"WE WERE A SOCIAL MOVEMENT AS WELL":

The Canadian Farmworkers Union in British Columbia, 1979–1983

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During the first national convention of the Canadian Farmworkers Union (CFU) in March 1981, South Asian farmworkers from across Stó:lō territory – known by its settler names, "the Lower Mainland" and "the Fraser Valley," where most of the CFU organizing activity, aside from a small amount of organizing on the lands of the Syilx (Kelowna) and, later, the lands of the Mississaugas and Haudenasaunee peoples (Toronto), occurred – gathered in New Westminster to determine the future of their young and financially fragile union. Having scraped by on donations for the first year of its existence, the CFU could not implement its significant social agenda without financial support from the BC Federation of Labour (BCFed) and the larger Canadian labour movement.[1] After a lengthy discussion, the delegates and participants settled on three options: formally join with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the dominant labour body in Canada; affiliate with the smaller Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU), a labour organization with a democratic, nationalist, and progressive agenda; or remain independent, like the United Farmworkers' of America (UFA) led by Cesar Chavez. Even though many workers leaned towards affiliation with the CLC, some delegates were skeptical of such a large labour organization, claiming that the CLC was "too conservative" and "out of touch with the worker."[2] The CFU decided to postpone its decision until the next national convention scheduled for April 1982; but, in light of the CFU's dire financial situation, and despite its ideological similarities to the CCU, the CFU affiliated with

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1 I use the phrase "Canadian labour movement" to describe the institutions, organizations, and unions that officially represent workers.

2 Minutes recorded by Charan Gill during First National Convention, 5, 27 March 1981, file 7, box 15, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

the CLC and the BC Fed in September 1981.[3] In the words of Sarwan Boal, secretary-treasurer for the CFU, the CFU was not "a traditional trade union – we were a social movement as well."[4]

To meet the unique needs of its members, who were primarily racialized immigrants from South Asia, the CFU executive saw itself as an organization that operated both within and beyond the spheres of traditional labour organizing. Along with its agenda aimed at improving labour conditions for workers on farms and in greenhouses, the CFU pushed a social agenda to improve the social lives of its members. This social agenda included providing English language classes and operating a farmworkers service centre in New Westminster. Furthermore, the CFU put on plays and engaged in boycotts of products from farms with whom it was in contract negotiations. However, the CFU's financial security was shaky at the best of times and non-existent whenever the BC labour movement was focused on other pressing matters, such as Premier Bill Bennett's budget bill, which sparked the Solidarity! movement during the summer of 1983. Using CFU-published materials, newspaper articles, and an interview with the inaugural CFU president Raj Chouhan, I demonstrate that the story of the CFU's fight for more than just improved labour conditions illuminates the innovative ways unorganized, racialized farmworkers adapted unionism to meet the needs of its members during a period of growing austerity in British Columbia. By forming an official union, the CFU needed to make alliances that it might not otherwise have made to stay active and relevant.

Finding the balance between existing as a "traditional trade union" and as a "social movement" would complicate the existence of the CFU in British Columbia. As a trade union, the CFU was successful in improving labour conditions, despite significant opposition from farmers and the Social Credit government led by Bill Bennett. In its early years of organizing and activism, the CFU set up picket lines in front of farms to help workers secure withheld pay, to help reinstate workers who were wrongfully dismissed, and to improve general working conditions in the fields and greenhouses. However, the CFU's successes in the fields and greenhouses of the Lower Mainland were impeded by its struggles to maintain its social agenda.

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[3] Mike Kramer to BC Fed affiliates, 21 January 1982, file 4, box 13, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

[4] Murray Bush and the Canadian Farmworkers Union, *Zindabad! BC Farmworkers' Fight for Rights* (Surrey, BC: Canadian Farmworkers Union, 1995), chap. 9, http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/chap9.htm. "Zindabad" roughly translates to "long live," used as part of a slogan. See also Bruce McLean, "Berry Pickers Mount Protest at Langley Farm," *Province,* 29 June 1980, A4.

The nature of the CFU's legacy has implications for how researchers have written about it. Recently, after the bulk of this article had been written, the BC Labour Heritage Centre – in partnership with the South Asian Studies Institute at the University of the Fraser Valley – published *Union Zindabad! South Asian Canadian Labour History in British Columbia*, a comprehensive overview of South Asian labour history in this province. Its chapter on the CFU highlights many of the successes from the union's early years as a grassroots organization, from securing contracts and increasing pay to improving working conditions on farms – things that the labour movement had not succeeded in doing. This account is important in demonstrating the ability of unorganized workers to organize themselves, but, as a triumphalist narrative, it masks the precariousness of the CFU's ability to survive without the help of other labour organizations.[5] Even though *Union Zindabad!* demonstrates the BC Fed's desire to work with the CFU on social issues like racism, it steers clear – except for a brief mention at the end of chapter 8 – of the CFU's financial reliance on the wider labour movement.[6] This article aims to contextualize the CFU's organizing successes both inside and outside the workplace by exploring the relationships it developed with other labour organizations, like the CLC.

