

# Sharks and Red Herrings: Vancouver's Male Employment Agencies, 1898-1915\*

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The private employment agency was an important element of urban industrial life in Canada from the 1880s until 1918 when, for post-war settlement reasons, it was replaced by the Employment Service of Canada. By 1910, hundreds of these agencies were in business. Major employment and immigrant distribution centres such as Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver saw anywhere from thirty to sixty of them operating at peak season; minor centres, such as Lethbridge and Nelson, also had their share of employment agents. Notwithstanding its ubiquity, this commercial response to the needs of a new working population has been largely ignored by social and labour historians, who have focused instead on the relationship between employers and workers. Given the crucial if temporary role of that response, such a gap is worth filling.

This study examines the experience of private employment agencies in the two decades leading up to World War I. Its aim is to test the profoundly negative reputation of employment agents against the actual experience of agents in one locality — in this case, Vancouver between 1898 and 1915. The image of the job agent was uniformly bad, and related to a widely repeated set of humanitarian abuses and economic inefficiencies. Agents for white male workers were often called “sharks”; and like sharks they were thought to be ruthlessly abusive and domineering.<sup>1</sup> As well (contrary to Asian labour contractors, who were not seen to be in conflict with their worker clients), European employment agents were described

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<sup>1</sup> Typical abuses, it was argued, included: fee-splitting (a labour turnover game played with camp foremen at the expense of workers); misrepresentation of the existence or nature of jobs; adjustable fee rates to best exploit more desperate or more gullible workers; refusal to return fees to disappointed clients; and theft of workers' possessions. For a detailed examination of these traditional complaints in the American context, see Tomas Martinez, *The Human Marketplace: An Examination of Private Employment Agencies* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1976), 43-56. For the traditional view of abuse by agencies in the Canadian context, see Edmund Bradwin, *The Bunkhouse Man: a study of work and pay in the camps of Canada, 1903-1914* (New York: AMS Press (re-issue), 1968), 54-61.

as ethnic “parasites” feeding off their countrymen. Edmund Bradwin’s study of railway camps thus described the European agent as a “smooth-tongued individual, rich in dialects, who . . . is not unlike the trained steer of the stockyards which decoys into chosen channels its kindred brutes, yet always to its own advantage.”<sup>2</sup>

Critics also argued that employment agents dealt only in unskilled labour and, consequently, could get away with abuses — a belief which implied that skilled workers would never accept such treatment. “Employment offices,” claimed M. Allerdale Grainger in his 1906 novel, *Woodsmen of the West*, “are below contempt — they are for men strange to the country, incompetents, labourers, farm hands, and the like.”<sup>3</sup> This was true, but employment agencies also found jobs for skilled workers — enough for trades unions to feel threatened by their activities. In any case, the unskilled “brutes” who used agencies were not as docile as Bradwin implied. On more than one occasion workers expressed their collective “concern” over an agent’s transgression. For instance, four men wrecked the interior of a Vancouver agent’s office when he did not return a fee. The employment agent, for simple business as well as persuasive physical reasons, often had to play the employment game by the workers’ rules. The traditional image of the omnipotent employment “shark” is not an accurate one.

On the economic side, white male employment agencies were seen by their critics as primary contributors to wasteful labour turnover. A practice called fee-splitting was responsible, union officials, progressives, and large employers claimed, for high levels of worker transiency. The common situation of “one crew going, one coming, and one working” was blamed on the employment agent.<sup>4</sup> The agent’s activities were linked, therefore, to economic waste and inefficiency. Yet there were better reasons for worker transiency than the game of fee-splitting. Foremen and workers argued

<sup>2</sup> Bradwin, 57.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Allerdale Grainger, *Woodsmen of the West* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1964), 17. Grainger’s quick dismissal of loggers’ agencies is curious. The narrator (Mart) condemns employment agents, yet boards the north-bound steamer with little hope of finding work himself. In all, Mart spends two or three times what he would have spent had he visited a city agency. One wonders if the dismissal of employment agencies was done for narrative reasons. Had Mart secured work through a Vancouver agent there would have been little dramatic tension early in the story: the extended stay at the Hanson Island Hotel would not have happened, and with it much of Mart’s character development and the riotous character of loggers at play would have disappeared. As it was, Mart’s up-country job search served a number of story-related purposes.

<sup>4</sup> Worker transiency was a major theme of the 1912 British Columbia Commission on Labor (hereafter known as Labor Commission testimony). The quotation in the B.C. context is attributed to Richard Quance, operator of Quance Lumber Company in Nakusp. Labor Commission testimony, Volume 6, file 12, 310.

that work and camp conditions, deplorable food, and the lure of opportunities elsewhere explained labour turnover. The employment agent was a convenient scapegoat on which to hang any number of failures, and a convenient foil for groups hoping to improve their position in the battle over economic power. Doing this allowed labour leaders, progressive reformers, and large employers to mask their self-interest with humanitarianism.

The image of the employment shark does not fit the agencies operating in Vancouver before World War I. They were neither all-powerful nor always abusive. They were, however, out of step with the trend towards greater organization, control, and efficiency encouraged by the forces of monopoly capitalism. The first part of this paper is an examination of Vancouver's white male employment agents: who they were, what they did, and why they did it. The final section explores the debate over agency activities which erupted between 1907 and 1913, and concludes that the negative stereotype of Vancouver agents grew out of a mutually reinforcing intermingling of imported myth and indigenous self-interest.

The study has a significance beyond the light it sheds on Vancouver's employment agents. The importance of job intermediaries in this and other labour markets underlines the complexity of class relations in the transition from competitive to monopoly capitalism. This was not simply a battle between wage-earners and employers; employment agents acted as buffers in class relations, and often had a positive impact on the lives of workers. The private agent's intermediate position in the class struggle suggests important splits within the business community and within the working class. The forces of petty capitalism (of which the agent was a part) were self-motivated, and saw little to identify with in large-scale capitalist enterprise. There was also a division within the working class between workers whose focus was on work in a particular locality, and the new labour unionists who thought monopoly capitalism could only be controlled through supra-local organization. While workers often chose to support increasingly outdated parochial services like private employment agencies, some of their labour leaders demanded such forms be replaced by large-scale institutions, often state-controlled, to mirror the growth and structure of industry. This paper suggests that the interests of workers were not always met by either large-scale business or the emerging labour bureaucracy. Agents and workers often had more in common with each other than the former had with large-scale enterprise or the latter had with union leadership. One wonders if group identity in this instance had less to do with class position than with a community of scale.

*Sharks at Work*

Commercial employment agencies had existed in Vancouver since the city's inception in 1886, but these multiplied in number between 1898 and 1915 in response to local and regional labour demand associated with the growth in resource industries, railway building, city construction and, for women, domestic service and "new" service work outside the home. In all, some 138 agencies opened and, often quickly, closed their doors between 1898 and 1915.<sup>5</sup> These agencies reflected the racial and sexual divisions within Vancouver's regional labour market and the contours of that market over time. As a result, three distinct agency sectors emerged before World War I: a large group of agencies for white males and two smaller agency sectors for Asian males and white women. Each of these sectors was more or less distinct; each tended to locate in different commercial neighbourhoods in order to attract its particular working clientele. Each of these agency groupings was itself segmented by industry, and some were specialized to the point of handling specific occupations within a certain industry. For instance, the "Fidelity Scandinavian Loggers' Agency" combined the structural demands of sex, ethnicity, industry, and occupation when it opened in 1911.<sup>6</sup> Women's agencies saw a degree of specialization with the entrance of hotel, restaurant, and clerical offices after 1908; however, the strength of women's agencies over the period lay with an almost insatiable demand for household servants — the majority of women's agents in Vancouver placed domestics.

Commercial employment agencies also reflected business cycles and changing sectoral or occupational structures. Thus, when the importance of Asian male domestic labour declined in the new century because of an increase in the number of white women and increased racial exclusion, the number of women's domestic agencies increased. The economic downturn in 1907-08 severely hampered the activities of men's agencies; thirteen of the thirty-three white and Asian male agencies open in 1907 failed to return in 1908.<sup>7</sup> The effects of such business slumps underline how marginal these agencies were — one bad year or one bad season could push most agencies out of business. The 1907-08 recession did not have the same effect on women's domestic agencies since household servants were

<sup>5</sup> Statistical information on Vancouver employment agencies is drawn from a newspaper and city directory search. See Robin John Anderson, "Sharks and White Slavers? The Vancouver Employment Business, 1898-1925" (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1991), 27.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

hired mostly by middle-class employers. By contrast, the 1913-16 depression forced most employment offices — men's and women's — to shut down. Thus, at the height of Vancouver's agency boom in 1912, some thirty-seven agencies were operating; by 1917 there were less than fifteen. Women's agencies were hurt by this downturn as the slight occupational expansion for women into service and clerical jobs outside the home came to a sudden end — and with them those agencies that catered to those new jobs. Still, a higher proportion of women's agencies survived because of the continued demand for part-time and temporary domestic servants. After the autumn of 1913 those remaining women's agencies offered little work other than domestic service.<sup>8</sup>

Each employment business sector also responded to seasonal labour market demands. For white and Asian males in resource industries, construction, agriculture, or railway building, this activity was fairly predictable: a strong spring, an active summer, fall slowdowns (excepting farm labour), and a dead winter. In the winter, male workers flocked to Vancouver to find other work or to ride out their unemployment.<sup>9</sup> Men's employment agencies responded to yearly seasonal layoffs by going into another line of work (a favourite strategy of Japanese and Chinese agents), going into hibernation, or by going out of business. In a literal sense, then, employment agents were fair-weather friends to resource workers. For example, of the twenty-nine male agencies active from April to October 1911, only seven bothered to advertise that winter. Seasonal fluctuations were potential killers of agencies regardless of the economy's strength the rest of the year; the winter attrition rate hovered between 25 and 35 per cent.<sup>10</sup> Women's agencies followed the different seasonal rhythms of the home, child care, and the city's social calendar. Thus, in December when men's agencies were depressed, desperate or dead, women's agencies were bustling with activity as Vancouver's middle class hired on help for the holiday season.<sup>11</sup>

Employment agencies which dealt primarily in white male labour are too numerous to list here. But of the thirty or so agencies operating after the 1907-08 recession, fifteen stand out as the main actors in the employment business. These key companies and their various proprietors are

<sup>8</sup> On patterns of domestic service in Vancouver before World War I, see Anderson, 76-88.

