

“GIRL STRIKERS” AND THE 1918 VANCOUVER STEAM LAUNDRIES DISPUTE

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A CAMPAIGN TO RAISE the minimum wage in British Columbia spearheaded by the BC Federation of Labour’s first female president, Irene Lanzinger, and affecting 63 percent of women wage earners, concluded successfully in 2018.¹ A century ago women performing low-paid work fought a similar battle for a living wage. They were limited to gendered work, navigating inferior working conditions, sexual harassment, and health and safety concerns. Women comprised 13 percent of the Canadian labour force compared to nearly 50 percent in 2015, typically working until marriage, their husband the sole wage-earner.² Organizing into trade unions was challenging, and white, male-dominated leaders were unreliable in their support. Women employed as telephone operators, retail clerks, bookbinders, tailors, and domestic workers in Vancouver signed union cards in the early 1900s, but their locals were not easily sustained. Such was the case of a laundry workers’ union formed in the city in 1902 and dissolved three years later.³ Still women persisted. When a labour shortage caused by the First World War occurred between 1916 to 1920, union membership soared. Laundry workers in cities across North America were among those to take a stand.⁴

¹ “The Fight for \$15” campaign by organized labour groups continues in many North American jurisdictions, the BC minimum wage increasing incrementally to fifteen dollars an hour by 2021. See *Vancouver Sun*, 15 August 2017.

² Census of Canada, Table D86-106, Workforce by occupation and sex, 1911. www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-workforce-canada.

³ Star Rosenthal, “Union Maids: Organized Working Women in Vancouver 1900–1915,” *BC Studies* 41 (Spring 1979): 36–55.

⁴ Craig Heron, ed. *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada: 1917–1925*, edited by Craig Heron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998). Laundry workers’ union activities are documented in Geoffrey Ewen, “The International Unions and the Workers’ Revolt in Quebec, 1914–1925” (PhD diss., York University, 1998), 154; Linda Kealey, *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour, and the Left in Canada, 1890–1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998), 231; Paula Kelly, “Looking for Mrs. Armstrong,” in *The Beaver* (June–July 2002), 20–26; Irene Ledesma, “Texas Newspapers and Chicana Workers’ Activism, 1919–1974,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 26, no. 23 (Autumn 1995): 309–31.

In Vancouver, a total of three hundred workers at seven steam laundries – most of them female – joined a union over the summer of 1918. In early September, they went on strike for four months to improve wages and conditions within an occupation that was hidden, hard, and dangerous. Characterized in newspapers as “girl strikers,” most were over eighteen years old, working out of necessity. Their task of cleaning clothes, considered women’s work, was devalued, performed in households without pay, or delegated to low-waged domestic servants. Unpaid laundry work was assigned to females in institutions of confinement, including Aboriginal students attending residential schools across Canada.⁵

Systemic racism provides another dimension for analyzing the dispute. Owners of steam laundries exclusively hired white people, typically British, but also those from other European backgrounds, some workers anglicizing their names.⁶ Chinese residents, many bachelors and sojourners, comprised 8 percent of the city’s population. By 1912, fifty-three Chinese-run hand laundries existed in neighbourhoods around the city, their businesses resented by competing steam laundry employers.⁷ During the dispute, the prejudicial treatment of Chinese residents escalated and hand laundry owners and workers were targeted. The groundwork for systemic racism towards immigrant visible minorities in British Columbia was instigated when the British colonial government seized Aboriginal territories without consent, in Vancouver displacing the people of the Musqueam, Tsleil Waututh, and Squamish Nations.⁸ These intersectional issues of race, class, and gender are considered here as they relate to the dispute.

The strike is narrated through the lens of four female participants, their accounts interweaving over the four-month period of the dispute. Helena Gutteridge and Ellen Goode were selected based on access to a valuable biography and taped oral history interviews. Matilda Cruickshank and Josephine Wilson, both single, appeared consistently for several years in Vancouver directories along with the name of their employer. (Married

⁵ *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*. vol. 1: *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015): 329–52.

⁶ George Baker, a laundry worker who died from the Spanish flu during the strike, was born in Greece, according to his death certificate. Mr. E. Levy, Jewish, was a dryer and was elected to the Laundry Workers Union (LWU) executive.

⁷ Paul Yee, *Chinese Businesses in Vancouver, 1886–1914* (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983). See also Joan Wang, “Race, Gender, and Laundry Workers: The Roles of Chinese Laundrymen and American Women in the US, 1850–1950,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 58–99.

⁸ Renisa Mawani, *Colonial Proximities: Cross-Racial Encounters and Judicial Truths in BC, 1871–1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

women's names were not listed until the 1930s.) The union participation of these two women was confirmed through newspaper sources, also a criterion for selection. Helena, Ellen, Matilda, and Josephine would be forever linked by an experience transformative for all the women involved.

THE ORGANIZING DRIVE, SUMMER 1918

Matilda Cruickshank

Girls and women dressed in white blouses, long skirts, and hats illuminate a photograph taken in the early summer of 1918.⁹ Posing under boughs of cedar trees, they comprise ninety employees at Cascade Dominion Laundry. Alongside them are thirty male employees, a few in military uniform, and several employees' children. On this weekday in June, these Vancouver residents were enjoying an annual employer-sponsored picnic at Seaside Park on the Sunshine Coast, where they had arrived by steamship.

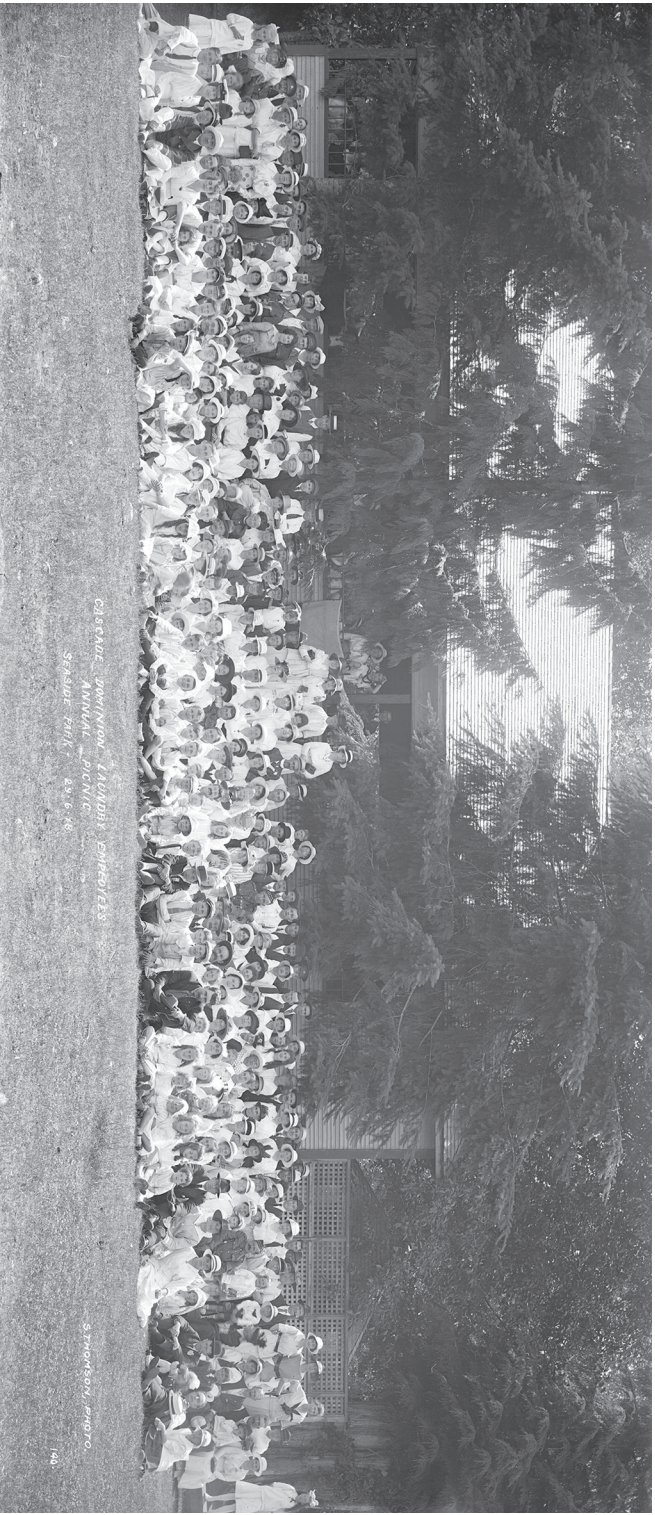
Owners of Vancouver's steam laundries promised customers white linen cleaned by white employees, as this photograph attests. Whiteness, equated with cleanliness and purity, also implied racial purity. The intermingling of races, whether at work, in residential neighbourhoods, or through intermarriage, threatened the colonial vision of "a white man's province."¹⁰ Employees' names were not captured with their images when the staff photograph found its way into the city archives many years later, but Matilda Cruickshank, aged forty-three, was surely among the group. She emigrated from Scotland with her married sister's family in 1911 and first appears in the Vancouver directory in 1917, living independently in the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood.¹¹ When news began spreading in the spring of 1918 that employees were joining a union – not just at Cascade but at six other city laundries – Matilda was listening.