Before *Union Zindabad!*, most scholarship that emphasizes traditional labour organizing has granted the CFU barely more than a paragraph, but the few graduate theses that emphasize social justice have been fruitful.[7] Carol Jhappan, Tyler Blackman, and, most important, Sadhu Binning all highlight the CFU as a "social movement" responding to various forms of exploitation and hazardous work.[8] However, these authors differ in

[5] Donna Sacuta, Bailey Garden, and Anushay Malik, "The Canadian Farmworkers Union" and "New Labour Alliances," in *Union Zindabad! South Asian Canadian Labour History in British Columbia*, 79–100 (Abbotsford, BC: The South Asian Studies Institute, University of the Fraser Valley, 2022).

[6] Sacuta, Garden, and Malik, "New Labour Alliances," 98.

[7] Rod Mickleburgh counters this trend with a few pages dedicated to the CFU in his most recent work on the BC labour movement. Some sources mention the CFU only once, such as Shirley A. McDonald and Bob Barnetson's edited volume *Farm Workers in Western Canada: Injustices and Activism* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016), 42, which contains one interview with Darlene Dunlop, a Farmworkers Union of Alberta (FUA) organizer. See Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour, 2018), 211–13.

[8] Carol R. Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation: East Indians and the Rise of the Canadian Farmworkers Union in BC" (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983), 3–4; Tyler A. Blackman, "The Canadian Farmworkers Union: Social Movements and Labour Arrangements" (BA hons. thesis, University of the Fraser Valley, 2016), 12; and Sadhu Binning, "The Canadian Farmworkers Union: A Case Study in Social Movements (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1982), 4.

their approaches. Jhappan, a political scientist, argues that the CFU's victories were nominal and had little bearing on changing the social and economic relationships between farmers and farmworkers.[9] She reasons that the CFU's success was limited because the BC government made changes to the labour code in 1980 to specifically pre-empt any further mobilization on its part.[10] Blackman, a geographer, approaches the CFU's organizing strategy from a geographic perspective, tracing the union's organizing strategy as a social movement across a given space.[11] However, because of his position within the CFU, Binning's thesis is the most important of the three.

Binning's thesis is unique in that he, being an active organizer and playwright for the CFU, provides an insider account of the union.[12] While critical of the sustainability of the union, Binning outlines the CFU's impact as a social movement and suggests that its limited success should not overshadow it as a "rallying point for the larger [issues rather] than for immediate trade union gains."[13] Rather than focusing on the CFU's limited labour wins, Binning frames its presence in the BC labour movement as a victory in itself. The significance of Binning's conclusion should not be lost on researchers since it was published just as some of the CFU's locals were being decertified.

The CFU's ideology stemmed from two related places. First, the CFU's organizers were active members of the Indian People's Association in North America (IPANA), formed in 1975 to promote social justice causes and to oppose imperialism around the world. IPANA was fundamentally a left-wing social organization that saw the support of the Canadian working class as necessary to overcoming the larger issue of racism. IPANA Vancouver members, such as Harinder Mahil and Charan Gill, would later join forces with Raj Chouhan to organize the CFU's predecessor, the Farmworkers Organizing Committee (FWOC), in late 1978.[14]

The tactics (demonstrations, meetings, and the production of educational material) and orientation (claiming to have won "the support of

[9] Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 3–4.

[10] Jhappan, 4. These changes "provided coverage for maternity protection, payment of wages and juvenile employment." Labour contractors were also required to be licensed. See Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 33.

[11] Blackman, "Canadian Farmworkers Union," 13.

[12] Sadhu Binning co-authored with Sukhwant Hundal the plays *Picket Line* and *A Crop of Poison*, which were performed at various events around the Lower Mainland. See Sacuta, Garden, and Malik, "Canadian Farmworkers Union" and "New Labour Alliances," 89, 98.

[13] Binning, "Canadian Farmworkers Union," 4.

[14] Sacuta, Garden, and Malik, "Canadian Farmworkers Union," 81. Some IPANA records can be found at the Simon Fraser University (hereafter SFU) Archives, Hari Sharma Fonds, 1949–2010, Indian People's Association in North America files, 1973–1995, F251-3-3, https://atom.archives.sfu.ca/f-251-3-3.

every progressive force and working class organization in North America, and of all Third World peoples' organizations") of IPANA has similarities to the larger New Left movement of the 1960s and 1970s.[15] Historian Craig Heron characterizes the New Left as a different style of politics, one that uses direct action – what he terms "participatory democracy" – instead of electoral politics.[16] This "participatory democracy" meant public demonstrations, marches, and other forms of what Heron terms "extraparliamentary confrontation" that engaged with social issues more directly than did the ballot box.[17] Even though demonstrations were not new forms of protest, the issues and concerns of the New Left that were reminiscent of the Industrial Workers of the World from the early twentieth century marked a different path from that of their old left counterparts. While capital elites hailed mass production and the role of technology in a growing consumerist society, the New Left grew from a counterculture that identified this so-called progress as the origin of society's woes.[18] Further, the New Left sought for renewed militancy and radicalism within the contemporary labour movement, something that it felt was missing. This counterculture was particularly appealing to young workers and activists who were disenchanted by some of the bureaucratic ways of the old left.[19]

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[15] IPANA, "Fascist Attack by CPC(ML) Disrupts IPANA Demonstration," 2, SFU Archives, Hari Sharma Fonds, Indian People's Association in North America files, 1973–1995, F-251-3-1-0-2.