<sup>9</sup> See Eleanor Bartlett, "Real Wages and the Standard of Living in Vancouver, 1901-1929," *BC Studies* 51 (Autumn 1981), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, 33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

FIGURE 1

*Vancouver's Major Employment Agents for Men, 1908-1920*

<i>Company &amp; Agents</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Sector</i>
<i>British American</i> Hugh McDonald (1912) Lester O. Way (1913)	1912-1915	Miscellaneous
<i>BC Employment</i> Brown & Downing (1910) F. Bullen & R. A. Hudson (1911) James Madison (1912)	1910-1913	Miscellaneous
<i>Canadian Northern</i> D. C. Hanley & J. G. McDonald (1911) J. W. Hanley & J. G. McDonald (1914)	1911-1915	Railways & Mines
<i>Canadian Pacific</i> Samuel G. Sells (1907) Samuel G. Sells & Fred Olson (1908) Samuel G. Sells (1913)	1907-1915	Logging & Sawmills
<i>Central</i> E. E. Gagnon & G. D. Lamont (1906) E. E. Gagnon & F. G. Robbins (1908) E. E. Gagnon (1909) E. E. Gagnon & G. D. Lamont (1912) G. D. Lamont & J. Hanley (1913) G. D. Lamont (1914)	1906-1920	Miscellaneous
<i>Coast Labor Agents</i> Godfrey J. Sykes (1909) A. P. Bryden (1911) Godfrey J. Sykes (1912)	1909-1913	Logging & Sawmills
<i>Cosmopolitan Labor Supply</i> J. H. Welsh (1909)	1909-1913	Railways & Mines
<i>Herbert Hicks and Company</i> Herbert Hicks (1910)	1910-1918	Miscellaneous

FIGURE 1 (Continued)

<i>Company &amp; Agents</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Sector</i>
<i>International</i> William Waine (1910) Samuel G. Sells (1915) Samuel G. Sells & F. H. Gallagher (1916)	1910-1916	Railways & Logging
<i>Labor Exchange</i> John L. Adams (1907) D. W. Robb & F. H. Gallagher (1909) Lester O. Way (1910) H. M. Marriott & J. R. Burke (1912) H. M. Marriott, J. R. Burke & Oliver Joy (1913) J. R. Burke (1915)	1907-1916	Miscellaneous
<i>Fred Lilyman and Company</i> Fred Lilyman & Travers (1911) Fred Lilyman (1912) Fred Lilyman & Ferree (1914)	1911-1915	Railways
<i>Reliable Labor</i> Charles Knight (1905)	1905-1911	Railways
<i>John Shields and Company</i> John Shields & McLean (1910) John Shields (1911) John Shields & Albert Toogood (1912) John Shields (1913)	1910-1917	Logging & Sawmills
<i>Vancouver Employment Agency</i> Eugene Gillis (1909) A. Ballie (1910) Alfred Sykes & Harry Meaker (1911) Harry Meaker & F. W. Elred (1912) Harry Meaker (1913)	1909-1914	Miscellaneous
<i>Harold Wolstenholme Agency</i> Harry Wolstenholme (1909)	1909-1912	Miscellaneous

SOURCE: Newspaper Classified Advertisements and City Directories, 1906-1920.

listed in figure 1. Based on evidence presented in Commission testimony and newspaper advertisements, these fifteen agencies approached or exceeded 500 job placements per peak month (April to October). Agents Fred Lilyman, Harry Welsh, Herbert Hicks, and Harry Meaker claimed around 800 to 1,000 placements per peak month. Based on the volume of advertised jobs in newspaper want ads, six other agencies — Canadian Pacific, Central, Canadian Northern, International, John Shields, and Wolstenholme — might have placed 500 jobs or more a month at some point in their history. Indeed, if the newspapers are to be believed, at the peak of Sam Sells' business in the spring/summer of 1911, his Canadian Pacific Agency filled upwards of a thousand jobs per month.<sup>12</sup> The remaining five agencies have been included on the basis of their persistence and the strength of their advertising over a period of years. Together, these fifteen agencies dominated Vancouver's white male employment business between 1909 and 1913.

Agencies for white males were roughly divided between those which delivered labour to the massive Grand Trunk Pacific and Canadian Northern railway construction projects underway by 1908, and those which supplied men to logging, sawmilling, and other forest-related industries. Thus, Charles Knight's Reliable Employment lived up to its name, sending railway workers to the CPR and Grand Trunk Pacific for three busy seasons up to 1911.<sup>13</sup> Sam Sells' Canadian Pacific Employment belied its name, however, dealing exclusively after 1909 in lumber workers and loggers.<sup>14</sup> Of course, no agency dealt with one company or served one industrial sector for its entire history. The tendency was to begin as a general agency and specialize over time as one's name became better known and employers presented more and bigger orders. Some agents never did specialize. William Waine, who boasted in 1911 of the "largest and best equipped office in B.C.," claimed that both railroad and sawmill

<sup>12</sup> Placements have been calculated through the itemized advertisements that employment agents routinely placed in newspaper "Help Wanted" advertisements. The *Vancouver Daily World* and the *News Advertiser* were used in this calculation. Sam Sells' Canadian Pacific Employment used these ads more than any other agency. An analysis of Sells' job placements was attempted for two four-week periods: July 1911 and April 1913. Inconsistent advertising on Sells' part made it impossible to compare identical months over the two years, or compare seasonal differences over the same year. Nonetheless, the analysis provides some interesting information on numbers placed, frequency of placement, types of jobs offered, and the like. An effort was made to avoid counting the same advertised job twice; still, since agents sometimes rephrased job descriptions in order to entice workers, it cannot be guaranteed that the figures are without redundancy.

<sup>13</sup> See Reliable's display advertisement, *News Advertiser*, 9 October 1911, Classifieds.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 July 1909, 3.

workers were "a specialty."<sup>15</sup> Bigness was a virtue, but not an easy accomplishment, in the employment business. Waine, for instance, felt forced to argue that unlike most agencies his was "no hole in the wall office."<sup>16</sup> But Waine was an exception: the best-tread path to success followed a refinement, rather than an expansion of clientele. Most agencies remained very small.

Agencies for white males were very competitive. Unlike the Japanese labour contractors who co-operated through commercial networks to divide the profits of migrant Japanese labour, white male employment agents made war on each other. Battle lines formed between agents fighting for the patronage of workers during good times, and for major employers when the economy slowed down. Obviously, competition was most intense between agencies dealing in similar types of work. For instance, in an effort to expand business throughout the province and, in some cases, to steal business away from other agents, a number of agencies employed commissioned salesmen to roam about the province securing orders from employers. The International and Canadian Pacific agencies were notorious canvassers, and apparently the practice became an annoyance to employers. One agent — Charles Knight of Reliable Labor — tried to capitalize on this sentiment, promising that "the old Reliable labor and Employment office has no canvassing agents whatsoever in its employ. The business is personally conducted by C. W. Knight its manager who carefully selects all help to fill its various orders."<sup>17</sup> Knight's appeal failed; "old Reliable" was gone before the year was out.

Agencies were surprisingly incestuous, given the often bitter competition between them. As figure 1 indicates, there was considerable intermingling of agents and their relatives, as they entered partnerships, left, joined other companies, or formed new partnerships. Brothers of prominent agents sometimes received apprenticeships at other agencies. For instance, John Hanley, brother of Canadian Northern Employment's Dennis Hanley, began working as a clerk for Gagnon and Lamont's Central Labor Agency in 1912. The following year, he replaced Gagnon as a principal at Central; and in 1914 he replaced his brother Dennis as a partner in Canadian Northern Employment. New agents often entered the business as clerks at prominent agencies, where they learned the trade, gained a reputation with both workers and employers, and then left to form their own companies — usually in partnership with another agent. Terrence Conway began as a

<sup>15</sup> *World*, 1 June 1911, Classifieds.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *News Advertiser*, 15 April 1911, Classifieds.

clerk in William Waine's agency in 1909. When Waine formed the International Employment Agency in 1910, Conway left to form his own company, T. J. Conway and Company. Brother Frank Conway joined Terrence in 1911, and both left the failing business in 1913 to do other things: Terrence ran a boarding-house and Frank returned to his job as a CPR trackman.<sup>18</sup>

The occupational background of most agents is difficult to determine from available sources because agents, like workers, moved from place to place frequently. Evidence suggests, however, that most labour agents were workers themselves — before and after their stint as employment agents. Some toiled in white collar jobs before starting employment offices. For instance, Frank Robbins (Robbins and Robbins Employment) worked as a clerk in an east end real estate office before starting his labour business.<sup>19</sup> Agent Adelard X La Brosse was a bookkeeper for a hardware wholesaler before he opened an agency in 1908; Alfred Sykes also worked as a bookkeeper before his stint with the Vancouver Employment Agency. More often, agents worked in skilled trades or, less frequently, as labourers before opening agencies. Frank Robbins' brother and partner George was a carpenter the year before he created Robbins and Robbins, as was Hugh McDonald of British American Employment Agency. Henry Downing worked as a warehouseman for a metal pipe manufacturer for a few years before launching the BC Employment Agency in 1910. Downing's partner, James Maddison, was a logger. Restaurant work was a popular pre-agent occupation: William Waine of the International cooked for several cafés in 1908 and 1909; Charles Knight began work in Vancouver as a rooming-house cook in 1898, then as a cook in an east end restaurant and, finally, as a baker before opening his business in 1907. Employment agents were just as likely to slip back into the working class after their agencies failed. Lester Way got work as a carpet layer for the Hudson's Bay Company after his agency closed in 1915. James Burke left the Labor Exchange in 1916 to become a longshoreman, while Godfrey Sykes and Alfred Sykes (relation unclear) both left employment agencies in 1913 to work as a housepainter and streetcleaner respectively. The fact that agents had been themselves part of the working class might not have affected how they treated other workers, but it does serve to complicate the simple, negative agent stereotype. Most agents would have known first-hand the difficulties of securing work.

<sup>18</sup> Information on personnel and occupational background of agents can be finessed from city directories. See Henderson's, *Greater Vancouver Directory* (Vancouver: Henderson Directory Company Limited), 1900-1920.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

The career of Sam Sells of the Canadian Pacific Employment Agency (CanPac) illustrates the small scale of these agents, how self-interest determined their activities, and how competition between agencies shaped their businesses. Samuel Sells came to Vancouver in 1907 from places unknown. Very few of the major agents listed in figure 1 were long-time residents of Vancouver; all except Charles Knight came to the city less than five years before opening or joining an agency.<sup>20</sup> The small-time agencies not included in figure 1 comprised more long-time residents. It may be that a number of experienced agents came to the city from outside the province between 1907 and 1910, although this is difficult to substantiate. Perhaps Sam Sells was one of these.<sup>21</sup>

Sells opened CanPac in 1907 and took Fred Olson in as a partner the following year. The two men stole a page from the immigrant labour contractors' handbook, buying the Home Comfort Lodging House in 1908 in an effort to integrate the company vertically. This was a measure of the competitive nature of the white male employment business. Rather than co-operate with boarding-house keepers or other agents to divide the business functionally (as the Japanese did), European agents tried to create their own small business empires. To this end, Sells and Olson continued to operate boarding-houses in conjunction with their agency until 1913, when provincial legislation barred licensed agents from owning any form of lodging business.<sup>22</sup> Even so, the two men bought and sold a bewildering number of boarding-houses between 1908 and 1914: in succession from 1911 to 1913 came the Oxford Rooms, Sells and Olson Boarding House, Keefer Rooms, Workman Rooms, Wardrobe Rooms, and Stockholm Rooms. Apparently in an effort to side-step the 1912 law, the two agents altered their names to confuse authorities. Thus, Fredrick Sells and Samuel Olson surfaced as owners of the Stockholm Rooms in 1913. This subterfuge was successful until 1915, when Sells abandoned the boarding-house business entirely.<sup>23</sup>

CanPac dealt in all kinds of labour in many different industries during

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1907-1915.