⁹ Cascade Dominion Laundry Employees Annual Picnic Seaside Park, 29 June 1918, Stuart Thomson Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives, 99-5201.

¹⁰ Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 199. The prejudicial connection to racial purity and cleanliness is also explored in Ruth Frager, "Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Eaton Strikes of 1912 and 1934," in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, 189-228 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992). See also Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1989).

¹¹ Vancouver directory, 1917. See also Canadian Passenger Lists, 1865-1935 (ancestry.com). Cruickshank arrived in Quebec from Glasgow on 14 May 1911 with her sister, Mrs. Annie Pollack, and family.

Figure 1. Cascade Dominion Laundry Employees Annual Picnic Seaside Park, 29 June 1918. *Source:* Stuart Thomson fonds, City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 99-5201.



On that day, picnickers shared food and participated in foot races, croquet, and tug of war. The outing provided a stark contrast to the employees' usual work routine, labouring six days a week within the confines of a stifling plant. Workers commuted along streetcar lines to the laundry, situated by False Creek's industrial shoreline, a few residential houses nearby. Sorting, bleaching, pressing, and folding laundry was performed by an assembly line of women as young as fifteen. Employees worked eight-hour days and often longer, without overtime pay. Before the Factory Act was amended, women worked night shifts too. Male washers and wringers performed physically demanding work in the washing room located in the basement. Men also worked for a wage and commission as delivery wagon drivers, picking up and delivering laundry to city residents. Drivers made additional stops at hospitals, hotels, rooming houses, ships in port, and soldiers' barracks.¹²

It must have been unsettling for Cascade employees – Matilda included – when they learned a male driver was fired in April. He had joined the union and attended meetings organized by the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC) downtown at the Labor Temple. A driver employed for thirteen years at Pioneer Dominion Steam Laundry, the city's largest industrial laundry, was also dismissed for union activity a week later.¹³ Thomas Kirk, Vancouver alderman, and Sandford J. Crowe, federal member of Parliament for Vancouver Centre, had major shares in Cascade and Pioneer Laundries and were watchful as labour tensions escalated. To what extent employees at the picnic talked among themselves about the firings is unknown. What is certain is Matilda supported the union, as later events proved.

Ellen Goode

Ellen Goode was seventeen years old when she began working the mangles at Pioneer Laundry. She was among the 20 percent of BC laundry workers, ages fifteen to eighteen, earning a lower "training" wage.¹⁴ Three years later, Ellen was still placing sheets through the rollers of steam-heated machines when Victor Midgely, secretary of the VTLC,

¹² Women's Labour History Collection: Ellen Barber (née Goode) interview with Sara Diamond, 1979, British Columbia Archives (hereafter BCA), AAAB4001, track 2. See also Arwen Mohun, *Steam Laundries: Gender, Technology, and Work in the United States and Great Britain, 1880–1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

¹³ *BC Federationist*, 12 April 1918.

¹⁴ British Columbia, Department of Labour, 'Report to the Minimum Wage Board of British Columbia,' in British Columbia Sessional Papers, 1919, vol. 1, H65; (hereafter MWB, 1919).



Figure 2. Victoria Steam Laundry Co., with Wagons and Drivers in Front, ca. early 1900s. Item E-07970 courtesy of Royal BC Museum Archives.

talked to her about joining a union. “I relayed [the conversation] to my father, who advised me to go ahead,” Ellen recalled in an interview in 1979.¹⁵

Originally from England, Ellen’s family had arrived to Vancouver in 1910. “My mother had a very serious operation in 1911 and my father was only making two dollars for a ten-hour day for the city of Vancouver,” she recounted. “He was a carpenter with full kit ... My father’s ambition was for me to go to university but with money conditions at home I didn’t want to go – for which I’m sorry ... So I got a job at the Pioneer Laundry – It was hot in those days,” Ellen recalled of the workplace. “We didn’t wear the loose clothing that we do now. We wore undergarments which was always starched – and the starched uniform.”¹⁶

Working in steam laundries could also be dangerous. According to an annual federal report, seventeen accidents occurred in BC steam laundries in 1917, more than half among female employees.¹⁷ Ellen remembered an accident involving another female co-worker. She had

¹⁵ Barber, 1979, track 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Annual Report of the Workmen’s Compensation Board of the Province of British Columbia, Victoria, BC: 1918.

placed a shirt through the mangle and "she's turning around and was looking at somebody and her hand went in and it burned all the flesh right off." An emergency bell rang and Ellen ran up a flight of stairs to help. "Of course the girl had fainted and that took the pressure off of it. When I got in there the superintendent was behind me and he said we'll take her downstairs and he was going to dress it. What he did was right – but was wrong. He should have put a piece of gauze over top and then cotton batting but instead he put on Carin oil which was treated for burns, then stuck cotton batting on top of it and bound it up in a bath towel." Ellen accompanied the superintendent and the injured worker in a laundry truck to a doctor's office. She held a chloroform mask over her co-worker's face while the doctor used tweezers to pull out the cotton batting. According to Ellen, the doctor was angry, asking the superintendent, "Where's your first aid man?"¹⁸

"We worked ten hours a day, sometimes sixty hours a week for the large sum of seven dollars a week," Ellen recalled. "We had these conditions up until 1918 when we decided to form a union."¹⁹ Ellen's decision to sign a union card would lead to a lifelong engagement in politics.

Josephine Wilson

Among the large wave of immigrants arriving in Vancouver in the prewar years was Josephine Wilson, an Irish-Presbyterian from Dublin.²⁰ The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Vancouver had been offering assistance to independent female travellers such as Josephine since 1897. The unique Vancouver Women's Building was established downtown in 1911 and contained a YWCA office, a daycare centre, and several women's social and political groups. The typical female club member was married, of British heritage, and middle class.²¹ A year after Josephine arrived, a coalition of women's groups, churches, and social reformers met with police and stirred up concern about the city's prostitution and other illicit activities. The plight of low-paid women who could be tempted to supplement their incomes in less "reputable"

¹⁸ Barber, 1979, track 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, track 1.

²⁰ Wilson's origins provided in marriage certificate for James H. Nelson and Josephine E. Wilson, 26 May 1926, BCA, 1926-09-307995.

²¹ Gillian Weiss, "The Brightest Women of Our Land: Vancouver Clubswomen: 1919–1928," in *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia*, ed. Barbara Latham and Roberta Pazdro (Victoria: Camosun College, 1984), 206.

work was discussed. Middle-class women were inclined to organize charitable services rather than empower working-class women.²²

Josephine settled in the city and found work at Pioneer Laundry. The following year she was listed in the directory as a “starcher” and in 1912 was employed at BC Laundry. When the union drive started, Josephine was thirty-one and had been working for Star Laundry for three years, commuting to work from a rental suite on the city’s east side.²³ She had aspirations beyond laundry work. Some of her dreams would eventually unfold, but in the summer of 1918, after eight years of working in three Vancouver steam laundries, Josephine saw the value of joining a union.

