MINE-MILL'S PEACE ARCH CONCERTS:

How a "Red" Union and a Famous Singer-Activist Fought for Peace and Social Justice during the Cold War

RON VERZUH

> No power on earth is going to stop me speaking out for my people.
> – Paul Robeson, Second Peace Arch Concert, 16 August 1953

STUDENTS OF COLD WAR and left history have long been familiar with the Peace Arch concerts performed by world-famous opera star Paul Robeson from 1952 to 1955, but those historic concerts have often been relegated to the footnotes of studies that deal with the strident anti-Communism that marked the late 1940s and early 1950s. Indeed, few scholarly works have offered an in-depth examination of the events and fewer still have examined the role played by the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (hereafter Mine-Mill) in organizing the popular series of four annual concerts that were attended by tens of thousands of adoring Robeson fans, many of them Mine-Mill members, who were there to support the singer-activist in the continuing struggle to restore his freedom to travel.

Some Canadian historians, notably Reginald Whitaker and Irving Abella, have addressed the Peace Arch performances tangentially in documenting the Communist union purges of the period and detailing the various police and government actions to contain Communist activity in Canada. American historians, on the other hand, have almost forgotten the Canadian-sponsored concerts in their portrayals of the ideological struggles that plagued the trade union movement and the left in the United States during the Cold War. Most recently, historian Philip Dray reminds us of those struggles, as do earlier labour historians such as David Brody and Paul Buhle,[1] but there is rarely if ever any

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[1] Philip Dray, *There Is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), is a recent attempt at a sweeping survey of radical labour struggles in the United States.

substantial attempt to describe the Canadian support for Robeson through the concerts. As for material on the concerts themselves, the selection is even more limited.

Martin Duberman's lengthy study of the life and times of the labour-friendly Robeson adds to the valuable research available, especially on the significance of the concerts during the singer's struggles to overcome official anti-Communism. What is missing from the published research, however, is a full picture of the behind-the-scenes factors that motivated the staging of the musical events that took place as the Cold War was heating up in North America. What motivated Mine-Mill and its pugnacious western regional director, Harvey Murphy, to dedicate the resources of the union to organizing and promoting the concerts? Until recently, Laurel Sefton MacDowell's essay on Robeson's visits to Canada offered the only detailed look at the concerts, and it remains one of the best studies of the larger political context of those events. Of late, her essay has been supplemented by works from labour and left scholars such as Benjamin Isitt and Mark Kristmanson that discuss the concerts and the politics of Mine-Mill. I cite portions of these works but also make extensive use of news coverage and commentary about the concerts that appeared in mainstream, labour, and left publications of the day. Finally, I reference some insightful personal accounts of people who attended the Peace Arch concerts as well as of those who worked to make them happen.

What follows, then, is an attempt to understand more clearly the significance of the concerts to the trade union movement and to resistance movements on the left. On a local union scale I attempt to answer several questions: What motivated Harvey Murphy, a lifelong Communist and friend of Robeson, to mount such an ambitious undertaking in defiance of national governments on both sides of the border? Why did Mine-Mill activists respond with such ferocity to the news that the black entertainer was not going to be allowed to cross the Canada-US

For views on aspects of the anti-Communist battles of the 1940s and 1950s, see David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and Paul Buhle, *From the Knights of Labor to the New World Order: Essays on Labor and Culture* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1997). The late David Montgomery also contributed much to an understanding of the history of workers' and left struggles. Like Robeson he had been ostracized during the McCarthy era, being refused jobs because of his Communist Party membership in the 1950s. Among many volumes on the history of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), here are three of interest to students of the labour movement in the United States: Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict That Shaped American Unions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); Robert H. Zeiger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill/London: University of Carolina Press, 1995); and Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: Twenty Years of the CIO* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1964).

border to sing at the Vancouver Mine-Mill convention on 1 February 1952? Why were some non-Mine-Mill labour leaders reluctant to support the concerts? On a broader political scale, I attempt to explain why the American and Canadian authorities chose to prevent Robeson from performing. What were the political issues involved in government efforts to silence Robeson and Mine-Mill, one of the eleven unions that had been newly purged from the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and from the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL)?