<sup>21</sup> Possibly these agents knew each other from earlier days in the United States; certainly a common criticism aimed at employment agents was that they were American opportunists. James Lodge, a labourer on the Grand Trunk Pacific, complained to authorities in 1913 that employment agent abuses were "the most damning thing that could exist in the civilized world, and [are] done by no less than Americans." Lodge thought it a curse to "allow foreigners to come here and run an office privately which ought to be run by the government as a public office." Labor Commission testimony, Printed Correspondence, file 7, Provincial Archives of British Columbia.

<sup>22</sup> Directories. On 1912 provincial legislation licensing and controlling employment agencies, see *Labour Gazette*, April 1913, 1103.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

its first years of operation. Calling itself the “oldest and largest agency in the city” — which was untrue — CanPac’s advertised appeals to employers in the spring of 1908 were for all types of workers: “skilled and common labor, oriental and asiatic labor if required.”<sup>24</sup> That fall, however, CanPac joined in the fevered competition for the business of Foley, Welch and Stewart and their sub-contractors on the newly announced Grand Trunk Pacific railway. Securing an exclusive Grand Trunk Pacific contract was an eldorado for any agency; Premier McBride’s proviso — that construction begin from west to east in British Columbia — meant that this would be a fat contract indeed. Before the announcement of construction on the Grand Trunk Pacific, the main railroad labour agent in the city was Alexander Calder. In the 1890s, Calder had sent men to construction and maintenance crews throughout the province.<sup>25</sup> Calder disappears from the historical record in 1900, but reappears early in 1908 as “the authorized agent for Foley, Welch and Stewart, Grand Trunk Pacific Railway Contractors.”<sup>26</sup>

It is unlikely that Calder actually secured an exclusive labour contract with the Grand Trunk Pacific. It is more likely that he received periodic orders to send as many men as possible. The practice of railroad contractors was to give orders to a number of agents in order to increase the number of men arriving at the camps. All contractors complained of labour shortages — it was hoped that duplicating orders would help to solve the problem.<sup>27</sup> This was the Grand Trunk Pacific strategy in the summer and fall of 1908. Testifying later to the Labor Commission, an agent for Foley, Welch and Stewart admitted duplicating orders to Vancouver agencies; because of this, said Donald McLeod, “there was a little dispute between the employment agents[,] a little mixture that had to be straightened out.”<sup>28</sup> The “mixture” began when Sells began to advertise Foley, Welch and Stewart orders in August 1908. To undercut Calder, Sells lowered his fee and offered reduced transportation fares to Prince Rupert.<sup>29</sup> Calder responded in kind, and for the next three months Calder, Sells and a few

<sup>24</sup> See *News Advertiser*, 5 May 1908 and 2 June 1908, Classifieds.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Calder’s advertisement for 500 men to work on the Skagway and White Pass Railway, *News Advertiser*, 1 July 1898.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 May 1908, Classifieds.

<sup>27</sup> See the testimony presented by the representatives of four railway contractors to the Labor Commission: E. R. Ennis on the Kootenay Central, Volume 6, file 9, 21-26; Arthur Schact on the Kettle Valley, Volume 5, file 5, 90-92; Robert Armstrong on the Canadian Northern, Volume 4, file 3, pp. 291-92; and Donald McLeod on the Grand Trunk Pacific, Volume 6, file 12, pp. 325-31.

<sup>28</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 6, file 12, 331.

<sup>29</sup> *News Advertiser*, 2 August 1908, Classifieds.

other agents fought a rhetorical war to secure workers. CanPac claimed a "job for everyone in Prince Rupert," providing, of course, the labour came to it first. Calder countered by lowering his fares further and re-emphasizing that he was "the only authorized agent for Foley, Welch and Stewart."<sup>30</sup> Sells responded under his motto, "We get the Men. We get the Jobs," claiming to have the cheapest tickets to Prince Rupert, and informing workers that his was the "most centrally located office in the city." Charles Knight's Reliable Employment joined the fray in September as the "largest [railway] Agency in the city," offering reduced steamship fares to Prince Rupert.<sup>31</sup>

The war over, Grand Trunk Pacific workers petered out with the winter slowdown. By spring 1909, Calder was again fending off competitors, as Charles Knight and William Waine (International) continued to joust with Calder over railway workers. Eventually, Calder and the others would be pressured by Fred Lilyman who, in 1911, cut into much of the Grand Trunk Pacific's business.<sup>32</sup> Sam Sells did not rejoin the battle in 1909; instead, CanPac turned to logging and mill workers. Why the agency took this turn is unclear. Certainly the demand for forestry workers was there; Sells or Olson also may have had connections with the industry. In any case, the move was a good one — from 1909 on CanPac was a major actor in the Vancouver employment business.

The day-to-day system Sells and other agents used to bring worker and employer together also reveals the extent to which these businesses were governed by inter-agent rivalries and parochial concerns. Sells and his staff of one or two clerks received orders for work from employers either directly through the office, through the mail, or most often, by telegram or telephone. Like all agencies, Sells bore the employer's communication and advertising costs.<sup>33</sup> While he seldom saw the employer face to face, Sells maintained contacts with employers through messages in classified ads. For instance, Sells once warned his "up country" clients to "beware other labor supply concerns, only recently established, who are closely imitating our firm's name."<sup>34</sup> Sells suggested clients use his company's full name to avoid such trickery. The imitator, the Canadian Employment Agency, returned the volley, warning workers against agencies "who try to deceive

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Classifieds, August to October.

<sup>31</sup> It is possible that the Grand Trunk Pacific provided agents with these reduced fares. However, there is no evidence of this — agents appearing in front of the Labor Commission claimed that railways did not forward fares to them.

<sup>32</sup> See Donald McLeod's evidence to the Labor Commission, Volume 6, file 12, 331.

<sup>33</sup> See *News Advertiser*, 15 April 1911, Classifieds.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 June 1911, Classifieds.

the public by using names of railroad companies."<sup>35</sup> Sells outlasted the Canadian Employment Agency's assault on his clients; the latter company was gone by the end of 1911.

If Sells safely received an employer's order for workers, he would place it on one of several large bulletin boards on the sidewalk outside his storefront. Orders received during the evening (CanPac, like many of the larger agencies remained open at night to employers) were printed as a list in the morning newspaper. Sells' advertisements contained a good deal of job information. They usually mentioned wages and board, the cost of transportation or whether the fare was advanced, and any specific details about the job that he or the employer thought worth mentioning. Sells offered, for instance, information on the length of work — whether that was "work till Christmas" for a dozen irrigation workers in the Okanagan, or only two months as a barker in a logging camp.<sup>36</sup> Sells gave out this information at the employer's insistence, not because the workers necessarily demanded it. Employers and management increasingly complained of high labour turnover, especially in the camps. Arthur Schacht, a Kettle Valley railway contractor appearing in front of the Labor Commission, blamed the men themselves for transiency: "Sometimes [the men] stay a month or six weeks, but I can't give a reason. The wages are good. Conditions are good. They just drift."<sup>37</sup> Labour turnover, especially during shortages, was increasingly condemned by employers as wasteful and costly. But since turnover was perceived as a personal rather than systemic problem, the employer depended on employment agents to separate the "dependable" from the "drifter." This could lead to bribery:

WANTED: A few good Steady millwrights for sawmill construction at \$4.00 a day — transportation will be refunded to men that stay through to end of job. About 3 months work.

Canadian Pacific  
Employment Agency  
108½ Water

Once an employer's order was placed on the board outside, or in the morning paper, Sells had to entice workers to his office. Competition between agents made enticements necessary. Newspaper advertisements were obvious lures; a good location was a less obvious but more important means to ensure workers' patronage. Between 1907 and 1915, CanPac changed locations four times, each time for strategic commercial reasons.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 July 1911, Classifieds.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 July 1911 and 16 March 1910, Classifieds.

<sup>37</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 5, file 5, 91-92.

With each move, Sells re-inhabited another agency's location in the hope that he might capture the previous agent's business, while retaining his own.<sup>38</sup> Being situated close to the migrant worker's seasonal haunts — such as hotels, boarding-houses, bars, and restaurants — was also crucial to an agency's success. Poolrooms, in particular, complemented the white male employment business, acting as a kind of magnet for unemployed workers. Harry Welsh of Cosmopolitan Labor operated a huge "Pool and Club Room" in the front of his Powell street offices, in order to attract, entertain, and retain prospective clients.<sup>39</sup> Herbert Hicks shared commercial space with poolrooms owned by others. Rupert MacEwen, a partner in Standard Labor Agents in 1912, ran the next door poolroom before and after his foray into the employment business. While Sam Sells never owned a poolroom, his office was never far from one.<sup>40</sup> In addition to poolrooms, many agencies had heated waiting-rooms, and some even boasted of having "Reading Rooms" — not unlike union hiring halls. Agencies competed, in the rhetoric of one agent, to be "The Headquarters of the Unemployed."<sup>41</sup>

Sam Sells' fees to workers were the same as most agencies: one dollar for what was called "ordinary labour," and a dollar and a half for so-called skilled work. Most agents charged a dime to fifty cents for short jobs of one or two days.<sup>42</sup> These fees seem to have been standard through the industry; fee-cutting was one form of competition that was avoided, as was over-charging for reasons of competition. Registration fees — charges for being on an agent's worklist — were not common in Vancouver's white male agencies. Harry Welsh told the Labour Commission that he charged twenty-five cents to clients unable to find work immediately from the Cosmopolitan bulletin boards.<sup>43</sup> Welsh argued the registration fee was necessary to cover the costs of tracking men down when an appropriate

<sup>38</sup> Sells' first move in 1908 was to 20 Powell, the 1907 location of Evans and Vayer's Agency. Sells moved again in 1912 to 108½ Water, a proven location of several agencies, including Harry Wolstenholme and Coast Labor Agents. His last move was to take over William Waive's long-standing offices at 180 Powell. See Directories 1907-1915.

<sup>39</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Box 4, Incoming Correspondence, file 5. For good discussion of the relationship between saloons, pool halls, and the working class in North American cities before World War I, see Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 72-76.

<sup>40</sup> Directories, 1907-1915.

<sup>41</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Box 4, Incoming Correspondence, file 5.

<sup>42</sup> See the testimony of Henry Meaker, *ibid.*, Volume 4, file 2, 144; and Harry Welsh, *ibid.*, Volume 4, file 1, 76-77.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 4, file 1, 77.

job came in. In any case, explained Welsh, municipal bylaws forced agents to return registration fees if, in seven days, a job was not secured. In the fall of 1911, CanPac asked workers seeking employment to “call and list with us,” and promised to “return the deposit” if the agency was unable to place them.<sup>44</sup> However, no other mention was ever made of a registration list in the historical record left by Sells’ agency. Most likely, the fee was reserved for unusual or more skilled work. A. H. Miller, an employment agent in New Westminster, explained to the 1912 Commission: “Yes. I register a first class man. An experienced man I take his name and look him up. When it comes to laborers, when I get a job I simply put it on the board. . . . It’s like this. Laboring men you would not register because that’s work that any able-bodied men can do. [But] if a man comes looking for [skilled] jobs, you register him and look up his record.”<sup>45</sup> Miller did not charge for registering workers.<sup>46</sup>

CanPac focused on unskilled workers. But like all employment agencies, it placed skilled workers regularly. In a sample of Sells’ advertisements for a four-week period spanning June/July 1911, CanPac offered work for blacksmiths, second-class engineers, machinists, head cooks, and camp bookkeepers. Sells also placed skilled woodsmen. Besides the frequent, open calls for sawmill and logging labours were specific, less-frequent advertisements for experienced fallers, buckers, hooktenders, and boommen.<sup>47</sup> Employment agencies tended to place all levels of workers within an entire industry — if they were so specialized — not simply the unskilled. The largest single group of skilled male workers regularly placed by Sells or any other agent were carpenters. CanPac sent carpenters to jobs in and out of the city for wages between \$4.25 and \$4.50 a day. The Vancouver Employment Agency’s Henry Meaker told the Labor Commission of the trouble he had filling orders for skilled workers — skilled tradesmen were in short supply. When faced with this problem, Meaker phoned the Labor Temple. The union, he said, would usually send over a man, and either the applicant or, reluctantly, his union would pay Meaker’s fee.<sup>48</sup> Contrary

<sup>44</sup> *News Advertiser*, 1 November 1911, Classifieds.