Helena Gutteridge

By mid-July more than 160 laundry workers joined the union. The VTLC executive decided a female organizer was needed. Helena Gutteridge, aged thirty-eight, and the lone woman on the executive for the past five years, got the job.²⁴ Her commitment to improving the lives of working-class women originated with her own background growing up in London, England. Helena left home when she was thirteen years old, eventually entering the tailor’s trade as a cutter and taking courses to further her education. She also became schooled in England’s trade union and suffrage movements.²⁵

When Helena arrived in Vancouver in 1911, she found employment in the textile trade, a member of the Journeymen Tailors’ Union. She was willing to work with middle-class women, yet found herself dealing with conflicting loyalties. As a result, she established the BC Women’s Suffrage League at the Labor Temple, where she mobilized working-class women, holding meetings of up to one hundred participants.²⁶ Her advocacy for white working-class women led her to appear before the Board of Licence Commissioners at City Hall in 1915 to lobby for a “whites-only” hiring policy at hotels, a prejudicial stance Helena would

²² Daniel Francis, *Red Light Neon* (Vancouver Subway Books, 2006), 32–36. See also Carolyn Strange, *Toronto’s Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

²³ Vancouver directories, 1910 to 1918.

²⁴ Vancouver Trade and Labour Council (VTLC) Executive Minute Book, 18 July 1918, available in the Vancouver and District Labour Council Fonds, RBSC-ARC-1574, UBC Library Rare Books and Special Collections, Vancouver, BC.

²⁵ Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

reverse four years later.²⁷ When white women gained the provincial vote in British Columbia in 1917, Helena continued her union work, helping organize a strike at McLeod's Cafe after two union waitresses were fired.

In the summer of 1918, the city's laundry workers offered another opportunity for Helena to raise the status of women. By 26 July, two hundred laundry workers had signed union cards.²⁸ Employees at Canadian and Excelsior laundries joined, as did those across False Creek at IXL and Peerless Laundries. Helena established meetings at the Labor Temple, where union members formulated their demands. Victor Midgely, of the VTLC executive and former driver at Pioneer Laundry, assisted.²⁹

Laundry workers drew up a "master" wage scale with fifty-one job classifications. Men still made more than women and certain jobs were still gender-specific.³⁰ A "female" minimum wage of twelve dollars per week was a key demand, with an eleven-dollar training wage for females ages fifteen to eighteen. Helena guided members' discussion towards the broader goal of a legislated minimum wage for female laundry employees across the province.

The adoption of the charter of the Laundry Workers Union (LWU), Local 37, an affiliate of the VTLC, was courageously passed at a meeting in early August, in the wake of anti-union violence. The VTLC had called a twenty-four-hour general strike to protest the shooting of union organizer and draft resister Ginger Goodwin by a special constable on 2 August. Helena was present when about three hundred war veterans entered the Labor Temple as the general strike got under way, angry at what they perceived to be the VTLC's anti-war stance. They destroyed property and pushed Midgely on to a second-storey ledge; his life was spared when Frances Foxcroft, the switchboard receptionist, intervened. Helena managed to avoid the men's wrath, with three hundred dollars in laundry workers' dues in her possession.

Helena accompanied Herbert Shuttleworth, an employee at Pioneer Laundry and president of the LWU, to visit each of the seven laundry owners in an attempt to negotiate.³¹ On 3 September, the Laundrymen's Association, representing steam laundry employers, issued an ultimatum: union workers had five days to withdraw from the union or quit. Helena charged employers with intimidation and refusal to negotiate. The

²⁷ Ibid, 113.

²⁸ "Laundry Workers Make Progress," *BC Federationist*, 26 July 1918, 1.

²⁹ Vancouver directory, 1915.

³⁰ "Laundry Strike Still Continues," *BC Federationist*, 27 September 1918, 1.

³¹ "Laundry Workers," *BC Federationist*, 30 August 1918, 1; "Laundry Workers Try to Intimidate Employees," *BC Federationist*, 6 September 1918, 1.

owners stayed resolute. On 8 September, LWU members voted to strike. "The girls will hold daily meetings during the strike and will establish a picket system," Helena informed the press.³²

ON STRIKE, SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER 1918

Matilda Cruickshank

Matilda walked off the job at Cascade Laundry, leaving a highly divisive workplace. Her co-workers Mrs. Reid and Mrs. Mass opposed the union, visiting the *Daily Province* on the first day of the dispute and showing a reporter a petition signed by fifty content employees. "We feel that by going out on strike we would only be helping increase Chinese labor," one of the women said.³³ Steam laundry owners released a press statement, claiming experienced female laundry workers received up to sixteen dollars per week and were paid overtime.³⁴

Despite these assertions, Vancouver's newspapers reported all laundries were behind picket lines, with one plant shut down and six others operating at limited capacity. When vehicles containing employees crossed the line, "girl strikers" were "hurling jeers and catcalls" at them.³⁵ On the third day of the strike, steam engineers, who were organized in a separate union, walked out in sympathy.³⁶ The *Daily World* noted that the "Chinamen" were busy "as customers turned for relief to Chinese laundries."³⁷ A delegation of union workers from Cascade, angry at anti-union co-workers, visited the *Daily Province*, informing a reporter that their wages were as low as \$7.50. Employees were docked \$2.50 a day if they didn't work a full week. There are "278 dissatisfied employees compared to 50 satisfied," one of the anonymous strikers said.³⁸

In a letter to the editor of the *Daily Province*, Mrs. Katherine C. Campbell, vice-president of the LWU, pointed out the union campaign was already benefiting workers who received a 10 percent raise and overtime pay after the organizing drive began. "The manager asked me personally how we were going to get the work out in an 8 hour day," she wrote, "and I replied 'by getting more help.'" In response to the Cascade

³² "Laundry Workers Decide to Strike," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 9 September 1918, 16.

³³ "Laundry Owners Issue Statement," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 10 September 1918, 5.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Laundry Workers on Strike for Recognition and Minimum Wage," *BC Federationist*, 13 September 1918, 1.

³⁷ "Strike Ties Up Laundries," *Vancouver Daily World*, 10 September 1918, 15.

³⁸ "Laundry Ladies Issue Statement," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 12 September 1918, 16.

anti-union petition, she commented: "I may say that they have only the striking employees to thank for those conditions and they will be as speedily taken away if the unions were crushed."³⁹

As the picket line at Cascade became volatile, the plant manager appealed to the police chief for protection. When a driver of a hotel vehicle attempted to cross the line to deliver soiled linen, strikers advised him not to return. A group of female strikers climbed aboard another customer's automobile and urged him to turn around, which he did, taking the "girls" with him for a "joyride" downtown.⁴⁰ This is "all in the game," city solicitor Edward Jones told the press – as long as there was no violence or threats on the picket lines. Jones did point out that the law was broken when a firefighter who crossed the picket line was pursued by strikers to a streetcar, where they told the conductor to "throw the scab off."⁴¹

By 22 October, the *Daily Province* reported laundries were "running with small forces" of about 5 to 25 percent. At Cascade, however, 70 percent of employees were crossing picket lines to work.⁴² In mid-November, the employees on strike at Cascade received a letter from their manager. Edith Hills, a tailor, submitted her copy to the *BC Federationist*. "I understand that you desire to return to work," the letter stated. "If such is the case, phone me at once and I will arrange to see that you can get in and out of the plant safely." This appeal was "a strategic failure," the *BC Federationist* asserted.⁴³ The labour newspaper also reported that strikers were "constantly patrolling" the laundries. Cascade was operating at "full capacity," however, though without drivers.⁴⁴

On 9 December, five hundred strikers and sympathizers gathered in front of Cascade at 5:00 p.m., jeering at the police for protecting the workers and throwing sticks and stones at strikebreakers as they left the building.⁴⁵ The following day another large group gathered at Pioneer Laundry at 5:00 p.m., but the manager had dismissed the employees an hour earlier. He praised a police inspector and six constables arriving at

³⁹ "Laundry Workers on Strike for Recognition and Minimum Wage," *BC Federationist*, 13 September 1918, 1.