[16] Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History,* 3rd ed. (Toronto: James Lorimer, 2012), 105.

[17] Heron, 105.

[18] Gordon Hak, *The Left in British Columbia: A History of Struggle* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2013), 137.

[19] The New Left manifested in many forms. In British Columbia specifically, one component of the New Left was the environmental movement, which led to the creation of Greenpeace in Vancouver in 1972. Another was the student movement at SFU during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which pushed to bring the university into the community. This student enthusiasm provided the necessary impetus to establish the CFU student support committees at SFU and at the University of British Columbia during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Finally, the women's movement played a prominent role in the New Left movement, with the creation of the SFU women's caucus in 1968. New Left counterculture "emphasized spirituality, peace, freedom, decentralization, local control, coexistence with nature, gender and racial equality, flexible, fluid living arrangements, and harmony." See Hak, *The Left,* 136–37. Greenpeace was heavily influenced by its American founders. For a Canadian example, please see Pollution Probe, which started in Toronto in 1969 (https://www.pollutionprobe.org/about/). See Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth: 1960s Labour Unrest, Young Workers, and New Leftists in English Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 107; and Hugh Johnston, *Radical Campus: Making Simon Fraser University* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005). The SFU Women's Caucus (formed 1968), later the Vancouver Women's Caucus (formed 1969), Working Women's Workshop (formed 1970), and finally SORWUC (formed 1972) were products of New Left activism at BC universities. The socialist-feminist organization was, like the CFU, disenchanted with the Canadian labour movement and its lack of effort with regard to organizing unorganized workers. See Julia Smith, "Organizing the Unorganized: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972–1986" (MA thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007), 19–21.

The CFU then, should be considered a late product of New Left activism in British Columbia and in Canada more broadly. Many CFU organizers, such as Harinder Mahil, Charan Gill, and Raj Chouhan, would have been exposed to this counterculture in the Lower Mainland, with connections to university campuses and other unions during the 1970s. For the New Left and the leaders of the CFU, a focus on social issues was the cornerstone of their new style of unionism. Social movement unionism was one method of simultaneously combating racism and labour exploitation. As is evident in the affiliation debates at the CFU's first national convention, the organizers wanted a more progressive union model to suit the unique social needs of its members.[20]

In many ways, the CFU, and its predecessor, the FWOC, operated like a trade union. The CFU executive chose three related areas on which to focus its organizing efforts: (1) improving working and living conditions, (2) eliminating the contractor system that further exploited already vulnerable workers, and (3) fighting to include farmworkers in the BC labour code, affording farmworkers rights to minimum wage and health benefits.

Working and living conditions constituted one of the main pillars that organizers rallied around to push their efforts. One story was often used in CFU documents as a rallying cry:

> On July 16, 1980, little Sukhdeep Madhar lay sleeping in a cow stall converted into sleeping quarters when, unknown to her parents working in the fields close by, she rolled off her cot. The seven-month-old baby drowned in a bucket of drinking water before being discovered. Ruling the tragedy as an accidental death, Dr. Bill Macarthur, Coroner, said that working conditions on the farm were like those found in Nazi concentration camps.[21]

Further, while out in the field, workers found that many farms did not have running water or washroom facilities.[22] Other farms did not

[20] Hari Sharma, SFU professor, IPANA member, and farmworker organizer suggests that the Punjabi Sikhs – the primary demographic of Canadian South Asian farmworkers in this period – had very little experience in working-class organization, aside from teachers and government employees, but they had a "considerable amount" of experience in political organizing. See "Race and Class in British Columbia: The Case of BC's Farmworkers, an Interview with Hari Sharma," in the *South Asia Bulletin* 3, no. 1 (1983): 58–59. Found in Hari Sharma Fonds, 1949–2010, Community Activism Records, 1968–2008, Canadian Farmworkers Union interviews and transcripts subseries, ca. 1981–83, F-251-3-2-0-6, SFU Archives.

[21] Charan Gill and Gurcharn S. Basran, *Farmworkers and Their Children* (Vancouver: Collective Press, 1995), 1.

[22] Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

have places for children who had to attend work with their parents (or for workers on breaks) to sit in the shade on hot days.[23] In addition to unsafe working conditions in the field, workers who did not have enough money for housing would have to live in converted barn stalls on the farm where they worked. These stalls would often have simple hay and straw as flooring with small cots for sleeping. Some living quarters did not have running water, heating, or washroom facilities. Finally, it was not uncommon for farm owners and operators, or even for the contractors who acted as intermediaries, to withhold wages from workers until the end of the season (should they be paid at all).