<sup>45</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 3, file 8, 117.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *News Advertiser*, 22 June to 19 July 1911. For a description of occupations and the work process in turn-of-the-century westcoast logging, see: Ed Gould, *Logging: British Columbia’s Logging History* (Victoria: Hancock House Publishers, 1975), 47-62, and Ralph W. Andrews, *Timber: Toil and Trouble in the Big Woods* (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1968), 69-101. For a contrasting discussion of woodwork and the hiring process in Ontario before World War II, see Ian Radforth’s *Bush Workers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 25-69.

<sup>48</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 4, file 4, 146.

FIGURE 2  
Cosmopolitan Labor Agency Contract, 1912

J. H. Welsh Open Until 12 Midnight

COSMOPOLITAN LABOR AGENCY

Phone SEY.5216 10 Powell Street

Vancouver, B.C., ..... 191.....

Received from ..... the sum of ..... Dollars,  
for which we have furnished and given to said applicant, information such  
as we have received, by which he may be able, if competent, to secure a situation  
as ..... with ..... of .....

wages ..... per ..... or as otherwise may be  
agreed upon. Should the said applicant not be engaged to go to work, we

agree to refund the fee paid within ..... hours/days from the time  
of issue of this contract, upon the applicant bringing a written and signed  
statement to us from the said employer, his foreman or person in charge of  
the work, that no engagement has been or will be made with the said employer  
to go to work for him. Applicant declares he is competent to fulfill duties of  
position above described, and if not employed because of proving incompetent,  
he shall forfeit all fees paid. It is mutually agreed that the COSMOPOLITAN  
LABOR AGENCY are not to be held responsible for any expense that may be  
incurred by the applicant for work, if situation is not procured.

It is further mutually agreed that the applicant shall proceed to point of

destination .....

REPORT AT THIS OFFICE WITH BLANKETS

AT ..... In the event of Applicant  
REFUSING to proceed to Work for ANY REASON whatsoever, after signing  
this Contract, the Fee paid shall be forfeited. We will positively refuse Fee  
paid, unless conditions given above are complied with.

I ACCEPT THIS CONTRACT .....

COSMOPOLITAN LABOR AGENCY, per .....

SOURCE: Labor Commission Testimony, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Box 4,  
file 30.

to popular belief, then, employment agencies did place skilled workers. And it was this invasion of membership allocation that explains increasing union hostility towards agencies after 1909.

CanPac, like all agencies, required workers to sign written contracts after a job was chosen from the board. These contracts were meant to rationalize the process for the benefit of bookkeeping, protect the worker and agent from each other's misrepresentation, and protect both from the employer's often capricious behaviour. The elements of all contracts were the same. These included: the name and address of the prospective employer; the level of wages, cost of board and, if necessary, the cost of transportation to the work site; the nature and duration of the work involved; and the amount of the employment fee. A typical contract is reprinted in figure 2. The white male employment agent made every effort to protect himself against what he believed were potential abuses by "undependable" employees and workers. These fears were written into contracts. For instance, the agent agreed to pay back a disappointed client's fee only if a list of conditions was met. "Incompetency" — as *Cosmopolitan's* contract illustrates — was vague enough to include a wide range of "undependable" behaviour, including vocational incompetence, tardiness, intoxication, an inability to understand English, or a refusal to work when a strike was in progress.<sup>49</sup> Agents' participation in strike-breaking and their invasion of union hiring were the key criticisms made against employment agents by organized labour in the province. In fact, most employment agents were uninterested in whether a strike was in progress or not — unless it helped or hurt business. A few agents refused to deal in strike-breakers on a matter of principle, and this gained them the reputation as "good agents." Conversely, agents dealing in scab labour did so at great risk: Harry Welsh of *Cosmopolitan* became so discredited by his involvement in the 1912 *Britannia Mines* strike that he was unable to continue in business — workers simply abandoned his agency. Four workers destroyed the interior of Herbert Hicks' office for a similar offence. As a result, agents like Henry Meaker refused to deal in strike-breakers. Others, like A. H. Miller, claimed to handle nothing but union work.<sup>50</sup> In the words of one agent, the "rule" was to "always tell the man exactly what he is going up against and what kind of job it is. It is due to that fact that a man retains his business. If he don't, his business gets away."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.*, Sample Contracts, Box 4, Incoming Correspondence, file 30.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 3, file 8, 117.

<sup>51</sup> On the *Britannia* strike and Welsh's involvement, see *Labour Gazette*, October 1912, 337-42 and Labor Commission testimony, Volume 4, file 1, 81-84. Welsh was also

Much of Welsh's contract (reproduced in figure 2) deals with conditions regarding the return of fees. However, employment agents claimed that disputes over fee-returns were rare and usually the fault of the employer. Herbert Hicks guessed that 5 per cent of the 700 to 800 men through his office every peak month returned unsatisfied to collect their employment fee. Most of these, claimed Hicks, got their money back.<sup>52</sup> Employment agents blamed employers for these problems. Herbert Hicks: "I have an order every time before the man goes [out]. We have had cases where [an employer] orders men and maybe we don't get them out right away and he will get somebody else, and when my man gets there he is refused. The first thing when he comes back I will ask him if there is any other job on the board suits him. If not, he gets his fee back."<sup>53</sup> In an effort to protect the agent from "undependable" employers, most contracts required the employer or his foreman to explain why the worker was not hired before that worker could get his fee returned. Fee refunds were probably much more difficult to get than agents claimed — the "run-around" is an old and durable tradition in small business.

Sam Sells and other agents were known to advance transportation or spending money to men heading to up-country camps in order to retain their share of the business. When labour was in short supply, large railway contractors sometimes advanced fares through employment agents. For instance, Foley, Welch, and Stewart periodically gave Fred Lilyman funds to advance fares, particularly during the spring start-up. Some agents bore the responsibility of advancing fares themselves, in order to retain the patronage of employers and workers. Most did not like the practice. Lilyman complained in 1913 that high transportation costs had hurt his business. He had advanced fares in the summer of 1912, but by early 1913 the now \$8.00 average fare was too high for him or the railway labourer to pay. As a result, Lilyman lost much of his Grand Trunk Pacific business, and began to concentrate instead on Canadian Northern, Pacific Great Eastern, and CPR construction and maintenance work, where transportation was presumably less expensive.<sup>54</sup> Agents generally found advancing fares a very risky business. Herbert Hicks was forced to offer advanced fares, but lived in fear of being duped by workers: "Lots of men

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involved in the 1912 Cumberland strike: see *BC Federationist*, January 17, 1913, 3. The "rule" was explained by Herbert Hicks: see Labor Commission testimony, Volume 4, file 1, 66.

<sup>52</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 5, file 1, 71.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 4, file 1, 69.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 4, file 2, 151.

want to get to a particular place and will enquire where that job is and get transportation furnished to them,” Hicks complained to the 1912 Commission, “[then] they will go to another job or will stay half a day and then go to the other outfit. They are getting free transportation.” In order to counter this practice, Hicks hired a man to “care” for the worker’s baggage until both reached their destination.<sup>55</sup> Other agents also hired so-called “travelling men” to protect the agent’s investment in transportation fares. Grainger mentions in *Woodsmen of the West* that workers often carried mock cardboard bags filled with dirt that could be abandoned at any moment.<sup>56</sup> Thus, transportation presented a dilemma to agents: the costs of advancing fares often outweighed the benefits, yet the practice was necessary if the agent wanted to compete with other agencies for the patronage of employers and workers.

Finally, after the employer’s order was taken, the worker enticed into the office, a job found, the fee paid, the list of conditions met, and, perhaps, the cost of transportation advanced and returned, the relationship between Sam Sells and the worker ended. Of course, Sells hoped to see the worker again at the end of the season — and given CanPac’s success, he probably did.

Above all, the Vancouver employment agent’s world was a predatory one. The agent served his own interests by responding to the needs of the employment market; competition between agents helped to keep the business more favourable to workers than would an employer’s own hiring department or a centralized state employment system dedicated to the employer’s vision of economic efficiency. At the very least, the agent’s office was a place to congregate, to play cards, and to shoot pool. The commercial system clearly had its costs to both workers and employers in the form of occasional job duplication and over-ordering. Conversely, the actions of agents did nothing to improve working conditions, increase union membership, promote working-class solidarity, or encourage workers towards revolutionary aims. However, agents did serve the interests of the working class in a most important way — by securing jobs for men needing work.

### *Sharks under Attack, 1908-1915*

Controversies surrounding white male employment agencies occurred sporadically throughout the 1900-15 period, but peaked in 1913. In tandem with the rising critique of agencies was a deepening commitment to

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 4, file 1, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Grainger, 64.

a state-run employment system. This section explores the relationship between the critique of agencies and the endorsement of a state system as seen through three important events: the King Commission hearings and reaction of the unemployed in 1907-08, Vancouver's tumultuous winter of 1911-12, and the 1912 Royal Commission on Labor hearing in the spring and summer of 1913. The critique of commercial agencies and the reasons given for state-operated alternatives changed from one social group to the next. Employers, politicians, labour organizers, and so-called progressive reformers each offered different reasons and harboured different motives for abolishing agencies and advocating a state-run labour exchange system. Within each group were inconsistencies — organized labour, for instance, could not decide whether the public system should be municipally or provincially organized. Nonetheless, all groups agreed that agencies had to go, and that everyone (barring Asians) would benefit by the state's takeover of the employment market.

Economic recession and the publicity of the Mackenzie King hearings on Japanese employment agencies made the winter of 1907-08 a controversial one for both Asian and European male agencies. A precedent was set that year for making employment agents scapegoats for cyclical and seasonal unemployment. The leaders of Vancouver's unemployed blamed Asian labour contractors (especially Japanese agents) for increasing white unemployment. No concern was felt by the white unemployed or city officials for unemployed Asians or for possible abuses of Asian workers by their labour agents. Indeed, the organized unemployed demanded a municipal job exchange to weed Asians from the labour market, and civil authorities provided one in order to discriminate "deserving" from the "undeserving" unemployed for fiscal reasons.