⁴⁰ "Chief of Police to Take Hand in Laundry Strike," *Vancouver Daily World*, 19 September 1918, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "Laundry Running With Small Forces," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 22 October 1918, 16.

⁴³ "Laundry Workers Strike is Still in Effect," *BC Federationist*, 15 November 1918, 1.

⁴⁴ "Laundry Workers Sign Up Another Laundry," *BC Federationist*, 8 November 1918, 1.

⁴⁵ "Organized Crowd of 500 Attacks Laundry Workers," *Vancouver Sun*, 10 December 1918, 1.

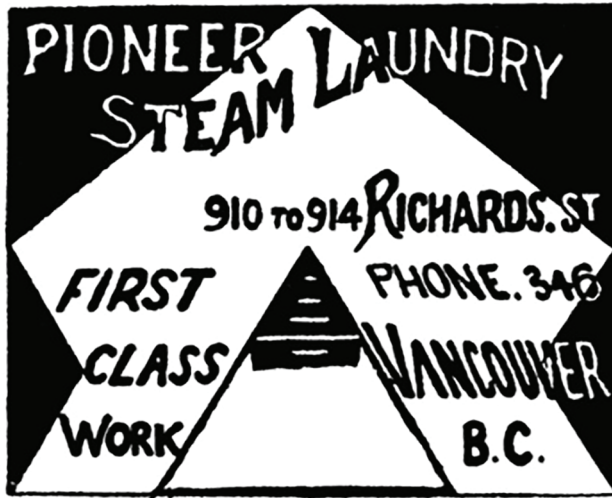


Figure 3. Pioneer Steam Laundry, *Henderson's BC Gazetteer and Directory, 1900-1901*, p. 643.

the scene and told a reporter, “The trouble is I refuse to settle with the closed shop.”⁴⁶

Matilda joined other union employees returning to work at Cascade when the strike ended in December. Workplace harmony would be shattered for a long time as strikebreakers worked alongside former picketers, the union failing to take hold.

Ellen Goode

“My mother used to say she’d come down and see me in jail,” Ellen recounted about her four months walking the picket line at Pioneer Laundry and other plants on strike.⁴⁷ She remembered the picket line at Star Laundry, including a “hammer” incident involving Mrs. Morrow and a male striker.⁴⁸ Strikebreakers were brought through the window of a house on Helmcken Street beside Star Laundry, she also recalled, where “there was maybe a foot between the two buildings. And I remember once the owner of it [Mrs. Morrow] got up on the roof and she took the hose up there and used to play it on the strikers, the picketers. She

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Labour Movement/Howie Smith Collection, Ellen Barber (née Goode) interview with Howie Smith, 1977, BCA, AAAB4849, track 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

used to play the hose down on them ... Oh yes, she was dead against us."⁴⁹ Further:

At the Peerless Laundry we had one little French Canadian fella and he was a longshoreman and they used to bring the private cars up and get the girls [strikebreakers] out and rush off with them, you see, and this day he ripped all the tires with his longshoreman's hook.

But I'll tell you what we [female strikers] did do. We used to get on the streetcar. We used to follow them [strikebreakers] to the streetcar and then we would – some would go up the front, some would get in the middle, and some would get down there and we'd say, "Gee what a peculiar smell on here." And somebody else would say, "Well, what can you expect when you got a bunch of dirty skunks on here from the Peerless Laundry." This is what we used to do. Mention the laundry, you see, and of course then the people would be sympathetic.⁵⁰

A man who owned an empty lot by Cascade Laundry gave longshoremen permission to build a shed with a stove, Ellen recalled, to keep the strikers warm as the winter rains arrived:

I had come from the Peerless [Laundry] over on 4th Avenue – come across the bridge and down the steps and along to the Cascade and when I got there some of the girls was shouting. And where this policeman came from I don't know, but he said to me ... "I thought I told you not to do any more hollering?" And I said, "I didn't do any hollering." And I got away from him and I got into this hut and he couldn't do nothing. I was on private property. And he kept me there. He went off duty at four o'clock – but he stayed. He wanted me to put my foot off there [outside the shed] and the moment I put my foot off there he'd nab me, you see? And the only way I could do this was to get word to the longshoremen. And one of the boys came up in his car and backed in to the door. I got in and we shot off, you see. But he kept me there for six hours.⁵¹

"The majority of police didn't see you as long as you kept to yourself as you should do," Ellen concluded. "You know what I mean? We never bothered anybody."⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Fortunately, the prediction delivered by Ellen's mother didn't come to pass; however, several female strikers were fined for minor picket-related charges such as unlawful assembly. Only one male striker would serve time in prison.

Josephine Wilson

Josephine was on strike at Star Laundry, the scene of the first incident in the dispute. W.J. Todd, a striker and returned soldier, was walking the picket line 16 September when he was assaulted with a hammer by the owner's wife, Mrs. Morrow. Todd required two stitches. The union laid charges. Despite Mrs. Morrow's affiliation with the Pioneer Political Equality League, a group advancing women's rights, she had positioned herself – with a vengeance – against the laundry workers.⁵³

The court trial revealed Mr. Morrow closed a door off the lane by the laundry. Strikers re-opened the door. This was “enjoyed by both sides for a time,” while Mr. Morrow “passed out a few jokes.” One of the female laundry workers testified: “Mr. Morrow said that three of us girls had asked him to marry us – or one of us – and we did not like that at all. And he said he could prove it. And it was not true. And it made us angry.” Other female laundry workers confirmed her testimony.⁵⁴ These women could have been using veiled language to express their objection to being sexually harassed by the employer, a behaviour exhibited not only on the picket line but also quite possibly in previous workplace incidents.⁵⁵

Todd defended the female strikers against Morrow's “jokes,” and this resulted in a fist fight. Mrs. Morrow, armed with a claw hammer, came in to the alley and attacked Todd. “Yes, I hit him,” Mrs. Morrow told the court. “I intended to hit him on the back and I did hit him. With all my might too.” The judge considered that “all parties were more or less to blame” and acquitted Mrs. Morrow of the charge.⁵⁶

Josephine quit her job at Star Laundry, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Morrow in her wake. She was hired at Excelsior Laundry when the union achieved a contract agreement with a closed shop at the end of October. “This is

⁵³ Howard, *Struggle for Social Justice*, 121.

⁵⁴ *Vancouver Daily Province*, 19 September 1918.

⁵⁵ Joan Sangster, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” *Women's History Review* (December 2006): 5–8. Sangster interviewed five women involved in a textile strike in Peterborough, Ontario, in 1937, observing that the topic of sexual harassment was either met with silence or labelled differently.

⁵⁶ “Developed Into A Public Fight,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, 19 September 1918, 7. See also “Arrests Follow Laundry Fracas,” *Vancouver Daily World*, 19 September 1918, 14; and “Laundry Workers Still on Strike,” *BC Federationist*, 20 September 1918, 1, 8.



Figure 4. Young Helena Gutteridge, ca. 1911. *Source:* City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 371-2693.

the first real fruits [*sic*] of the strike,” the *BC Federationist* wrote about the settlement.⁵⁷

Helena Gutteridge

Helena sent a letter to MP Crowe and Alderman Kirk asking why, as major shareholders at Cascade and Pioneer Laundries, they refused to negotiate with the union.⁵⁸ By October, a tentative agreement achieved

⁵⁷ “Laundry Workers Are Still Going Strong,” *BC Federationist*, 1 November 1918, 1.

