the *World* newspaper, L. D. Taylor headed one of Vancouver's shrillest booster organs, forcing working-class voters who supported his pro-labour policies to accept, if not actively embrace, his concurrent role as advocate of speculative capitalism. In addition, hourly wages in Vancouver during the pre-war boom were among the highest in Canada, approximating those in other major western Canadian cities but exceeding those in central Canada and the Maritimes by one-third and two-thirds respectively.<sup>117</sup> The resulting expectation of economic improvement undoubtedly explains the pre-war migration of thousands of workers into Vancouver. It may also account for the political apathy of wage-earners at the peak of the boom, an apathy noted by labour observers<sup>118</sup> and reflected in the labour clique's temporary disappearance after 1911 from city council. The myth of prosperity appears to have united many middle- and working-class Vancouverites in a common belief that capitalism offered a realistic hope for material advancement. By making economic and social improvement appear attainable through individual effort, the myth retarded collective action by working people.

So did evidence of upward social mobility, of which rapidly growing cities, in contrast to one-industry mining and lumber towns, furnished numerous examples. In Vancouver new office towers sprouted from the business district, an exclusive residential neighbourhood for business and social leaders sprang from the soil of Shaughnessy Heights, and the rich flaunted their wealth as never before, leaving the impression of widespread opportunity for economic gain. More influential in lessening class consciousness among wage-earners, however, may have been examples of social movement upward from the working class into the petit bourgeoisie.<sup>119</sup> Many carpenters became contractors, among them Aldermen Morton and Hepburn. Several skilled workers prominent in the local labour movement established their own shops: typographer Harry Cowan formed a printing business; cigarmaker John Crow founded a cigar factory; and Joseph Dixon advanced from carpenter to contractor to office and store fixtures manufacturer. Even an unskilled laundry worker,

<sup>116</sup> *Federationist*, 5 April 1912, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Calculated from *Census of Canada, 1921*, vol. III, pp. xix-xx.

<sup>118</sup> *Western Wage-Earner*, June 1909, p. 12 and *Federationist*, 6 December 1912, p. 2.

<sup>119</sup> Social mobility is defined here as movement from a wage labour to wage employer position; occupations were traced through city directories.

C. N. Lee, was able to finance an English Bay tea and refreshment parlour. Contemporaries could easily have interpreted such experiences, whether typical or not, as demonstrable evidence of a society open to success.

Urbanism impeded the emergence of class consciousness in another way: rather than being internally uniform, Vancouver's working class was a large, economically differentiated entity characterized by significant occupational divisions. As noted earlier, the interrelated factors of skill, geographic persistence, gender and race sorted workers into a hierarchy defined by varied incomes, market power and status. These economic distinctions in turn acquired social and cultural expression. The skilled worker who was raising a family, belonged to a craft-organized trade union, took part in union picnics, baseball games and balls, had joined the Odd Fellows Lodge, owned or rented a small cottage in Mount Pleasant and voted in provincial and municipal elections lived in a very different social world than the single loggers for whom cheap hotels, "skidway saloons," shooting galleries, prostitutes and Sunday evening Wobble meetings constituted Vancouver society. Ethnicity and race erected even larger barriers between Italian or Asian minorities and the British-born majority. Reinforced by rampant materialism and examples of social mobility, these differences precluded a widely shared feeling of community among Vancouver wage-earners.

In turn, a social environment that compared favourably with B.C. resource towns and large Canadian cities alike lessened the conditions that might exacerbate class tensions. Despite the presence of significant ethnic and, especially, racial minorities, Vancouver's population was predominantly Anglo-Saxon.<sup>120</sup> The west coast city's social geography did not include the teeming immigrant ghettos of Winnipeg's North End, Toronto's "Ward" or New York's Lower East Side. Ironically, by segregating Vancouver's Asian population physically, politically and economically, racism reduced social anxiety by removing from the mainstream of Vancouver life the city's most clearly recognizable foreign element. Deryck Holdsworth argues that housing conditions also marked Vancouver "as a somewhat benign example of an industrial city."<sup>121</sup> A suburban environment of detached residences with surrounding gardens rather than a dense concentration of tenements characterized Vancouver housing; so did the lack of harsh residential segregation, despite an over-

<sup>120</sup> Norbert MacDonald, "Population Growth and Change in Seattle and Vancouver, 1880-1960," *Pacific Historical Review* 39 (1970): 297-320.

<sup>121</sup> Holdsworth, "House and Home in Vancouver," p. 261.

all spatial division of the city by class.<sup>122</sup> Health conditions appear to have been better in Vancouver than in comparable Canadian cities as well. Margaret Andrews has demonstrated that Vancouver's death rate — "a measure of the state of health of the whole population" — was relatively low.<sup>123</sup> The city's liberal expense of money and effort on health services and readily available supply of fresh water conspired to check disease. However, such generalizations apply less to one section of the city than to the others: the higher incidence of death from disease and the deplorable tenement and rooming conditions in the eastside waterfront area<sup>124</sup> emphasize again the need to differentiate between the domestic circumstance of seasonal migrants and that of more stable urban workers.

The preceding analysis corroborates Peter Ward's conclusion that several influences, including the pervasiveness of individualistic and materialistic values, the geographic mobility of the labour force and broadly held perceptions of upward social and economic mobility, muted class feeling in British Columbia at the turn of the century.<sup>125</sup> But it departs from his conclusion in one fundamental way. Ward emphasizes the subjective, intellectual dimension of class, concentrating on elements that constrained class awareness while neglecting its persistent, structural features. Yet the experience of Vancouver workers shows that only by examining both objective and subjective elements can historians fully appreciate the process of class formation. While recurrent cycles of prosperity may have sustained for Vancouver's ordinary people the myth of economic and social improvement, the reality of their essential powerlessness was never far distant. The 1913-16 economic collapse that drove almost one-quarter of Greater Vancouver's population, especially wage earners, from the area illustrates clearly the ongoing social contradiction of British Columbia's capitalist system.

The Vancouver experience also suggests that, for too long, labour historians have generalized for the whole province from the history of

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, chaps. 1 and 7.

<sup>123</sup> Margaret W. Andrews, "Medical Services in Vancouver, 1886-1920: A Study of the Interplay of Attitudes, Medical Knowledge, and Administrative Structures" (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1979), pp. 1, 3-7, 17-18, and 33 and Roy, *Vancouver*, p. 176, n. 43. For comparative purposes see Copp, *Anatomy of Poverty*, p. 100 and Alan F. J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), p. 231. Medical health officials and others often commented on Vancouver's plentiful supply of fresh water: *N-A*, 21 August 1891, p. 12; and 31 October 1912, p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> Andrews, "Medical Services in Vancouver," pp. 20-22 and *N-A*, 14 October 1911, p. 9 and 26 May 1912, p. 1.

<sup>125</sup> Ward, "Class and Race."

coal and hardrock miners. Vancouver's work force, in 1911 equalling 25 percent of the provincial total,<sup>126</sup> constituted British Columbia's largest single concentration of wage-earners, yet this group has been virtually ignored in the existing literature. The foregoing discussion shows that a variety of urban characteristics, including the appearance of greater economic opportunity and the reality of a more complex occupational structure, distinguished working-class history in Vancouver from that elsewhere in the province. In studying British Columbia's past, then, historians must consider more fully the role of local factors in giving varied expression to regional patterns of labour militancy, labour radicalism and social structure.

<sup>126</sup> *Census of Canada, 1911*, vol. VI, table 5, p. xv and table 6, p. 286.