Minister of Labour Mackenzie King arrived in Vancouver in the fall of 1907 to investigate the well-known race riot of early September and, officially, to "inquire into the methods by which Oriental labourers have been induced to come to Canada."<sup>57</sup> At the centre of the investigation was a Japanese labour company with white and Japanese directors known as the Canadian Nippon Supply Company.<sup>58</sup> It had been the hope of Canadian Nippon to secure a large labour contract with the Grand Trunk

<sup>57</sup> Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission appointed to inquire into the methods by which Oriental labourers have been induced to come to Canada* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1908). Known hereafter as the *King Commission Report*.

<sup>58</sup> Some information on the Canadian Nippon Supply Company is contained in the *King Commission Report*. But local newspaper reporting is more detailed: see *Vancouver Daily World*, 13-29 November 1907. The principals of Canadian Nippon included: Saori Goto, a large-scale labour contractor who arrived in Vancouver from Tacoma

Pacific Railway, a plan that was dashed when McBride demanded that the railway only use white labour in its construction.<sup>59</sup> Even though Canadian Nippon's plans failed, rumours of an enormous invasion of Japanese workers clouded the air in the summer of 1907 and played a part in the violence against orientals on September 7.<sup>60</sup> Mackenzie King's hearings, which were widely publicized in local papers, revealed an intricate and co-operative network of Japanese employment agents, immigration companies, government officials, and hotel owners on both sides of the Pacific. The Japanese agents and boarding-house keepers who appeared in front of the Commission were frank about their intentions — the Grand Trunk Pacific was less so. The result was the vilification of a handful of Japanese labour agents and, by association, the workers under their care.

Vancouver's organized unemployed reacted to newspaper reports on the Commission and to severe unemployment by publicizing stories of agency abuse and by demanding municipal action. One labourer-spokesman, Matthew Allen, told Mayor Bethune he had been lured to the city by a Winnipeg newspaper advertisement placed by the "American Locating Company" of Vancouver. Allen came to Vancouver but no work was found. Allen's real concern was with the successes of Asian labour agents. While fruitlessly applying for work at a local sawmill, he counted twenty-eight orientals at work, and was told to see an agent in Chinatown.<sup>61</sup> Another distraught unemployed worker threatened to "blow the mayor to pieces" if Japanese immigration was not stopped.<sup>62</sup> The Vancouver *World* supported the white unemployed, demanding employers "discharge their armies of Orientals, who can be maintained at small cost by the Japanese

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in 1901; Frederick Yoshi, a well-connected member of the Japanese Consulate; Charles Gardiner Johnson, a prominent white businessman in the city and owner of one of the province's biggest ship brokers, shipping and marine agents; and William Boulbee, Gardiner Johnson's nephew and manager of the Johnson Wharf on Vancouver's waterfront. On Gardiner Johnson and Boulbee, see E. O. S. Scholefield, *British Columbia, from Earliest Times to the Present* (Vancouver: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914), Volume 3, 518-19 and Volume 4, 517-18. Also see R. A. J. McDonald, "Business Leaders in Early Vancouver, 1886-1914" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1978), 486.

<sup>59</sup> Patricia E. Roy, "Progress, Prosperity and Politics: The Railway Policies of Richard McBride," *BC Studies* 47 (Autumn 1980), 7-8, and G. R. Stevens, *Canadian National Railways* (Toronto: Clark, Irwin and Company, 1962), 256-58.

<sup>60</sup> Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was: A History of the Japanese Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), 63-70, Peter W. Ward, *White Canada Forever* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), and Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1989), 185-226.

<sup>61</sup> *World*, 6 December 1907.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 November 1907.

agencies which brought them here, and give the white men work.”<sup>63</sup> The speakers for the unemployed met with the mayor to demand food, shelter and a city labour exchange to weed Asians from the workforce. “Much of the blame for the present state of affairs,” argued one man, “is laid at the doors of the Japanese employment agent, [whose] licences should be cancelled and a municipal bureau established.”<sup>64</sup> The Vancouver Trades and Labor Council had earlier agreed, resolving that “large employers be requested to give [white] unemployed workers employment instead of the many orientals,” and that the city should open “a register for all unemployed white citizens where employers can secure any number.”<sup>65</sup>

Mayor Bethune feared that a municipal labour exchange would act as a magnet for unemployed men outside the city. A small employment office had been open in the basement of city hall since October, but was closed in early November when it was swamped by unemployed men; Bethune was convinced the office had become a “rendezvous for a morning loaf of men who could spend their time better rustling for work themselves.”<sup>66</sup> Nonetheless, some form of labour office became necessary for administering the work-relief system by early December. The city exchange could be used to distinguish the “deserving” from the “undeserving” unemployed, regardless of their colour. Seeing the fiscal advantages in this, Bethune re-opened the municipal labour office on 11 December. As a result, Vancouver’s first large-scale free municipal labour exchange really grew out of the civic government’s tight-fisted need to separate deserving out-of-works from undeserving out-of-lucks. Yet, the municipal exchange option was also linked to the demands of the organized unemployed and the widely held perception that Asians were working at the expense of more deserving white workers. In times of high unemployment, Asian workers were defined as “undeserving” — the success of the city’s Anti-Asiatic Employment Bureau (1907-08) testifies to that.<sup>67</sup> The municipal bureau was a white preserve, designed, in part, to substitute “deserving” unemployed white workers for “undeserving” employed oriental labour. In fact, public labour exchanges could be used to shape the labour market in whatever ways its designers wanted; in Vancouver’s winter of 1907-08, the organized unemployed hoped to weed the oriental worker out of the regional labour force entirely.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 6 November 1907.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 December 1907.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 November 1907.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 November 1907.

<sup>67</sup> See *World Classified Advertisements*, November 1907-February 1908.

Vancouver's first municipal labour exchange was never meant to be permanent: by March 1908, the city bureau was closed, and the employment agents — Japanese or otherwise — were back in business.<sup>68</sup> Either as a means to engineer an employed white society or as a way to administer cuts to municipal relief costs, city employment bureaus were meant as temporary measures and were not designed to replace existing commercial employment agencies. Civic bureaus seldom opened past March, seldom supplied "real" employers in or out of the city, and seldom dealt in skilled workers of any kind. Instead, civic bureaus complemented the existing commercial employment system by being an off-seasonal stop-gap until the spring, when the "regular" commercial agencies went back to work. This pattern began to change in the winter of 1911-12. In response to organized labour's attack on the sharks and, in part, for narrow political reasons, a different kind of employment agency was introduced that winter — a more aggressive bureau, less concerned with unemployment and more intent on competing with commercial agencies.<sup>69</sup>

The story of the 1911 civic employment bureau began early in November 1911. Agencies in town signalled the end of the working season: in late October Sam Sells and CanPac promised workers that "we are daily receiving employers' enquiries for help"; but by 15 November all agencies other than those placing women workers disappeared from public view.<sup>70</sup>

By late November, the city was flooded with "out-of-works." A new "union" of Pacific Coast Employers' Associations, argued the Vancouver Trades and Labor Council (VTLC) and the BC Federation of Labor, was to blame for the high unemployment. In June 1911, the Employers' Association of Vancouver had opened a free employment agency "on the open shop principle" to break the building trades unions. As part of the on-going open shop drive, employers from San Diego to Vancouver opened similar bureaus. "The intent," said the *World*, was "to flood the coast with unemployed, and by keeping the labor market over-run, to maintain the open shop. A strong bureau will be established, [and by] a systematic

<sup>68</sup> Patricia Roy, "Vancouver: 'The Mecca of the Unemployed,' 1907-1929," *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development*, Alan F. J. Artibise (ed.) (Regina: University of Regina, 1981), 394.

<sup>69</sup> Vancouver's winter of 1911-12 is well known for the IWW-led free speech fights in late January 1912. Mark Leier's study, the best account of the fights, reveals the deep divisions within the political left — divisions firmly rooted in the ideological incompatibility of IWW syndicalism and VTLC/SPC "social democracy." See James Mark Leier, "Through the Lens of Syndicalism: Fragmentation on the Vancouver and British Columbia Left before the Great War" (M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1987).

<sup>70</sup> *News Advertiser*, 15 October 1911.

method of misrepresentation and lying advertisements to the effect that there is plenty of work on the coast . . . uninformed workers all over the continent will be herded like cattle to the Pacific States and western Canada . . . to fill their places with the unemployed.”<sup>71</sup>

The appearance of an Employers' free employment bureau would seem to indicate considerable employer dissatisfaction with existing commercial agencies. However, the employer's bureau and the local agencies were indistinguishable to VTLC officials. Both earned their keep by providing strike-breakers, both were dedicated to breaking unions, and both were tools of employers. On the heels of a BC Federation of Labor warning against the Employers' bureau, the VTLC officially “expressed themselves opposed to employment agencies in the city.” The Council charged that since such agencies were operated by “unscrupulous persons,” and were “a menace to the working element of the city,” they should be abolished. The Council recommended that the municipal government establish its own bureau and “charge the patrons a minimum fee” for the service.<sup>72</sup>

The hostility of local trade unionists towards employer-directed and commercial employment agencies was not lost on Mayor L. D. Taylor. Editor/owner of the Liberal Vancouver *World* and self-styled “friend of the workingman,” Taylor faced a December election against James Findlay, a candidate supported by local Conservative Party and business leaders.<sup>73</sup> In an attempt to capture the support of the VTLC and give the appearance that city hall was interested in the plight of workers, Taylor opened an expanded and revitalized civic employment bureau in the basement of city hall on 20 November 1911. The *World*, of course, welcomed the event with great fanfare. On the stump, Taylor never failed to make mention of his latest triumph. He seldom failed, as well, to link the civic bureau with the unscrupulous employment sharks: “Men can now go [to the civic bureau] and look for work without having to pay fees for the privilege of getting a job. (Applause) There are parties who think they should take the last dollar from a man to send him to a job.”<sup>74</sup> Not sur-

<sup>71</sup> *World*, 17 June 1911. The Employers' Association of Vancouver's employment bureau was directed by an E. C. Goodman and located in an office building in the heart of the city's financial district. The degree to which it was successful remains unknown. During the local building trades strike, scabs appear to have been taken on at the construction site itself, not through any office. See Classifieds for carpenters in *News Advertiser*, June 1911. As for the linkage of open shop bureaus across the Pacific slope, it is impossible to determine how many workers were sent to Vancouver.

<sup>72</sup> *World*, 8 December 1911.

<sup>73</sup> Leier, p. 60. On L. D. Taylor and the *World* see Bessie Lamb, “The Origin and Development of Newspapers in Vancouver” (M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1942), 36-37 and 40-41.

<sup>74</sup> *World*, 28 November 1911.

prisingly, Taylor's newspaper endorsed the city's venture into the employment business. "Everyone knows that a great injustice is done laborers through unscrupulous private employment bureaus," read a *World* editorial during the campaign. The editorial allowed that "not all of them are unscrupulous," but "when it is considered that the amount which each man is fleeced is only a paltry dollar, the unqualified meanness of the swindle is apparent."<sup>75</sup> The *World* applauded the efforts of the present city government in giving the workingman "the most reasonable protection" against agency abuses through a government employment bureau "in which the man behind the counter would have no financial interest to send a grader 2 or 3 hundred miles to a fake job in order to get his poor ragged dollar."<sup>76</sup> The newspaper even dragged out local celebrities to promote Taylor's scheme. Joshua Johnston, the city's famous private detective, demanded that any "man who uses his talents for the procuring of the dollar, thereby adding misery to the lot of those who are already miserable, should be driven out of society."<sup>77</sup>

In conjunction with the *World's* relentless campaign against commercial agencies, extensive promotional advertising for Taylor's new civic employment bureau appeared. These advertisements reveal the city's belief that the business community would benefit most from municipal control of the labour market. The ads also show that the bureau was in competition with commercial agencies.