⁵⁸ “Laundry Workers on Strike for Recognition and Minimum Wage,” *BC Federationist*, 13 September 1918, 1.

through mediation with representatives of the Ministry of Labour offered a starting wage of twelve dollars for female workers and twenty-two dollars for males, with a forty-six-hour workweek. "The only difference between the workers and the owners is the closed shop principle," J.D. McNiven, deputy minister of labour, stated. A union contract containing a closed shop, as opposed to a modified or open shop, meant no employee could opt out of the union – a basic "union recognition" extremely difficult to achieve in any first contract. Steam laundry owners were only willing to reinstate striking employees from "time to time depending on business conditions" and "without discrimination except in the cases of employees who have been convicted of an offence."⁵⁹

"In view of our large membership," Helena responded, "we feel that we are justified in demanding a closed shop in order to protect ourselves against any possibility of discrimination."⁶⁰ Employers believed that it was Helena, not the strikers, who was stubbornly holding out for the closed shop. McNiven attended an LWU meeting and asked strikers if this was true. According to the *BC Federationist*, there was "such prolonged cheering and clapping of hands that there could not have been left a shadow of a doubt in the mind of Mr. McNiven that they [the strikers] knew what they wanted and were determined to get it."⁶¹

The steam laundry owners ran advertisements in the newspapers encouraging customers to cross picket lines to drop off laundry. They stated that all conditions of the union had been complied with, except the closed shop "owing to a large number of our employees having no desire to join the union." "Ideal working conditions and sanitary surroundings" were promised to prospective employees, along with an eight-hour work day. The owners would "consider" hiring former employees and new help "whether experienced, or not."⁶²

A motion was passed by the VTLC executive asking unions to contribute towards strike pay. By the end of October, the fund stood at \$6,619.85.⁶³ Strikers without dependants received seven dollars a week, and those with dependants received fifteen dollars.⁶⁴ The executive discussed calling a general strike in support of laundry workers in early October and received a "mixed" response from the general membership, with Helena among the opposition. "It would not tie up the laundries

⁵⁹ "Closed Shop Only Bar to Settlement in Laundry Strike," *Vancouver Sun*, 8 October 1918, 2.

⁶⁰ "Deadlock Has Been Reached," *Vancouver Daily World*, 9 October 1918, 13.

⁶¹ "Laundry Workers Are Standing Firm," *BC Federationist*, 11 October 1918, 1.

⁶² "Steam Laundries to Re-Open" *Vancouver Daily Province*, 9 October 1918, 10.

⁶³ "Laundry Workers Are Still Going Strong," *BC Federationist*, 1 November 1918, 1.

⁶⁴ "In Support of Laundry Workers," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 18 October 1918, 15.

any tighter than they were at the present time," she believed, telling the *Daily World* a general strike might injure their cause and force strikers to return to work. As long as workers received financial assistance, Helena said, they would continue the strike. Some LWU members voiced their support for a general strike in a letter that Helena read to the VTLC executive. Finally, the executive decided against the strategy but passed a motion recommending union members be assessed one dollar a month to help strikers.⁶⁵

The union continued to pressure Alderman Kirk. A group of strikers attended a meeting at city council, wearing suffragette-style sashes bearing the statement: "They are trying to break our union."⁶⁶ Another special picket stood outside St. John's Church while Mr. and Mrs. Kirk attended Sunday service. Mrs. Kirk – among the dozens of female shareholders financially sustaining the Vancouver Women's Building – became "very indignant" towards the union and later retaliated by dismissing the sister of one of the female pickets hired to do her sewing.⁶⁷

Helena never received a response to her letter from Alderman Kirk or MP Crowe. Fourteen years later, she would encounter Alderman Kirk again on an equal footing, when she was elected to Vancouver's city council.

MORE ACCOUNTS FROM THE STRIKE

Matilda Cruickshank

Matilda volunteered to testify on behalf of the LWU before the Minimum Wage Board, established to set female rates in selected occupations for the first time in British Columbia. On the board with McNiven were Mr. T.A. Mathews and Mrs. Helen MacGregory MacGill. MacGill, co-founder and president of the Vancouver Women's Building, was sympathetic to working women though union members would challenge her at public hearings, especially in regard to the training wage. Also giving supportive input was Mrs. Mary Ellen Smith, British Columbia's first female member of the Legislative Assembly. The board was impressed by the many testimonies

⁶⁵ VTLC Minutes, 4 October and 14 October 1918. See also "Laundry Workers are Opposed to General Strike," *Vancouver Sun*, 18 October 1918, 11; "No Strikes In Sympathy," *Vancouver Daily World*, 18 October 1918, 20; "In Support of Laundry Workers," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 18 October 1918, 15; . "Laundry Workers Stand Firm," *BC Federationist*, 18 October 1918, 1.

⁶⁶ "Laundry Strike Still in Force," *BC Federationist*, 22 November 1918, 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* See list of shareholders and donors in *Vancouver Women's Building Diary*, various years, City of Vancouver Archives.

over the course of their public meetings, commenting in a report about the “deep interest displayed by the women’s organizations in the welfare of their sisters.”⁶⁸ By 5 December, the board had formulated a minimum wage for females in the retail industry at \$12.75.⁶⁹

Next on the board’s agenda were laundry workers’ wages. Picket lines were still operating when Matilda, and two other LWU strikers, Mrs. Thexton and Mrs. Deerman, travelled to Victoria in mid-December to testify, accompanied by Helena. Laundry owners Mrs. Courtenay and Mrs. Morrow were also present. Miss Annie Hartney, who had family members working in steam laundries in Vancouver, told the board “the question of insurance and sick benefits is an important one and laundry employees should earn sufficient wages to keep these up.” “Miss Cruickshank,” representing “laundry girls” in Vancouver, “was instructed to ask for nothing less than \$14 a week.”⁷⁰

The board ruled that female employees over eighteen engaged in “laundry, cleaning and dyeing industries” would earn a minimum wage of \$13.50. The ruling gave laundry workers \$1.50 more than striking workers proposed – and fifty cents less than Matilda’s demand.

Ellen Goode

Ellen remembered that laundry owners blamed striking employees when the Spanish flu began spreading in the city, finally dissipating in the New Year and leaving nine hundred Vancouver residents dead, four strikers at IXL Laundry among them.⁷¹ Ellen recounted:

A full-page advertisement came out in the papers that the flu epidemic was not easing up owing to the laundry workers being on strike with dirty linen. So the union ran an ad stating that we would man any laundry, free of wages, twenty-four hours a day for people with the flu in their home – which we received no response for. We wanted to man

⁶⁸ British Columbia, Department of Labour, “Report to the Minimum Wage Board of British Columbia,” in British Columbia, no. 6062, 28 November 1918, H60. See also “Minimum Wage for Women is Theme,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, 22 November 1918, 11, for MLA Smith’s quote.

⁶⁹ “\$12.75 Fixed as Minimum Wage for Women Over 18,” *Vancouver Sun*, 5 December 1918, 8.

⁷⁰ “\$13.50 Per Week is Laundry Workers Minimum,” *BC Federationist*, 20 December 1918, 1, 12. The MWB hearing was also covered by the Vancouver newspapers. See for instance “Minimum Wage For Lady Laundry Workers Fixed at \$13.50 A Week,” *Vancouver Sun*, 19 December 1918, 3.

⁷¹ “Laundry Workers Sign Up Another Laundry,” *BC Federationist*, 8 November 1918, 1. The labour newspaper published the names of LWU members who died. Mountain View cemetery records indicate date of death and age. The four workers are Miss Josephine Tielens, aged 19, died 2 November; Miss Margaret Roxburgh, aged 19, died 25 October; George Baker, aged 34, died 31 October. Nick Pervie is not listed in the cemetery records.

the general hospital which was working ten hours a day. But there was no response to it.⁷²

Ellen also commented: "You'd get on the streetcar and people they'd say – they'd know you were a picketer because they'd see you get on the corner and they'd say, 'No wonder so many people are dying when the laundry girls are out and refuse to work, you know.' But that's what they [the employer] did with us. But it didn't work."⁷³ She continued: "I did have that paper for years until it began to crumble and I had to throw it away. I kept it as a souvenir."⁷⁴

Josephine Wilson

Josephine volunteered at an LWU fundraiser dance and was at her post when the doors to the Dominion Hall opened at 8:00 p.m. on 20 September 1918. A Friday night in downtown Vancouver, spirits were high among the strikers after two weeks on picket lines. More than 350 couples danced the evening away, and a second orchestra was called in at midnight. Many attendees played whist, another money-maker for the strikers' fund. The night's financial success would lead the LWU to organize two more dances during the dispute.