Despite its small size, the CFU was relatively successful in improving working conditions, especially with regard to securing stolen wages. The first test for the FWOC was a dispute between Mukhiter Singh and the contractor that he had hired to provide a labour force. On 17 July 1979, workers contacted the FWOC to help set up a picket line after they discovered that Mukhiter was withholding $100,000 owed for six weeks of labour because he was unsatisfied with the pickers' work. The FWOC immediately sent out "several dozen Committee members" and "joined two hundred workers on the picket lines." After a tense standoff, Mukhiter offered to pay $40,000 in wages, but the farmworkers refused the offer. After roughly two hours of negotiations with Chouhan, Mukhiter paid the workers $80,000 and the dispute was settled. This incident was the first major victory for the FWOC.[24]

The following year, a larger battle took place with a much larger grower: Jensen Mushroom Farms in Langley. On 18 July 1980, despite the grower's assertion that "if they don't like it [working conditions], they can quit," Jensen Mushroom Farms became the first agricultural work site to be certified by the Labour Relations Board (LRB).[25] While this did not mean the workers had a contract, the LRB ruling did mean that the union could negotiate on behalf of the workers. This was the first ruling of its kind in BC labour history. The first signed contract would come from a different farm, Bell Farms. The owner, Jack Bell, was relatively sympathetic to unions and did not offer any resistance to workers who organized for union representation. That LRB certification

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[23] The cover photo for Gill and Basran's *Farmworkers and Their Children* is captioned "Two-year-old child asleep in a field shows need for daycare for women farmworkers." The unnamed child sits under a makeshift tent made of berry flats for shade.

[24] Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 77.

[25] Anand Patwardhan and Jim Monro, dirs., *A Time to Rise* (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada, 1982), DVD, 39 minutes; CFU, "Draft Report #2, 1983," 51, file 12, box 18, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

would come on 3 September 1980, and the first contract would be ratified on 18 November.[26]

While getting a certification was the first step, the process to signing a contract could be extremely drawn out. After nine months of negotiations at Jensen Farms with little progress, the CFU voted to strike on 14 April 1981. Here, Jensen demonstrated his resolve to prevent a union from entering his workplace. On the first day of picketing, an altercation between Chouhan and some of Jensen's family members left Chouhan with a cut on his forehead, and each side pointed to the other as the instigator. A CFU organizer at the picket line, Sandi Roy, describes in a police report how Annie Hall, Jensen's daughter, struck Chouhan in the head with keys, "causing him to bleed profusely." Immediately after the altercation, Murray Munroe, Jensen's son-in-law, "and at least three of the passengers of both trucks [that had transported Jensen's family to the picket line] exited from the trucks and began running towards Mr. Chouhan and pushed him into a roadside ditch." No legal action was taken by either party.[27] As the strike wore on, the CFU described "various forms of violence from name calling, to car pounding, to a physical scuffle, to telephone wires being cut, to trucks being chased at high speeds, to an attempt to burn down a trailer while a picketer was sleeping inside." Despite ten workers scabbing (union strikebreaking) and extreme tension on the picket line, the line held strong until September 1981, when it was finally lifted. Formal contract negotiations would not recommence until May 1982, and on 30 July 1982, more than a year after the certification, a formal contract was signed.[28]

Getting a contract after a long strike was one matter, but managing to maintain certification with a stubborn owner was also a difficult task. According to the CFU, the fourteen remaining workers who returned to work at Jensen's were evenly split on the issue of the union. In June 1983, ten months after the strike's conclusion, the number of people who worked at Jensen's had increased to forty-seven, and the turnover rate was high. This meant that many of those who supported the union had left and that those who remained were now outnumbered in the workplace. Jensen also began to hire his immediate family members as employees to reduce the strength of the union. The family members intimidated workers who were worried about being identified to the employer as pro-union. When shop stewards were elected, Jean Hall – whose relation

[26] "Draft Report #2," 60, file 12, box 18, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

[27] Police statement from Sandi Roy, 14 April 1981, file 7, box 26, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

[28] "Draft Report #2," 51–52.

to the aforementioned Annie Hall is unclear – was elected for labourers and Rajinder Gill was elected for pickers. The CFU claimed that "the election of Jean Hall was orchestrated by Tove Nesbitt and Jens Jensen (Jensen's daughter and brother)."[29]

Clearly, Jensen was determined to break the union by inserting his family members into the union's structure. Union meetings became difficult places to be and were reported by workers to be dominated by Jensen's family members. According to the CFU, "at one time Jensen had nine family members working at the farm and on average there were seven." Workers felt intimidated at meetings because they feared that their concerns would be passed back to Jensen and that they could be disciplined or fired. On 1 April 1983, Jensen's employees applied to the LRB for decertification, and, despite the CFU's confidence that the decertification vote would fail, on 8 July it passed by a count of 23 to 22. The CFU, understandably disheartened, put some blame on recent immigrants, who were "in awe of 'authority' figures" and did not want to appear pro-union to new employers.[30]