MR. BUSINESSMAN  
MR. CONTRACTOR  
MR. HOUSEHOLDER  
MR. STOREKEEPER

Do you require any help of any kind?

THE  
CIVIC EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

is at your service

Can supply you with all classes of  
labor, skilled and unskilled

Also, men for odd jobs

Prompt service.....No fees

The sharks, it was thought, could be run out of business by a progressive city bureau — there was really no need to outlaw them. Taylor believed, as did many who commented on the employment problem, that the agencies constantly had to trick workers in order to stay in business. Thus, given

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 23 December 1911.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 6 January 1912.

the choice, workers would vote with their feet for a city-operated bureau.<sup>78</sup> Still, city council felt it necessary to give the new civic bureau a trump card over the agencies by passing a by-law barring commercial agencies from taking telephone or telegraph orders from employers. All orders for work outside the city had to be in writing from the employer himself. Needless to say, the civic bureau was exempt from the bylaw. In a unique show of solidarity, agents protested the regulation en masse. They argued that any prohibition on telephones or telegraphs would cause "a hindrance to their business" when business picked up in the spring.<sup>79</sup> City council shrugged off the protest; the *World* pointed out that private agents were finally "being forced to compete with the free labour bureau established in the city."<sup>80</sup>

But the free civic bureau was in no position to compete with agencies dealing in white male workers. There was little work for men in December and January 1911-12. Agents knew this and were hibernating peacefully. Meanwhile, the civic bureau was overwhelmed by unemployed workers. On its first day, Devine and Kenis took in over 100 applications, few of which were successful.<sup>81</sup> In its first four days almost 500 jobless sought out the bureau, but fewer than a quarter of those were placed.<sup>82</sup> By mid-December Devine admitted that only 150 men had found work through his office, most of whom were placed on city street work — a traditional staple of winter work relief.<sup>83</sup> In all, close to 1,500 men applied at the bureau in the month of December, and fewer than 400 secured work — temporary or otherwise.

Taylor and the *World* measured the success of the civic bureau by the number of applications for work, not the office's ability to place the unemployed. In part, this was due to the bravado of Taylor's election campaign. However, his opponent, James Findlay, not wanting to alienate working-

<sup>78</sup> Never before had a civic bureau pursued employers with such vigor. "Do you want extra help to move that shipment of goods that arrived yesterday?" asked the bureau in one ad; "are you requiring male help of any kind?" asked another ad aimed specifically at building contractors. The bureau even sent out circulars to employers informing them of the bureau's purpose and its services. Never before had a city bureau claimed to deal in "all classes of labor" or appealed to skilled workers. Unlike previous efforts as well, the new civic bureau was given a full-time staff: P. A. Devine, manager, and J. C. Kenis, assistant, were hired on at \$150 and \$75 a month respectively. "Mr. Devine," reported the *World* on opening day, "is preparing for a busy time." See *World* 28 November, 1 December and 11 December, 1911.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 December 1911.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 November 1911.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 December 1911.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 December 1911.

class votes either, also lauded the purpose and efforts of the bureau. Thus, the bureau's success at attracting unemployed workers was seen as a victory over the "shark" — a vindication of the bureau's primary objective. That, read the *World*, 995 men applied for work at the bureau by 22 December (only 215 were placed) "clearly shows that this department is doing good work and was an urgent necessity." Mayor Taylor visited the bureau a number of times during the election campaign, and on seeing the crowds "expressed satisfaction with the good work the bureau was undoubtedly doing."<sup>84</sup>

The civic bureau was not designed to alleviate unemployment, and it did not. In January, when the situation worsened and mass street protests were organized by the IWW to demand work, the civic bureau retreated from public view completely. The bureau's failure to alleviate the crisis became an embarrassment to city council. The unemployed themselves began to avoid the bureau — many left the city entirely. As a result, the *World* pulled its advertisements on 18 January and never placed them again. The new mayor kept the bureau operating through January, but slowly phased the office out. By early spring Vancouver's new civic employment bureau, like all other earlier efforts, was dead.

The civic bureau died because it failed to help the unemployed. Its existence was an embarrassment while men marched through the streets. But another failure was never recognized by those who endorsed the bureau originally. "The real object of the local bureau," argued an executive of the BC Federation of Labor, "was to enable men to obtain work without having to pay their last remaining dollar to one or other of the employment offices." In this, said the Federation, the bureau has been "a failure."<sup>85</sup> The *World* finally admitted to defeat as well: "the municipal labor bureau is a failure to this extent . . . ; employees insist on using the offices which charge fees." But, said the *World*, "the difficulty is one which the city cannot very well overcome. Provincial legislation is necessary. Had the Provincial government the interests of workers at heart, the scandals in connection with employment offices . . . would long ago have been investigated and a remedy found."<sup>86</sup> The rise and fall of the 1911 Vancouver civic employment bureau reveals how reformers linked the activities of commercial agencies to proposals for state-controlled employment markets. And like that of 1907, the 1911 effort shows how criticisms of agencies and calls for state-run labour exchanges were meant to enhance narrow, often

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 1 December 1911.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 24 January 1912.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 30 January 1912.

very selfish ends. L. D. Taylor introduced the municipal bureau for narrow political reasons, while organized labour supported the initiative to rid the city of agencies that blocked its efforts to control hiring.<sup>87</sup>

The 1912 BC Royal Commission on Labor marks the high point of the debate on private employment agencies. The Commission travelled for eight months throughout the province; the first Vancouver hearings in February 1913 took place exactly one year after the civic employment bureau closed its doors. The provincial government had been promising a commission to look into labour conditions for some time; organized labour had been demanding one for even longer. In fact, the question of a labour commission actually arose during debate on a bill prohibiting employment agents from operating boarding houses. The agency "problem" was always at the heart of the Commission. Thus, when McBride announced in February 1911 that such a commission would be established, the critics of the employment business were well prepared.<sup>88</sup> Organized labour had been running a relentless campaign against the sharks since the civic bureau's demise. The BCFL was the key actor in the debate: its members brought the issue to the Commission's attention; their critique and proposed alternatives influenced the final report profoundly.<sup>89</sup> So-called "progressive" social reformers were also prepared for the Commission. Most of these voices came from eastern Canada, where the agency debate took on a slightly more sophisticated — if not more sinister — character. Progressives visualized a more efficient employment market than the sharks were able to provide. Failure to bring the labour market under control, argued progressives, might lead to chaos — perhaps a revolution. Employers and workers were less concerned about the activities of employment agencies, probably because they used their services. However, the prospect of a state-coordinated labour distribution system to regularize labour supply excited some employers. Needless to say, the seven employment agents interviewed by Commissioners felt threatened by the proceedings. They blamed employers for abuses accredited to them, or lashed

<sup>87</sup> For its part, the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was always wary of both commercial and state labour bureaus. Experience taught the Wobblies to distrust civic authority; in Portland during Vancouver's 1911-12 winter of discontent, city authorities used their civic bureau to weed out troublesome IWW members. However, the IWW was the only organized group unambiguously critical of state-operated employment bureaus. See *World* 16 December, 1911.

<sup>88</sup> On the genesis of the 1912 Commission see *Labour Gazette*, March 1912, 838-39. For the bill prohibiting agency/boarding house combinations, see *Labour Gazette*, April 1913, 1103.

<sup>89</sup> The campaign against the sharks gained strength through the spring and summer of 1912. See *Federationist*, 8, 15 June and 6, 27 July 1912.

out at one another. By the Commission's end, the evidence presented by union officials and reformers was undeniable, the direction inescapable: private employment agents would be legislated out of existence and a state-operated system would be put in their place.

The Commission itself primarily comprised loyal Conservative partisans. These included H. G. Parson, a defeated Conservative member from Golden; John Jardine, a journeyman painter and Conservative member from Victoria; J. A. McKelvie, editor of the Conservative Vernon newspaper, *The News*; and R. A. Stoney, president of the New Westminster Trades and Labor Council, a long-time organizer for the International Typographical Union, and a "steady member of the Royal City Conservative Party."<sup>90</sup> The final Commissioner was the least known. Andrew Harper was a thirty-five year old Vancouver lawyer and a different character from the other Commissioners. Trained at Queen's University in political economy and the classics, and once described as "interested in all matters relative to the public welfare and . . . a student of the times regarding political, sociological and economic conditions," Harper may be described as the lone progressive on the panel.<sup>91</sup> The BCFL was unsure what to make of Harper. Seeing him neither as a has-been nor a Conservative hack, the *Federationist* finally pronounced him "truly a student of the requirements of labor."<sup>92</sup> Harper's contribution to the agency debate would prove significant. More than any other Commissioner, Harper returned witnesses to the subject of employment agencies — their abuses and inefficiencies — and prompted witnesses to speak on the state alternative. The employment agency debate became Harper's pet project. In the context of the Commission's otherwise lacklustre talent, its final report reflects the influence of his progressive outlook.

But it was organized labour that first brought the agency issue to the Commission. J. H. McVety, BCFL chairman, and J. W. Wilkinson, CTLC delegate, delivered the critique to the Commission in March 1913.<sup>93</sup> The two men began by outlining the traditional abuses of the sharks — their

<sup>90</sup> For the formation of the Commission, see *Federationist* 9 November and 13 December, 1912, and *Colonist*, 6 December 1912. Also see Martin Robin, *The Rush For Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972).

<sup>91</sup> For information on Andrew Harper, see Etherbert Olaf Stuart Scholefield, *British Columbia, from the Earliest Times to the Present* (Vancouver: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914), Volume 4, 450-53.

<sup>92</sup> *Federationist*, 13 December 1912.

<sup>93</sup> The BCFL had earlier hammered out its position on agencies at its third annual meeting in mid-January. B. D. Grant of the New Westminster TLC introduced one of several resolutions urging the abolition of employment agencies and the establishment of state-run bureaus in their stead. See *Federationist*, 24 January 1913.

fees were too high, they sent men to non-existent jobs, and they refused to return fees and deposits. However, the loudest criticism raised by unionists was the practice of "fee-splitting." The basic mechanics of fee-splitting were the same throughout North America. In his study of American agencies, Thomas Martinez cites fee-splitting as one of the most commonly found abuses of employment agencies and the key criticism of agencies raised by the U.S. Bureau of Labor in 1912. "Stated simply," writes Martinez, "an employment agent and an employer agree to divide the fee of an applicant, who is kept on the payroll for a limited time. In order to maximize profits, a turnover of employees is accelerated through firing."<sup>94</sup> In B.C. fee-splitting between the agent and camp foremen was presented to the commission by BCFL leaders as a common practice. Wilkinson explained the abuse to Commissioners:

The impression we have [is] that there is an understanding between the employment agent in this city and the foreman on the job. A man pays \$1 or \$1.50 for a job. Then he goes up to the job and it *naturally* follows that if the foreman in charge is sufficiently mean to collaborate with the agent in town, then the agent can hand him a portion of the fees of each man who comes for a job. The result is that there are three lots of men, one going to the job, one on the job and one going away from the job.<sup>95</sup>

According to Wilkinson, all employment agents would "naturally" descend into this "petty roguery." Fee-splitting was unavoidable. McVety claimed that if "there are three employment offices in a row, and two are following pernicious practices, the third one must do as the Romans do in order to get any business."<sup>96</sup> McVety stressed that wasteful and inefficient labour turnover was caused by the game of fee-splitting: "No foreman would change men the way they are changed on various works around this province unless for some consideration other than the mere securing of new help."<sup>97</sup> Even so, neither Wilkinson nor McVety brought concrete evidence of fee-splitting to the Commission. Wilkinson admitted having no proof at all, but maintained that the practice was commonplace. McVety claimed the BCFL sent men undercover to trap a number of foremen, but found nothing. He explained that the victims of fee-splitting never came forward because most were transients and the amount of money involved was so small that most thought it too much trouble to

<sup>94</sup> Tomas Martinez, *The Human Marketplace: An Examination of Private Employment Agencies*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1976), 47-48.