Parm Pettipiece, editor of the *BC Federationist*, had promoted the event, encouraging readers to support laundry workers and "trip the light fantastic." He appeared that night, jotting down names of volunteers for an article. Pettipiece made note of Mr. Geofray, a driver at IXL Laundry, taking tickets at the door – twenty-five cents for ladies and fifty cents for gents. Pettipiece also gathered the names of volunteers in the cloak room and by the whist tables. Arriving to the beverage room, he asked six female volunteers for their names, including "Miss (Josephine) Wilson."⁷⁵

Helena Gutteridge

Helena declared "no desertions" as the weather turned cold and picketing continued. "This says much about the solidarity of the girls and of the men."⁷⁶ Helena also noted that some girls were getting as much in strike pay as they were earning in the laundry. She made a plea to

⁷² Barber interview, 1979, track 1. For the LWU's statement regarding volunteers, see "Laundries Started Working Again Today," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 21 October 1918, 10.

⁷³ Barber interview, 1979, track 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ "Laundry Strike Still Continues," *BC Federationist*, 27 September 1918, 1.

⁷⁶ "No Settlement in the Laundry Strike," *BC Federationist*, 25 October 1918, 1.

strikebreakers, stating: “those inside can still join the union.”⁷⁷ At the end of October, Helena resigned as a paid organizer but continued her involvement. VTLC president Ernest Winch and Midgely joined the strike committee soon after to aid in a resolution.⁷⁸

A second victory was achieved in November when Canadian Laundry signed a contract with a closed shop.⁷⁹ An LWU committee was struck to explore the idea of a union-run laundry service specializing in clean towels. This was inspired by Seattle’s union, whose representatives visited Vancouver during the strike.⁸⁰ Amid the union activity, an armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 in Europe, ending four years of brutal war. It should be noted that many activists in the city’s labour movement had been strenuously opposed to Canada’s participation in the First World War.

As hundreds of Vancouver residents gathered to celebrate the armistice on the downtown streets, the dispute wore on. Employers continued to threaten strikers, one owner telling a reporter that proprietors throughout the city would meet “to look at the feasibility of re-opening their laundries employing Chinese workers.” He continued: “The business is all going to the Chinese laundries anyway.” And: “We have the big interests here which must be protected.”⁸¹

At a VTLC executive meeting, Helena reported a laundry owner attempted to hire a Japanese worker but failed and that no Chinese workers were crossing the line “so far.” Despite societal prejudice, many white working-class people patronized Chinese hand laundries because they were affordable.⁸² Instances of unions forming alliances across racial lines also occurred. For instance, a white organizer had signed ninety Chinese workers employed at hand laundries in 1906, but a union did not take hold.⁸³ More often racism prevailed, sometimes intersecting with prejudicial attitudes towards working-class women, as illustrated in the enactment of the white women’s labour law. Initially passed in Saskatchewan in 1912, the law made it illegal for Chinese employers to hire white women. This law was later adopted in three other provinces,

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ VTLC Minutes, 1 November 1918, Fonds RBSC-ARC-1574 – Vancouver and District Labour Council fonds, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections; and “Laundry Workers Are Still Going Strong,” *BC Federationist*, 1 November 1918, 1.

⁷⁹ “Laundry Workers Are Still Going Strong,” *BC Federationist*, 1 November 1918, 1.

⁸⁰ “Laundry Workers to Start Towel Service,” *BC Federationist*, 7 December 1918, 1. For more on Seattle laundry workers’ history, see www.66bellstreet.com.

⁸¹ “Laundries May Open with Chinese Labour,” *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 1918, 3.

⁸² *Opening Doors in Vancouver’s East End and Strathcona*, interviews compiled and edited by Daphne Marlatt and Carole Itter (Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 1979), 41; and Barber interview, 1979, track 2.

⁸³ Yee, *Chinese Businesses in Vancouver, 1886–1914*.

including British Columbia in 1919, thus further stigmatizing Chinese residents. And there are documented instances indicating that white working women also resented this law.⁸⁴

The negative rhetoric surrounding Chinese laundries during this dispute may have contributed to criminal acts. According to a short article on the back page of the *Daily World*, on Halloween boys committed pranks, with the "only serious damage" being done to Wing Chung, a laundryman. He had to pay fifty dollars to repair his wagon after the boys pushed it over an embankment on Vernon Drive. In late November, Wokee, a laundry driver, was held up by eight young men after they stopped his vehicle on the Georgia Viaduct and robbed him of cash and cheques totalling \$410.⁸⁵

Chinese residents were in the public spotlight again on 7 October when city police charged twelve laundry workers for working on Sundays. This was of concern to white business owners who frequently lobbied for regulatory bylaws related to Chinese businesses. Barred from practising law, members of the Chinese community nevertheless defended themselves either by employing "brokers" who had legal knowledge and were bilingual or by hiring sympathetic lawyers as needed.⁸⁶

Laundry owners also employed the tools of the state against the strikers. On 24 September, when the manager at Peerless Laundry asked a constable to obtain the name of a man accused of cutting tires on an automobile during a demonstration, the officer did not comply to his satisfaction. The manager complained to the police board, and the constable was consequently charged with neglect of duty and fined his pay for the duration of his suspension.⁸⁷

Helena frequently attended the courts, paying fines and making bail payments for strikers arrested on picket-related charges. The only striker to face serious charges was William Geofray, who was alleged to have caused bodily harm to a female strikebreaker. A jury found him guilty at a court trial in December. The union's lawyer asked the judge for leniency, stating that Geofray was married and had two young children; however, on 12 December, he was sentenced to eighteen months of hard

⁸⁴ Constance Backhouse, "The White Women's Labour Laws: Anti-Chinese Racism in Early Twentieth Century Canada," *Law and History Review* 14, no. 2 (1996): 346.

⁸⁵ "Little Trouble on Halloween," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 1 November 1918, 28; and "Chinaman Held Up," *Vancouver Daily World*, 26 November 1918, 7.

⁸⁶ "Laundries May Open with Chinese Labour," *Vancouver Sun*, 12 October 1918, 3; and MWB report, 1919, H62. Also see Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada's Exclusion Era, 1885-1945*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁸⁷ "Constable Fined By Police Board," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 3 October 1918, 7.

labour.⁸⁸ The VTLC executive pursued further legal advice and was told an appeal was not feasible.⁸⁹

Financial costs were a likely factor for the VTLC executive's decision to end the strike at the end of December, though no full explanation is on record. Helena remained committed to assisting laundry workers as the new year unfolded.

AFTER THE STRIKE, 1919 AND BEYOND

Matilda Cruickshank

Matilda remained at Cascade, her total service at the laundry totalling more than fifteen years. Four years after the strike ended, she moved to a rental suite in a house on Walden Street, still in the Mount Pleasant neighbourhood. Her landlady, Eliza Mickle, was a tailor originally from Prince Edward Island. The two women became loyal friends. By the time Matilda left Cascade in 1932, the steam laundry industry was in decline. Matilda worked two more years at Family Laundry, retiring at age fifty-nine.