During an investigation of Jensen Farms by the provincial government's Ministry of Labour, R.F. Bone noted some troubling practices on the part of the employer. First, at the time of the strike, it was estimated that 90 percent of the workforce was South Asian and that most supported the union. During the strike, many of these workers left for other jobs because they needed to support themselves. After the strike, Bone noted: "all employees hired (approx. 17) have been non-East Indian, except for four young ladies, all related to the only two East Indians (Gurmit Kaur and Sukhbir Kaur) employed before the strike who then and still are strongly anti-union."[31] These hires were Euro-Canadians and Laotians. Since the mushroom farm had different greenhouses, Jensen had the Laotians working in areas away from the pro-union employees and had scheduled the pro-union employees to work during union meetings.[32] This tactic allowed the anti-union workers who still attended meetings to elect Jean Hall and Gurmit Kaur, workers who scabbed during the strike, to be delegates for the CFU National Convention in April 1984. Both delegates were expelled from the convention after this revelation and were deemed members "not in good standing."[33] Finally,

[29] "Draft Report #2," 53.
[30] "Draft Report #2," 53–56.
[31] Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 3 May 1983, 2, file 6, box 28, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.
[32] Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 2–3.
[33] Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 11.

Jensen attempted to have the CFU barred from any certifications for one calendar year – an attempt that was denied by the LRB.[34]

This battle had an underlying racist tone. As demonstrated by Jensen's practices after the strike, Jensen was actively avoiding South Asians. Other anti-union employees also hinted at an ethnic divide. Fred Forman, a white worker hired after the strike, suggested: "if I had a grievance, I don't think it would work because I'm the wrong colour." Farmers, including Jensen, used the idea that the CFU was an exclusively South Asian union to discourage membership among newly hired Laotians and whites as well as to discredit the union among its current members.[35]

The category of race was also critical to the second pillar of the CFU's organizing mission: ridding the industry of contractors. Contractors would supply the labour force for the farmers and, in many cases, they held as much power as the farmers. The contractor was responsible for hiring a workforce, maintaining discipline, and making payments. The farmer would not pay the workers directly; instead, the farmer would pay the contractor who, in many cases, would retain the money until the end of the season.[36]

In many instances, the contractor was also responsible for transporting workers between the field and their homes. Since labour contractors were trying to maximize profits, the vehicles they used to transport workers predictably violated many road safety standards. As Chouhan remembers, his first contractor: "came to pick me up in an Econoline van which had no seats in it, there were people sitting on the floor which was quite a shock [laughs]. No seat belts, no nothing."[37] Many workers have been killed due to accidents in these unsafe vehicles, and, as recently as 7 March 2007, three farmworkers died in a rollover accident while riding in an overcrowded vehicle between Abbotsford and Chilliwack.[38]

Often, contractors were from the same social and ethnic circles as the labourers whom they employed. Charan Gill identified a "colonial

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[34] James Russell to the Ministry of Labour Relations Board, 10 January 1984, 1, file 7, box 28, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

[35] Memo from the Ministry of Labour to the Labour Relations Board, 6.

[36] Patwardhan and Monro, *Time to Rise*.

[37] Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

[38] Three women – Sarabjit Kaur Sidhu, Sukhwinder Kaur Punia, and Amarjit Kaur Bal – were killed when their van carrying seventeen people rolled over a median on Highway 1 between Abbotsford and Chilliwack. The driver, Harwinderpal Kaur Gill, was found to not have the proper Class 4 commercial licence required for driving a commercial vehicle transporting more than 10 passengers, and the van was carrying two more people than permitted. Gill was fined $2,000 and prohibited from driving for one year. "Driver fined $2,000 in Fatal Abbotsford Van Crash," *CBC News*, 18 December 2008, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/driver-fined-2-000-in-fatal-abbotsford-van-crash-1.704818.

mentality" in comments made by farmworkers. Since the contractors who provided them with work shared familial and cultural ties with them, some of which could be traced back to Punjab, many farmworkers did not want to stand up to the contractors. Fears of losing jobs and housing were very real, and such losses could jeopardize their immigration status. Contractors who came from the same community as the workers could manipulate the latter into believing they were on their side,[39] and, because of this, Gill notes: "in spite of our efforts, individual interests [of workers] sometimes invalidated collective interests [of their class]" because some of those workers aspired to be contractors.[40]

Simply getting safety information to farmworkers was also difficult. Since many of the workers could not read or write in English, and some were illiterate in their own languages, they were often dependent on information from the farmer and the contractor. Contractors could intentionally mislead, omit certain information, or outright lie to their workers about their legal rights. This delayed organizing efforts. To counter this information block, organizers would try to go to local temples on the weekends, where many workers went to pray. However, the labour contractors also had control over the temple executives, so organizers were often refused the right to speak. Frustrated, the organizers developed a two-part strategy. First, they would have "kitchen meetings" in which the organizer would contact one worker for a meeting in their home, and that worker would contact neighbours and friends, so "that way [they would] not [be] afraid to be seen by a labour contractor or in the temple or in a public place." Second, because many families used the temples for social events, the organizers would ask family members to invite the CFU and thus circumvent the temple executives as organizers of social events had the "absolute right to invite anyone they want[ed]." These strategies helped the CFU reach out to potential members and to provide valuable information regarding their legal rights.[41] Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the CFU, contractors are still a part of the industry to this day, and anyone driving through the agricultural areas of British Columbia's Lower Mainland can witness the painted-over shuttle buses that daily transport farmworkers from home to field.