<sup>95</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 3, file 8, 169.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 3, file 9, 331.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

try to retrieve it. "For this reason the employment sharks get away, and every time they get away they are that much more bold."<sup>98</sup>

Accounts of the practice of fee-splitting had acquired mythic proportions all over Canada and the United States. It was often used by labour unionists and progressive reformers to explain high labour turnover. This explanation afforded an uncritical view of the economic system; the social and economic inefficiencies of high turnover and worker transiency were blamed on a small group of shameful schemers, not on the structure of the economy itself. As with so many of the criticisms aimed at the employment business, the charge of fee-splitting served to obscure larger systemic problems.

While the charge of fee-splitting may have been something of a red herring, the threat agencies posed to union organization in the form of strike-breaker recruitment and organization of the unemployed certainly was not. Control over hiring was the issue upon which organized labour's critique of employment agencies turned. Yet even on the issue of strike-breaking, union officials stressed humanitarian concerns rather than deeper organizational fears. McVety related the story of seven "Hungarian" scabs Herbert Hicks sent to the Britannia Mines strike in 1912. The abuse workers took at the hands of scab-organizers like Hicks, McVety claimed, "is one of the most pernicious games in vogue in this country."<sup>99</sup> Cosmopolitan's Harry Welsh, who provided strike-breakers when the economy slowed in the spring of 1913, also took a beating by BCFL officials for his involvement in the Cumberland strike. Welsh sent to Cumberland fifty-seven coal miners from Durham, England, and failed to mention to them that a strike was in progress.<sup>100</sup> Later in September 1913, Welsh also violated a federal law prohibiting a fee of more than a dollar to recent immigrants — he charged a dollar and a half.<sup>101</sup> The combination of bad publicity and an even worse economy drove Welsh out of business in the fall of 1913. Frank Farrington of the United Mine Workers in Nanaimo told of an Edmonton agent who sent nine men out from Alberta to the Cumberland mines without telling them of the strike then in progress. To ensure that the men reached their destination, explained Farrington, the

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>100</sup> See *Labour Gazette*, July 1913, 37 and August 1913, 145. See, as well, John Norris, "The Vancouver Island Coal Miners, 1912-1914: a study of an Organizational Strike," *BC Studies* 45 (1980). Norris points out that the effort to break the strike with strike-breakers was a failure — not even the likes of Welsh were able to recruit enough scabs.

<sup>101</sup> *Labour Gazette*, October 1913, 507.

agent took the men's baggage hostage.<sup>102</sup> These incidents were meant to show the employment agent's contempt for the welfare of scab workers.

The welfare of strike-breakers obscured a deeper concern over the threat employment agencies posed to union organization. The Vancouver Trades and Labor Council had recently opened its magnificent new Labor Temple, and one of its purposes was to control hiring. While employment agents dealt in skilled workers only occasionally, they did it enough to give VTLC officials a sense of the potential havoc that a commercial recruitment system might wreak on union organization. Moreover, agents formed a barrier to organizing unemployed and unskilled migrant workers. McVety, who was also head of the new Labor Temple, explained that without "a place to secure accurate information, that vast army of unemployed casual labor which is impossible to deal with in a group, but which forms a constant menace to existing wage scale and working conditions . . . , drift into saloons and employment sharks, and are systematically defrauded and robbed."<sup>103</sup> The Vancouver Labor Temple, McVety rather sentimentally explained, could better serve the function of an employment bureau than the sharks — and with more gentility:

Take the case of a union carpenter, a stranger and possibly in a different country to where he belonged. On his arrival, he checks whatever hand luggage he may have and leaves his tool box in the possession of the transportation company until he gets located. [At the Labor Temple] his card makes his welcome complete and the secretary or business agent tells him where to locate a decent rooming house, advise him briefly as to local conditions, and introduce him to whatever members may be in the office at the time. His attention is drawn to the room in the basement where his tools can be stored without charge, and where he can file his saws or do the dozen odd jobs required. . . . Meanwhile the agent has located him a job and soon he is ready for work. . . . On wet days, or when out of employment, instead of sitting in a small, cold, dismal office, or filling up on 'squirrel' whiskey, he can go to the Temple and read, play pool or billiards, or indulge in a game of cards for fun. [Finally,] if he is of an observing disposition, he notes the warmth, cleanliness and ventilation, and compares the result of collective effort with the conditions existing in some other of the privately-owned meeting places he has been in during his travels in search of the elusive job.<sup>104</sup>

The real problem with the employment agent, and one never admitted by BCFL officials, was that the shark "organized" the unemployed inside and around his office. In the shark's "den" unemployed men could play

<sup>102</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 2, 208-10.

<sup>103</sup> *Federationist*, 9 November 1912.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

cards (for real money), play pool (for more money), and drink whatever they wished.

The BCFL endorsed a state-run employment system as a compromise between the existing commercial network and McVety's vision of a union-controlled hiring system. Labour leaders who met with the Commission did not agree, however, on whether a loose municipal network or a centralized provincial system was best. Those who identified more progressive social aims in the proposal argued for the provincial employment system. For instance, Wilkinson and McVety argued that a provincially organized system would aid in a more "intelligent" immigration policy, provide government with a better knowledge of labour supply and demand, and help to reduce unemployment-related crime and debauchery.<sup>105</sup> Conversely, D. S. Cameron, vice-president of the New Westminster TLC, and John Notman, of the Nelson TLC, preferred an unconnected series of municipal exchanges. Cameron endorsed Wilkinson's view of a labour exchange to distribute immigrants, but argued that a municipal exchange would be less expensive and more responsive to the individual needs of migrants.<sup>106</sup> John Notman was even more suspicious of a centralized provincial plan. Exchanges should be controlled at the municipal level, he argued. "If it is run through the municipality, any advantage that is taken of a man could be looked into on the spot," whereas "if it is run by the provincial authorities we are in a measure left helpless." In short, a local response meant real union control: "The closer we get to this line of business to regulate it, we consider best."<sup>107</sup>

Udo Sautter has observed that Canadian trade unionists were generally hesitant to support province-wide state labour exchanges. Fear that such a system would reduce union control over hiring — that the state might use the system as an aid to open shop or strike-breaking employers — led the CTLC in 1914 to declare itself "opposed to the establishment of Provincial labour Exchanges."<sup>108</sup> The BCFL was uncertain as well. Notman and Cameron and men perhaps more closely committed to their city labour councils placed more faith in local control. They felt that pressure to increase union control over hiring should be done locally. McVety and Wilkinson, leading members of a province-wide labour organization, supported a provincial solution to the exchange debate. Both men appeared

<sup>105</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 3, file 8, 171.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 1, 153.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 6, file 11, 235.

<sup>108</sup> Udo Sautter, "The Origins of the Employment Service of Canada, 1900-1920," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 6, 1980, 95-96.

downright progressive in their discussions of state agencies: social and economic efficiency married to humanitarian justice could be accomplished only through a centralized, manipulative system. As the BCFL continued to grow in influence, it might exert control over the provincial system. Thus, as with previous labour exchange proposals in 1907 and 1911, those presented to the Commission in 1913 reflected the narrow and varying interests of labour organizations. Still, while labour delegates disagreed on how and at what level to exert power over the exchange system, all believed that a state-run operation would be easy to co-opt. The threat of commercial agencies could be eliminated and, at the same time, union organization enhanced through a malleable state-operated system.

Those progressive social reformers who contacted the Commission on the agency debate reinforced the general views of organized labour, but strongly advocated a national system. Mrs. E. St. John Wileman, a vigorous supporter of a national — if not Imperial — employment system, spoke to the Commission in the spring of 1913. Wileman reiterated the economic and humanitarian objectives of her proposed system, emphasizing that there was “nothing in the nature of charity in the working of the Bureaux”: according to Wileman, the system was intended to improve the economy, not deal with the victims of it.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, one of the benefits of the system would be to separate the “industrious Labourer from the shiftless, drunkard and degenerate.” The latter would be dealt with by existing charities. Also, Wileman clarified how such a system would enhance immigration policy. Information generated through the employment system could be used to check incoming surplus labour, pinpoint needed labour migrations, or specify the kinds of occupations needed in certain areas.

Reverend William Stevenson, Secretary of the Victoria Social Service Commission, recommended the abolition of private employment agencies and the creation of a provincial system as the first, most important step in combatting seasonal and cyclical unemployment. A devotee of William Beveridge and other “scientists” of labour market management, Stevenson urged state action against unemployment for reasons of economic efficiency and humanitarianism: “I make this suggestion [of a state-run employment market] because there is a tremendous amount of labour power being lost. It is a loss of wealth to the country. It is a loss of life and cannot but be degrading to the worker.”<sup>110</sup> To Stevenson’s suggestion of state-run employment bureaus was joined a number of other reforms, including a minimum wage, counter-cyclical and seasonal public works projects and unemploy-

<sup>109</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Incoming Correspondence.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

ment insurance.<sup>111</sup> Stevenson also urged the creation of a provincial "Department of Human Welfare." This new department would operate the provincial labour exchange system, which, in time, would join a national employment network. The reasons he gave for the department's necessity reveal a pre-occupation with social control:

The time is ripe for such a department. . . . There is the alienation of workers from the governing classes as well as from the employers of labour. There is a growing distrust of what is called justice under the present economic conditions. Workingmen in large numbers are losing all faith in the fairness of persons in power when they come to deal with the workers as a class. This is a dangerous condition of things. But the remedy is not far to seek if only we had a department with trained experts in control whose duty it would be to study social conditions and the needs of the people with a view to producing the best results in the community.<sup>112</sup>

To organized labour's detailed humanitarian critique of existing methods of employment, progressives like Stevenson added a sense of urgency. State labour bureaus were necessary, not only to relieve the plight of workingmen and increase economic production, but to fend off possible social upheaval as well.