A year later, Matilda died of cancer. Eliza ensured she was given a proper burial at Mountain View Cemetery, only a few blocks from her home. Matilda's gravestone reads "Faithful unto death," and below, "Erected by E. Mickle."⁹⁰ Eliza continued to live on Walden Street until she died in 1957, aged ninety. She was interred alongside her friend, Matilda.⁹¹

Ellen Goode

Ellen and other union members did not abandon William Geofray, providing financial assistance for his family while he was incarcerated.⁹² After his release from prison, Geofray visited the Labor Temple,

⁸⁸ "Pelted With Eggs And Then Kicked," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 11 December 1918, 21; "Laundry Girl Must Have Fallen Against a Fence," *Vancouver Daily World*, 11 December 18, 3; "Laundry Worker Stands Convicted," *Vancouver Sun*, 12 December 1918, 12; "Laundry Worker Found Guilty," *BC Federationist*, 13 December 1918, 1.

⁸⁹ VTLC minutes, 19 December 1918, 157, Fonds RBSC-ARC-1574 – Vancouver and District Labour Council fonds, UBC Rare Books and Special Collections.

⁹⁰ Vancouver directories, 1919-1934; and death certificate for Matilda Cruickshank, 7 February 1935, BCA, 1935-09-497884. See also Vancouver Mountain View online cemetery records at <https://covapp.vancouver.ca/BurialIndex/>.

⁹¹ Death Certificate for Eliza Delaney Meikle, 8 November 1957, BCA, 57-09-010880.

⁹² Barber interview, 1977, track 1.

receiving a warm reception from union members, as reported in the *BC Federationist*.⁹³

Ellen worked at the unionized Excelsior Laundry after the strike and was active on the LWU executive. When Jack Little, LWU president, was unable to attend a convention, Ellen went in his place. She remembers Midgely encouraging her as she nervously entered a room of two hundred male delegates. "I walked up to the front and I sat down and he announced I was a new delegate from the laundry workers." Midgely gave "quite a speech" about the laundry workers, Ellen remembered. "I just got up and said 'thank you' and I bowed. And they clapped and then they started, 'speech, speech,' and I thought, 'oh dear,' but I managed to get through it all right."⁹⁴

Ellen continued living with her parents on Wall Street, located along the Burrard Inlet shoreline, with a clear view of the working port. She left Excelsior Laundry in 1939 and found employment at the Canadian Pacific Railway repair depot. Ellen was forty-five when she married John Barber, a forestry worker and first-aid attendant in logging camps.⁹⁵ The couple moved to Port Moody. Ellen continued her involvement with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and later with the New Democratic Party, eventually becoming an honorary life member. Ellen was eighty-five years old when she died in 1983, predeceased by her husband and leaving two daughters, six grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.⁹⁶

Josephine Wilson

Josephine worked eight years at Excelsior Laundry and was a member of the LWU. She used her savings to purchase a four-room bungalow on Union Street in Burnaby, a few blocks from a streetcar line on East Hastings Street. Josephine quit Excelsior in 1926, aged thirty-nine, and married James Nelson, an Anglo-Irish immigrant and longshoreman.⁹⁷

The couple left the city that same year, possibly living in one or more towns along the coast. By 1932 their names appear in the Port Alberni directory and voters' list. Over the next ten years, Nelson worked as

⁹³ "Laundry Unit Elect Officers," *BC Federationist*, 16 January 1920, 1. Geofray is listed as a carpenter in the Vancouver directory in 1920.

⁹⁴ Barber interview, 1977, track 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1979, track 3.

⁹⁶ Obituary, Ellen Elizabeth Barber, *Vancouver Sun*, 27 May 1984.

⁹⁷ Marriage certificate for James H. Nelson and Josephine E. Wilson, 26 May 1926, BCA, 1926-09-307995, .

a longshoreman and (later) as a fisherman. In 1942, the couple moved for the final time to Gibsons Landing, population 620, where Nelson continued working as a fisherman off the waters of the Sunshine Coast. Josephine lived two years in the picturesque village before dying of cancer in 1944, aged fifty-six.⁹⁸ Six years later, her husband died, as reported in the *Coastal News*: “With a feeling of sorrow, we announce the death of one of our old-time fishermen, in the person of Jimmy Nelson. Long a familiar figure hereabouts, he was taken ill and confined to Pender Harbour hospital.”⁹⁹ Nelson was buried in Seaview Cemetery, in a plot adjacent to Josephine.¹⁰⁰

Helena Gutteridge

Helena ensured that the eighty female strikers and twenty men who were blacklisted after the strike, their employer refusing to rehire them, were given financial assistance until they found work, making an urgent appeal to union members for donations. By February, “some 35 girls” were still looking for work, as reported in the *BC Federationist*. A month later, only a few were unemployed, and the LWU organized a fundraiser dance to assist them.¹⁰¹

Helena and LWU members kept busy on other fronts. LWU members were angry about the Minimum Wage Board’s ruling on the training wage and asserted they hadn’t been properly consulted by the VTLC executive. The LWU executive sent a letter of protest to the board, stating that the “low scale of pay” for laundry girls under eighteen, at eight dollars a week, “practically re-established the inadequate wage existing before the strike and ... [would] lead to girls over the age of 18 being eliminated from the industry.”¹⁰² However, the board was unwilling to move on this issue.

A tragic accident occurred on 2 May at Peerless Laundry, one of the five laundries failing to unionize. Helena and other LWU members took notice. A boiler connected to the mangles exploded, and boiling water gushed out. Mrs. Lily Phillips, aged thirty-one, and Marguerite Cawley, aged eighteen, died later in hospital from burns, and five other female workers were badly scalded. The inquest revealed that, several weeks previously, a steam leak had been noticed in the head of the mangle. On

⁹⁸ Death certificate, Josephine Evelyn Mary Nelson, 30 April 1944, BCA, 1944-09-641567.

⁹⁹ “Death Claims James Nelson,” *Coastal News*, 8 May 1950, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Seaview Cemetery burial records, Sunshine Coast Archives and Museum.

¹⁰¹ “Laundry Workers and the Minimum Wage,” *BC Federationist*, 14 March 1919, 1.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

the Saturday of the explosion, the mangle had finally worn out. No one was held liable, the coroner's jury simply ruling: "the engineer should be censured for operating machinery knowing it to be defective."¹⁰³

Helena was part of an LWU committee formed to further investigate the accident. She observed that the Factory Act and other legislation was "totally disregarded" by laundry owners. According to an LWU member: "only a short time ago a mangle at another laundry had burst, fortunately at a time when the workers were at lunch."¹⁰⁴

Helena's next union effort was organizing forestry workers. She stayed on the VTLC executive until 1921, when she married and moved to the Fraser Valley. After the marriage ended in divorce, Helena moved back to Vancouver and continued her involvement with the CCF. The first woman elected to city council in 1937, she advocated effectively for social housing, sparring with her former nemesis, Alderman Kirk, who was still on council. Helena was residing in the city's downtown West End neighbourhood when she died in 1960, aged eighty-one.¹⁰⁵ A plaque commemorating her extensive social justice work was erected at Vancouver City Hall in 2017.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

Women struck for a living wage, a demand still relevant a century later. A United Nations Human Rights report in 2015 underscored economic inequalities between men and women in Canada, concerned with the high level of the pay gap and its disproportionate effect on low-income women, racialized women, and Indigenous women.¹⁰⁷ The "training" wage, an exploitative two-tiered wage system protested by the LWU in 1918, was reintroduced by British Columbia's Liberal government in 2001 and, despite labour groups' opposition, was in effect for ten years. Unpaid overtime, a key grievance in the laundry strike, continues to trigger organizing drives, including among female-dominated bank employees in British Columbia who joined the independent, feminist Service, Office and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC) in the 1970s.

¹⁰³ "Explosion Kills Two Workers Last Saturday," *BC Federationist*, 9 May 1919, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Howard, *Struggle for Social Justice*.

¹⁰⁶ "Women and Labour Unite: Helena Gutteridge's Enduring Legacy," *Vancouver Courier*, 20 April 2017. Available on line at - <https://www.vancourier.com/news/women-and-labour-unite-helena-gutteridge-s-enduring-legacy-1.16275595>

¹⁰⁷ United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, "Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Canada," 2015, as quoted at the Canadian Women's Foundation website: canadianwomen.org/the-facts/the-wage-gap/.