It was the fight to include farmworkers in British Columbia's labour code that has had the most lasting impact. After the findings of the provincial committee's report of 1975, the CFU advocated for legislative

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39 Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

40 Charan Gill, "The Birth of the Farm Workers Organizing Committee," 1980, 9, file 17, box 17, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

41 Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

changes to the provincial labour code to ensure that it would include farmworkers under the *Minimum Wage Act*, allow for unemployment insurance, and give workers fair representation at the Workers Compensation Board. Without minimum wage protection, many farmers paid their workers on a piece-rate system instead of on an hourly wage system. The argument from the farmers was that the piecework wage was self-motivating and pushed the workers to pick more. Farmers also argued that this system was better because workers did not need to be supervised, allowing farmers to do more "productive work." Farmers insisted that farming was a "free market" enterprise and that piecework was "in the best interest of all parties."[42] Chouhan would continue his crusade for farmworkers even after he left the CFU in 1986. He advised numerous legislative committees that pushed for change to the *Employment Standard's Act* to improve the health and safety for farmworkers. His work would help create the Farm and Ranch Safety and Health Association (FARSHA, later AGSAFE), which is the farmworkers' equivalent of the Workers Compensation Board, now WorkSafeBC. Tellingly, when the BC Liberals – a right-wing party composed of the former BC Conservatives, Social Credit, and Liberals – came into power in 2001, the new government rolled back the protections for all farmworkers but left the health and safety regulations untouched.[43]

Even though the CFU devoted substantial resources to trade unionism, it was its significant investment in social unionism that set it apart from other unions during this period. Two things were central to the CFU's organizing: the ESL Crusade and the Farmworkers Services Centre in New Westminster. These things – both physically and metaphorically – were intended to complement the CFU's labour organizing efforts in the fields and greenhouses. Although they did not last, it is crucial that they be included as part of the assessment of the overall impact of the CFU.

During the first CFU convention, money was set aside for the rental of two offices that were to provide the CFU with a platform to offer legal and social services, which were previously administered by the FWOC and the BC Law Union. Farmworkers from across the Lower Mainland were able to come and get free advice (e.g., legal counsel on immigration) and to connect with other farmworkers on personal matters (e.g., family or marital concerns). The two offices, connected

42 Jhappan, "Resistance to Exploitation," 56.
43 Author interview with Raj Chouhan, 23 November 2018.

by a doorway and staffed by volunteers, were in New Westminster and proved to be popular among farmworkers.

Unfortunately, the centre proved to have logistical problems. Many farmworkers, few of whom owned cars, found the location in New Westminster difficult to get to by bus or by foot, especially from the fields of Abbotsford, Surrey, or Richmond. As a result, visitor numbers were low while valuable resources were spent to keep the centre open. An internal memo from the CFU noted that the Farmworker Services Centre "was only in existence for three months as CFU could not afford the double rent ($275) and let one of the offices go."[44]

The second pillar of the CFU's social agenda was its ESL Crusade. Starting in October 1981, volunteers were brought in to help the largely South Asian immigrant population of farmworkers learn English. Many members of the CFU did not read or write English, and some were completely illiterate. In the ESL Crusade's *Tutor Manual* potential tutors were exposed to several pedagogical tools specifically aimed at teaching oppressed peoples. Further, there were short lessons on South Asian history in the Lower Mainland – including the *Komagata Maru* incident – and newspaper clippings from the CFU's history. Critically, the English language terms that were emphasized came from a "Glossary of Labour Terms" that workers would often hear at union meetings.[45] The Crusade was intended "as an organizing tool to give the union access to members and potential members in order to raise their consciousness about the CFU" and to "broaden [their] support network."[46] This does not refer to raising class-consciousness in a revolutionary sense but, rather, to educating members on how the union worked and the benefits of being part of it. However, like the Farmworkers Centre, the ESL Crusade was attended by only a few members, and funding ran out by July 1983. The CFU managed to pass the program over to the Deol Agricultural Education Research Society, which kept the program going, albeit independently of the CFU.[47]

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[44] "Draft Report #2," 19.

[45] Canadian Farmworkers Union, *Farmworkers ESL Crusade 1986: Tutor Manual*, ESL0004-001, https://digital.lib.sfu.ca/cfu-1236/esl0004-001, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

[46] "Draft Report #2," 41.

[47] "Draft Report #2," 45. The Deol Agricultural Education Research Society was set up in 1983 by the CFU in response to the death of nineteen-year-old farmworker Jarnail Singh Deol. Deol died of prolonged pesticide poisoning ingested from the farm he was working on in October 1982, and the coroner's inquest ruled his death a "preventable homicide," blaming it on "ignorance and a lack of government legislation." The society's mandate was to push for better health and safety regulations, specifically in relation to pesticide use. See Bush, *Zindabad!*, chap. 6, http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/chap6.htm.