Very few workers or employers spoke to the Commission on the issue of commercial agencies and state exchanges. All the workers who spoke were delivered there by BCFL officials. Even so, their views on employment agencies differed embarrassingly from the testimony of union leaders. For instance, A. Gill, a striking miner at Britannia Beach, recommended the abolition of agencies because of strike-breaking; but Gill recognized that a state system could never alone drive the more popular private agencies out of business: "My recommendation is to cut out [i.e., outlaw] these employment agents, if you allow him [*sic*] to compete with a civic employment bureau he [*sic*] will get the trade."<sup>113</sup> Hugh McMullen, a lather and shingler, gave testimony that must have floored BCFL officials. McMullen asked that employment agencies be abolished and a state system be run by the police department; the police, then, could "get acquainted with the men and place them in positions where their services would be appreciated more."<sup>114</sup> McMullen admitted never having any trouble with employment agents since he had come to the province. Gavin Buchanan, a railway construction camp cook, delivered bizarre testimony on the topic of fee-

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, Box 3, file 4, 512-16.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 4, file 2, 157.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 5, file 6, 104.

splitting that had guest inquisitor McVety frustrated. Buchanan began by claiming to have solid proof of the practice. However, even under McVety's leading questions, Buchanan and his proof crumbled. He had only heard of fee-splitting from a friend, not in his camp, but at another. He had no idea of who the foreman or the agent was or when the event occurred. In fact, the BCFL was unable to find any victims of fee-splitting, save one, James Lodge. Yet even Lodge's testimony was vague and failed to mention any specifics at all. In the end, workers' testimony to the Commission undermined the BCFL's critique of employment agencies. The absence of working-class comment suggests a gulf between the workers' experience with employment agents and the criticisms raised on their behalf. In fact, there is little evidence that workers were chronically abused by Vancouver's employment agents. Workers were silent, not silenced; the agency problem was never theirs.

The employers or management men interviewed by the Commission were ambivalent about the merits of commercial employment agencies. Sautter notes that eastern Canadian manufacturers in the pre-war period welcomed controls on commercial agencies as a way to reduce waste and redundancy; yet they were hesitant to endorse a state-run system because of their dedication to *laissez-faire* economy. Sautter does point out that business leaders often jettisoned principles for profits — as their fight in Ontario for state control of utilities shows.<sup>115</sup> Too few B.C. employers spoke to the Commission on the subject of employment agencies to allow firm conclusions about their attitudes. However, there was a tendency for small employers and managers to support existing commercial agencies, while large employers condemned them as inefficient and asked Commissioners to consider a provincial system. For instance, E. R. Ennis, manager for a small railroad sub-contractor out of Golden, had no criticisms with the Fernie and Cranbrook agents he had used. Ennis explained that fee-splitting was impossible at his camp or any other sub-contractor's in the area because foremen did not do the hiring.<sup>116</sup> Robert Armstrong, another sub-contractor on bridgework out of Ashcroft, sent to Vancouver frequently for carpenters. He felt commercial agencies always made efforts to get men with the right skills and explain the kind of work they could expect.<sup>117</sup> Arthur Schacht, a Kettle Valley Railway sub-contractor, frankly attributed high labour turnover to his camp's bad food, not the practice of fee-splitting. His experience with employment agents was also positive:

<sup>115</sup> Sautter, 97.

<sup>116</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 6, file 9, 23.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 4, file 3, 291.

“Any time I need a large bunch [of men] I go to the employment office. It’s a sort of centre. . . . From our point of view, we would like to centre the labour market. We would not care who operated it as long as we could get in touch with the men.”<sup>118</sup> None of the small employers or managers interviewed by the Commission had encountered any of the agency abuses outlined by organized labour and progressives. They used agencies because the agencies delivered — because the agencies knew the work and the workers as well as the employer. Fee-splitting, said small employers, did not exist. Labour turnover was the fault of camp conditions or based on the whim of workers.

Larger employers or their representatives told a slightly different story to the Commission. Charles Lindmark, General Superintendent of Dominion Sawmills, was typical. Lindmark claimed employment agencies were wasteful, inefficient, and out of touch with the “real needs” of workers and employers. “The employment agent is very unsatisfactory to deal with,” said Lindmark, “they don’t understand the men themselves. For instance, if they have an order for so many sawyers or stumpers, they put up a notice and everybody out of work is a sawyer or a stumper, and the employment agent doesn’t know.”<sup>119</sup> Lindmark suggested that a government labour exchange would deliver the “right kind of worker” to employers; a provincial system would take the trouble to weed out inefficient workers. William Slavin, Secretary of the Kamloops Board of Trade, felt that a state-run exchange system would help to keep “undesirables” out of the workforce.<sup>120</sup> These employers argued that a better organized, more regular, more efficient and, therefore, more profitable labour market was achievable through a government-operated exchange system. They also intimated that unwanted, possibly hostile workers could be weeded out of industry through such a system. These goals appeared more attractive to large employers. And, as always, those with the closest contact with commercial employment agencies — workers and small employers — had the fewest complaints of them.

The eight employment agents called to appear in front of the Commission felt threatened by the proceedings — which is not surprising, since they were under attack. The Commissioners accused all eight of fee-splitting; all eight denied it. Guest Commissioners from the BCFL accused

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 5, file 5, 92.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 1, 327. For more on Lindmark’s business activities, see Henry J. Boam, *British Columbia: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries and Resources* (London: Sells, 1912), 372-73.

<sup>120</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 1, file 3, 231.

two of the agents of dealing in strike-breakers; the two (Welsh and Hicks) admitted to doing it. The agents reacted to the inquisition by blaming the employer. For instance, the agents argued that the employers' practice of duplicating single orders over a number of agencies was responsible for the problem of non-existent jobs. If duplication was stopped the problem would disappear. "If an employer wanted 25 men and wanted to do business with five employment agents," Welsh offered as an example, "he should give them each five men. . . . The man who goes looking for the job and doesn't get it, it isn't my fault. It's the fault of the employer."<sup>121</sup> Tom Robley, an employment agent in Nelson, blamed employer "dishonesty" for problems surrounding job misrepresentation. The employment agent, Robley clearly saw, "is made the buffer between the employer and the employee."<sup>122</sup> The sharks asked the Commission to control the actions of employers.

The final *Report* of the Royal Commission on Labor strongly condemned the activities of private employment agencies — especially the allegedly chronic practice of fee-splitting — but stopped short of recommending their abolition entirely. In the future, however, the whole business of employment, said the *Report*, should be "taken entirely from the hands of private agencies."<sup>123</sup> In the meantime, they were unfortunately necessary. The *Report* supported the establishment of free municipal labour bureaus in cities over a population of ten thousand, with an eye to bringing these into a provincial, then national, system. Implied in the *Report* was the belief that regulation of private employment agencies until a national system was installed would push the former out of business. After all, such an abusive industry could never survive tight controls. The recommendation of a national system was a victory for the progressives. Seen from their point of view, an efficiently organized regional labour market demanded regulatory structures national in scope. The creation of co-ordinated municipal agencies was the first step in this larger project.

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In fact, employment sharks were driven out of business, but not by tight regulations. Their demise was the result of the economic depression which began, for them, in the spring of 1913. Regulations did have an effect, but

<sup>121</sup> Labor Commission testimony, Volume 6, file 1, 78.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume 6, file 11, 267.

<sup>123</sup> See *British Columbia Sessional Papers* 1914, 4 Geo. 5, M 4-5.

not until after the war when the employment business was curtailed on an international scale. The international labour exchange movement offered a "scientific" alternative to commercial agencies, a language of criticism and an impressive cadre of international experts to carry the message to Britain, the United States, and Canada.<sup>124</sup> Exchange advocates — mostly social reformers, progressive intellectuals, and new government bureaucrats — called for a centrally organized and state-controlled labour market in order to meet three related goals: economic growth through an improved hiring/labour distribution system; prevention of unemployment, under-employment and abusive employment practices; and social harmony through employment control, particularly during wartime. While labour exchange theorists and their followers viewed unemployment as a necessary feature of the capitalist system, the labour exchange was never meant to interfere with industry; rather, the exchange system was a preventative measure which was meant to assist industry and workers, while preserving, to varying degrees, ideals of initiative and personal responsibility. Commercial agencies, North American relics of an unorganized and inefficient world of competitive capitalism, stood in the way of the labour exchange movement and were therefore attacked by American and Canadian reformers after 1910.

While labour exchange theorists and their followers shaped local opinion on commercial agencies by providing a weighty vision of the state alternative, opposition to agencies in Vancouver grew out of more parochial concerns. Organized labour raised the issue of the employment "shark" because of the threat men's agencies posed to union organization. Labour officials, particularly in the new British Columbia Federation of Labor, hoped to end the male employment agent's control over the hiring of labourers, the agent's incursion into the placing of tradesmen, and the actions of a few agents in recruiting strike-breakers. But these deeper organizational concerns were never openly admitted. Instead, labour officials constructed a largely unfounded moral argument against commercial agencies, accusing them of abuses and trickery which owed more to legend than fact. Outside of organized labour there was very little local concern over male employment agencies. A few social reformers took up the exchange movement's "scientific" concern for economic efficiency, human waste, and social control. Some larger employers responded favourably to the labour exchange system's promises of less labour turnover, "quality" control over workers, and streamlined labour distribution. When male

<sup>124</sup> The international labour exchange movement is reviewed in Anderson, 9-26.

workers commented on commercial agencies at all, it was to condemn Asian agencies for their successful placing of “undesirables”; when workers collectively demanded a labour exchange, it was meant to remove Asians from the workforce. In 1913, when workers and employers should have expressed their concern over commercial agencies, there was silence. The agency problem was never theirs.

The “truth” about Vancouver’s employment agencies is that they were small, marginal, delicate businesses which operated in an intensely competitive environment only during periods of labour shortages, and whose operators emerged from and often returned to the same social background as their working clients. The employment business was not lucrative, but because it demanded no special skills and few start-up costs, the business attracted those hoping to escape wage labour. Most eventually failed. In the meantime, chronic labour shortages, competition, and geographic proximity forced agents to cultivate a reasonable relationship with workers, the success of which was demonstrated to civic labour exchange officials on a number of occasions. When employment agents did step beyond limits acceptable to workers, retribution was quick — few agents could survive a bad reputation for long. Fewer agents could survive an economic depression like that in 1913, and fewer still could survive the regulatory assaults against agencies in the post-war period.

The existence of petty employment agencies reflects the chaos of small-scale competitive capitalism before the war. Chaos was a double-edged sword for workers. It might mean poor conditions, as the absence of regulations contributed to enormous material and psychological hardships for working and unemployed people. But it could also mean opportunities in good times, as the absence of controls offered workers a degree of power and freedom of action that would have been difficult in a more regulated environment. Small businesses, like employment agencies, bar rooms, cafés, poolhalls, second-hand stores, and boarding-houses, were manifestations of this unpredictable but sometimes friendly side of petty, competitive capitalism. One wonders if workers and small business owners shared more with each other than either did with the newly emerging large-scale corporate structures of the new century. Perhaps their small scale and contact with each other profoundly separated the workers and small business owners from large-scale corporate and bureaucratic organizations. It may be that a shared experience based on tangible day-to-day relations between mutually dependent groups, whose power and influence was limited to a locality, would have allowed bridges between the worker and small business of the sort that could never have been built by corporations and the state.

Local influence and small-scale entities were, however, doomed by corporate capitalism and the state structures raised to regulate and serve its growth. The fight against Vancouver's employment agents and the attempts to construct an organized labour market after World War I was one modest step in that process.