Figure 5. Women were still folding sheets at industrial laundries in the 1940s, as this photo at Nelson's laundry in Vancouver attests, though when this photograph was taken in 1943, work in this sector was in decline. *Source:* City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 1184-728.

More recently, employees at two of Canada's five major banks launched a class action suit to claim unpaid overtime wages.¹⁰⁸ Women in steam laundries also experienced unsafe working conditions, in some instances these were life-threatening and frequently there were no consequences for employers. The lives of Josephine and Matilda were possibly shortened because of their long work days among steam, dyes, and chemicals. Occupational health and safety awareness has progressed since then, though ensuring employees' well-being requires vigilant oversight by organizations representing their interests. Generations ago, a woman subjected to sexual harassment or assault quit her job, kept silent, or expressed her experience indirectly, usually with no repercussion for the perpetrator. Despite educational campaigns and legal reforms in recent decades, predatory behaviour continues, as do the difficulties victims experience in breaking their silence and being believed, as is evidenced by the formation of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements.

¹⁰⁸ Bank Book Collective, *An Account to Settle: The Story of the United Bank Workers (SORWUC)* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1979). See also "Judge approves \$20.6-million settlement in Scotiabank overtime suit" *Globe and Mail*, 4 March 2016, available on line at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/judge-approves-206-million-settlement-in-scotiabank-overtime-suit/article29029762/>; and "Overtime Class Actions Dealt A Blow," *National Post*, 18 June 2009, available on line at <http://www.nationalpost.com/overtime+class+actions+dealt+blow/1709703/story.html>

Most industrial steam laundries closed their doors by the late 1950s, displacing employees across North America as washing machines became affordable for middle- and working-class consumers. Technological change occurs at an even greater speed today, and employees in a wide range of occupational groups confront precarious work, defined as temporary, as insecure, and as having few benefits. Protecting workers' interests through unions, engaging in the democratic process of regulating laws, and forming coalitions across the social divide are some ways of meeting these challenges. Ricardo Tranjan, a senior researcher at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, an independent, non-partisan research group, studies precarious work. He observes: "We don't need any exotic solution. What we need is to look back at our own history to see what we did to turn precarious factory jobs into good jobs."¹⁰⁹ Tranjan credits government regulations and union organizing for making a difference.

When laundry workers took the risk necessary to form a union in 1918, many were criminalized, scapegoated, and/or fired as a result. The sacrifices and hardships female workers experienced translated into small but tangible economic, personal, and social gains. They established unions with a closed shop at two of the seven disputed steam laundries, and the BC government instigated a female minimum wage. All laundry employees in the city experienced improvements for a time, under threat of unionization. Union meetings, picket lines, and dances gave female workers an opportunity to engage in collective action, to broaden their worldview, and to form alliances. Friendships between women were strengthened, and this was especially meaningful for those who lived outside heterosexual marriage for a portion or all of their adult lives.¹¹⁰ Helena Gutteridge, Eliza Meike, and Edith Hill, tailors in a skilled, unionized trade, gave valuable support to laundry workers. In turn, the LWU organized a fundraising dance for female telephone workers when they went on strike in 1919. Matilda and others were empowered when they provided influential testimony before the Minimum Wage Board. A few women associated with suffrage groups, such as Helen Gregory McGill and Mary Ellen Smith, also played a supportive role as advocates for a female minimum wage.

¹⁰⁹ See "More Than 1 In 5 Canadian Professionals Have Precarious Jobs: Study," *Huffington Post*, August 20, 2018, available online at http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/08/20/precarious-work-professionals-canada_a_23505831/.

¹¹⁰ Tierl Thompson, ed., *Dear Girl: The Diaries and Letters of Two Working Women, 1897–1917* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1987), 14–15. In the introduction, the editor reflects on varying degrees of intimacy in relationships between women during this period.

Women on the picket lines defied the public perception that they were “just girls.” Lindsay McMaster’s study of the media’s depiction of wage-earning women in early western Canada included the laundry workers’ dispute. She suggests that the diminishing representation of wage-earning women as “girlish” workers “likely influenced the culture at large, including the organized labour movement, the middle class feminist movement, even early labour historians.”¹¹¹

Trade union men were effective allies, giving financial support during the strike and attending fundraising dances. The longshoremen were especially active, contributing moral and practical support on picket lines. It should be noted that gendered laundry work did not pose a threat, nor did male unionists fear the “dilution of labour” should women step into “men’s jobs” at lower pay. Still, given a VTLC executive historically dominated by skilled tradesmen with a poor record of organizing women and visible minorities, its organizational and financial support represented a significant shift. Despite threats by employers, no Chinese or Japanese workers crossed picket lines during the dispute, indicating cooperation could also exist within a racially diverse working class.¹¹²

The steam laundry owners took full advantage of police, courts, and government in their attempt to keep their businesses open during the strike, thus undermining the union and creating a divisive, potentially violent environment. Owners also pressured the government to enforce laws detrimental to their Chinese business rivals, yet they violated the Factory Act to their own advantage, as Helena cited laundries with underage workers, extra long shifts, and unsafe conditions. In an effort to turn public sympathy against strikers, employers insinuated that their withdrawal of laundry services had led to increased cases of the Spanish flu. This accusation, which the union successfully fought against, echoed the scapegoating tactic directed at Chinese hand-laundry owners, who were frequently accused of having unsanitary premises and blamed for the spread of disease.¹¹³ Mrs. Morrow, Mrs. Courtney, and Mrs. Kirk, wives of the laundry owners, also undermined the women on strike, providing examples of how the suffrage campaign failed to unify women across class lines.

The discriminatory hiring at steam laundries and the targeting of Chinese residents during the laundry dispute contributed to the

¹¹¹ Lindsay McMaster, *Representations of Wage-Earning Women* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008).

¹¹² Gillian Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the Oriental Problem,” *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1988): 24–51. Creese cites an example of racial solidarity in the 1917 and 1919 strikes by the Shingle Workers Union, three-quarters of whose members were Chinese.

¹¹³ “Laundry Owners Issue Statement,” *Vancouver Daily Province*, 10 September 1918, 5.

climate of racism pervading the province.¹¹⁴ A formal apology to the Chinese Canadian community delivered by Vancouver's mayor Gregor Robertson in 2018 acknowledged the systemic racism directed against Chinese residents, from the city's origins in 1886 to 1949, when Chinese Canadians gained full voting rights. A portion of the statement reads: "Many of our elected officials including mayors and councillors used the legal power of the City to enact and expand laws targeting Chinese residents. Through Council motions and through the everyday effects of bylaws and licences and legalized racism, the Chinese community of Vancouver suffered the awful consequences of lawful discrimination."¹¹⁵ The goal of Canadians to achieve decolonization and equality continues.

The experiences of Helena, Matilda, Josephine, and Ellen indicate that the strike was a transformative event for many. Although cautious in some of her political views, Helena's support of laundry workers left its egalitarian mark; by 1919, she had adopted the Socialist Party position of supporting all workers, white and Asian, and she later broadened her activism to include participation in civic politics. Matilda benefited from workplace improvements, led an independent life, and made important friendships. Josephine volunteered at a fundraising dance and was possibly active in other ways while employed at a unionized laundry; with her savings, she purchased a house. In the 1970s, Ellen, who was active in the union movement for many years, shared her memories of work for oral labour and feminist history projects. The laundry workers' strike was a central event in her recollections, suggesting that the dispute was pivotal in many other strikers' lives as women experienced the potential of their collective power.

¹¹⁴ Stephanie Weber, "Moral Panic and Sexuality Discourse: The Oppression of Chinese Male Immigrants in Canada, 1900–1950," *Mount Royal Undergraduate Humanities Review* 3 (2015): 48–62.

¹¹⁵ The full apology is available on-line at <https://vancouver.ca/files/cov/r8-112-06%20chinese-apology-media-english.pdf>.