The two pillars of the CFU's social agenda were complemented by community engagement that was meant to raise public awareness of the plight of farmworkers in British Columbia. The CFU borrowed from Cesar Chavez and the UFA in the United States and took part in significant boycott campaigns that targeted growers during strike periods or with whom they were in contract negotiations. Other engagement came from putting on plays or benefit concerts to raise money to help with funding the union's activities. Finally, to raise funds, the CFU performed plays that were shown in school gymnasiums and community centres around the Lower Mainland.

There is, however, one central theme that underlines the CFU's social unionism: money (or, rather, the lack of it) to support the Farmworkers Services Centre, the ESL Crusade, and the CFU's own labour activities. The root of its financial issues was the executive-designed dues' structure. In the CFU's "Plan of Action," the goal was to see the CFU financially self-sufficient by June 1983, three years after its founding convention. The executive had goals for each category of worker. It aimed for seven hundred year-round workers paying 1 percent of their gross monthly income, which the CFU calculated to be eight dollars per month per worker. This was despite the fact that "most [potential bargaining] units [were] 10–25 workers," meaning that there were only anywhere between twenty-eight and seventy bargaining units paying regular dues.[48] The goal for seasonal farmworkers was more modest, with the CFU aiming for fifteen hundred workers to pay the flat monthly fee of five dollars per month per worker.[49] However, this revenue stream was not consistent when farmworkers were only working four months out of the year.

Achieving these goals was extremely difficult. Between 1980 and 1983, the CFU only had sixteen hundred workers sign cards out of a possible thirteen thousand farmworkers in the Fraser Valley alone. But these workers "donot [*sic*] pay regular dues." The CFU discovered that members did not feel comfortable sending in pre-authorized or postdated cheques. Volunteers tried to alleviate this with door-to-door collections, and although that saw an increase in paid dues, the CFU considered it to be too time consuming.[50]

Another reason for withheld dues was that the members wanted the CFU to provide a guarantee of jobs, a promise the CFU could not make. Further, families with multiple farmworkers in the same household did

48 CFU, Plan of Action 1981–1983 Draft #1 – Update, 1983, file 12, box 18, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

49 CFU, "Plan of Action 1981–1983 Draft #1 – Update," 1983, 3.

50 CFU, "Plan of Action 1981–1983 Draft #1 – Update," 3.

not want to pay for multiple family members. Since many farmworkers were barely scraping by on the wages they were receiving, having two dues-paying members from the same household was an incredibly tall order. In this desperate situation, the CFU described itself as "holding its own."[51]

Between 1978 and 1983, and during its entire existence until it merged with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) in the early 1990s, the CFU relied on the financial support of other unions and the Canadian Labour Congress to make up the deficit between its own revenue and operating costs. Part of the reason for these operating costs had to do with the substantial social agenda that the CFU was using to try to become financially self-sufficient. As CFU executives noted, members were unwilling to give up a portion of their already meagre wages for an entity that could not guarantee them work. Furthermore, at the same time, the CFU was trying to expand into the Okanagan fruit-growing region of British Columbia and into the even more hostile labour climate of Ontario, whose labour code, during this period, barred farmworkers from joining any sort of union or association.[52] While trying to organize in Ontario, these attempts at expansion led to some tense meetings between the CLC, the CFU, and the UFCW regarding jurisdiction. Despite the CFU's valiant effort, expansion was costly and ultimately unfruitful.

Another hindrance to the CFU was the reluctance of the CLC to continue its financial support of a union that was pushing a significant social agenda. The 1980s represented a period of increasing austerity, and attacks against labour rights and unions proliferated. Unions were facing a markedly different economic environment from that which existed at the beginning of the postwar compromise,[53] and the hard-fought gains of the Second World War were in jeopardy. The CLC had to make a

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[51] CFU, "Plan of Action 1981–1983 Draft #1 – Update," 8.

[52] For an excellent reading on material related to Ontario farmworkers and race, see Ed Dunsworth, "Race, Exclusion, and Archival Silences in the Seasonal Migration of Tobacco Workers from the Southern United States to Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review* 99, no. 4 (2018): 563–93.

[53] Scholars use the term "Postwar Compromise" to describe how, at the end of the Second World War, the labour movement in Canada exchanged union recognition and bargaining rights – what Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker term as "industrial pluralism" – at the cost of militant labour action. For a short introduction, see Don Wells, "Origins of Canada's Wagner Model of Industrial Relations," *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 20, no. 2 (1995): 193–225; Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900–48* (Toronto: The Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 2001); and Peter McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

choice between sending the CFU three thousand dollars per month to support its social agenda or trying to protect the postwar compromise that was now under threat.

The CLC chose to withhold the monthly allowance, but for suspect reasons. A letter from Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley – the CLC's representative and liaison for the CFU – in August 1981 claims that the CFU "had no funds from Congress since April 24, 1981" and that the CFU has "not heard anything from [Smalley's] office since July 15, 1981."[54] Coincidentally, the funds from the CLC were cut within days of the CFU's determining that it would need more time to decide whether or not it should affiliate with the CLC. On 16 September 1981, a one-page handwritten note describes Smalley entering the CFU's offices, irate with Chouhan about not having sent the CLC a detailed list of the community support committees. According to the note, Smalley came in accusing the CFU of "stonewalling" the CLC and stating that the CLC would discontinue funding if the CFU did not divulge information about its support committees. Chouhan replied to Smalley: "every time we try to talk to Congress, you people treat us as a bunch of kids."[55] In another strange coincidence, once the CFU determined it would affiliate with the CLC in September 1981, the monthly allowance returned.

The CLC also withheld the allowance during the CFU's expansion into Ontario, citing jurisdictional issues with UFCW in the region. Chouhan wrote in a letter to the CLC as follows: "[My] hope was that the [jurisdictional] meeting would take place in October and that a resolution to the situation would be clear. This has not happened. I havenot [*sic*] been contacted for any such meeting. I have made numerous calls to Brother Bill Smalley and Brother Ed Johnston but was unable to reach them."[56]

After two weeks without a reply, Chouhan, once again writing to Smalley, took a harsher line. In the letter, Chouhan claims that Smalley insinuated there would be no support for the CFU in British Columbia until it pulled out of Ontario. Chouhan countered: "the sentiment behind the resolution [to organize in Ontario] plus the fact it was endorsed by 21 labour councils and locals is in total contradiction to your statements that 'none of the affiliates will put any money to support the CFU

[54] Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 6 August 1981, file 4, box 3, CFU Fonds SFU Special Collections.

[55] Handwritten account from Raj Chouhan, 16 September 1981, file 4, box 3, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

[56] Raj Chouhan to Dennis McDermott, 16 November 1982, file 11, box 13, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

in Ontario.'" Chouhan then separated the jurisdictional issues with Ontario organizing, writing: "If Ontario organizing is contentious, fine. Let's deal with it in a meeting with other unions involved. But support for organizing in BC should not be halted or used as an organizing weapon."[57] A swift reply from the CLC determined that the jurisdictional meeting would be held on 20 December 1982.[58]

The jurisdictional meeting between the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCWU, later, the UFCW), the CLC, and the CFU was tense. An unknown author transcribed some of the conversations between the representatives of each union. After Chouhan requested more financial assistance from the CLC, CLC representative Ed Johnston suggested that the "CFU ha[d] made some contributions [to labour organizing] – not major" ones though. Further, he questioned the CFU's usefulness, asking if the CFU "couldn't find a better cause? Farm workers have [a] union and legislation," which was the basis of some of the CFU's original goals. Then, referring to the difference between family farms in British Columbia and agribusiness in Ontario, Johnston concluded: "[the] CLC cannot finance a fight against multinationals." After a reply from Chouhan, Johnston made the CLC's position crystal clear: "If you want support, confine [your] activities to BC."[59] After the CFU's 1982 meeting with the CLC, organizing in Ontario came to a formal end on 30 June 1983, mere weeks before the Solidarity protests would dominate national headlines.[60]

The successes, failures, and obstacles of the CFU are a telling story about the limits of social unionism during the early 1980s, especially in British Columbia. Although they were not the first union to try to organize previously unorganized workers in the Lower Mainland, the CFU's commitment to its social agenda in tandem with its economic goals highlights alternative methods of organization that do not fit into scholars' understandings of a traditional trade union.[61] The CFU's

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57 Raj Chouhan to Bill Smalley, 3 December 1982, 1, file 11,box 13, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

58 Dennis McDermott to Raj Chouhan, 6 December 1982, file 11, box 13, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

59 Author unknown, "Ontario Jurisdictional Meeting between CFU and CLC," 20 December 1982, file 4, box 25, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

60 Raj Chouhan to Dennis McDermott, 27 April 1983, file 1, box 25, CFU Fonds, SFU Special Collections.

61 Another union at this time, the Service, Office, and Retail Workers Union of Canada (SORWUC), was also organizing previously unorganized women restaurant workers and faced strikingly similar challenges. See Julia Smith, "An 'Entirely Different' Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972–1986," *Labour/ Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 23–65.

tactics and priorities were suited to the needs of its members, who were primarily from the South Asian community. These needs included English language training, union rights education, the Farmworkers Service Centre (to develop community connections), and producing plays and films for fundraising events. Further, unlike their Euro-Canadian counterparts, farmworkers had not only to organize against contractors that withheld wages but also to fight to include rights to minimum wage and workers compensation in the BC labour code.

The CFU emerged at a time when unorganized and oppressed groups were struggling to find representation within the larger Canadian labour movement. Unions like the CFU and SORWUC in the Lower Mainland provided unorganized groups the opportunity to enter the labour movement under their own terms, forming unions that did not conform to the business unionism that dominated the labour landscape. While these unions did not remain active or autonomous after the end of the 1980s, the CFU's legacy in trying to organize the unorganized and adapt to the relentless pressure of a neoliberal agenda stands as a testament to the creativity and ingenuity of grassroots organizations. As neoliberalism continues to attack unions and workers' rights today, historians and labour organizers alike can turn to unions like the CFU and the SORWUC as inspiration for new ways to organize.