In a political climate in which the union movement was at war with itself, the concerts must have been a large red flag waving in the face of the non-Communist union movement and especially in the faces of the leaders of what became the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), who had been authorized by the CIO to raid Mine-Mill and to defang what many observers considered to be one of the most progressive and democratic unions in the history of the North American labour movement. Under the leadership of Philip Murray in the United States and Aaron Mosher in Canada, both viewed as conservatives, the CIO-CCL was determined to eliminate the Communist-run unions that posed a threat to achieving the postwar economic compromise sought by both national governments.[2] With Murphy and the leadership of Mine-Mill's BC District among the most radical elements of the Canadian labour movement, the concerts represented their defiance not only of governments but also of the house of labour itself. Murphy, never shy about challenging power – whether that of employers, national union leaders, or Communist Party headquarters – took the opportunity offered to him by the Robeson banning to orchestrate one of the most enduring cultural events in labour history.

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It began with the organizing of an impromptu concert at which Robeson sang through long-distance phone lines to the delight of delegates and guests attending the February 1952 Mine-Mill convention in Vancouver. Murphy then promised delegates that a much bigger concert would take place that May at the Peace Arch near the Canada-US border at Blaine,

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[2] For a discussion of the legal and political implications of the postwar compromise in Canada, see Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900-1948* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Peter S. McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002). On the American side, see Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Unions: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

Washington. If the American authorities wouldn't let Robeson come to the convention, Murphy reasoned, then Mine-Mill would take the convention to Robeson. Those authorities had quietly pulled Robeson's passport in 1950.[3] Had they needed to defend the suspension of the singer's constitutional right to free passage, they might have said it was a matter of national security: they were protecting the nation from the threat of Communist infiltration. But they needed no such defence. After all, it was the McCarthy era, and Communist sympathizers like Robeson and active Communist labour leaders like Murphy were vulnerable to the whims of politicians of the day.

For the singer-activist's adoring Canadian fans the banning defied logic. Here was a man who was pledged to freedom and good will among all peoples, a man who had earned worldwide respect for his art, his intellect (he was said to speak several languages), and even his prowess as a college football star. How could Robeson's own government turn on him? Yes, he had visited the Soviet Union, found the workers' state inspiring, and said so publicly, but that such behaviour would be enough to justify the US State Department's actions seemed undemocratic at best and fascistic at worst. Nevertheless, Robeson's passport was nullified very quietly and with full Canadian government complicity and approval.

The situation in the lead-up to the Peace Arch concerts was problematic from several other vantage points as well. First, while Robeson garnered accolades abroad, at home his popularity was sinking like a stone. Defiantly, he did nothing to heed the warnings, continuing to make public statements lauding the accomplishments of the Soviets, lambasting President Harry S. Truman for his Korean War decisions, and publicly celebrating the birthday of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.[4] He had been openly critical of American government policy from the 1940s on, and the battle lines between him and the State Department had been clearly drawn by the time of the 1952 concert. His overt praise of the Soviet Union and his caustic remarks about American corporate exploitation were well known and supplied ample ammunition for the State Department to withdraw his passport and for arch anti-Communist J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation to spy on him relentlessly. What perhaps made matters more tense for the Mine-Mill concert organizers were the negative views about Robeson

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[3]   At that time, passports were not required to cross the Canada-US border, so to many observers it seemed clear that the American authorities were violating Robeson's rights.

[4]   Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 655. Also note that Robeson challenged Truman's failure to support anti-lynching legislation, thus further irritating the authorities in Washington.

Figure 1. American singer and activist Paul Robeson sings at the 1955 Peace Arch concert. He awed large crowds at all four concerts with his rendition of "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night." *Source*: *Pacific Tribune* Archive.

that came from some black leaders and commentators as well as from *Ebony*, the respected black magazine. Ironically, as Duberman notes, "Even some of the leaders of the CPUSA [Communist Party of the United States of America] thought he ought to tone down his rhetoric." By the time of the 1952 concert he had been roundly condemned as a "fellow traveller," a Kremlin stooge, and an anti-American by everyone from world-class boxer Sugar Ray Robinson[5] to Robeson's fellow entertainer Josh White.[6]

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[5] Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: The New Press, 1989), 394.
[6] Ibid., 391.

With such negative publicity increasingly attached to the singer, the authorities on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel might have been emboldened to act. Even so, when Robeson was stopped at the border that winter day in late January 1952, Canadian authorities were able to deflect any suggestion that it was their doing. Historian Mark Kristmanson, who devotes a full chapter to the Robeson concerts in his book on Canada's national security system, reflects on the impact of the events in what he calls "the cultural civil war" that occurred in the period following the revelations of Soviet spying dramatically exposed in 1946 by Soviet defector Igor Gouzenko.[7] Kristmanson traces Canadian government concern about the singer's visits to Canada going back to at least 1940, when officials were advised to bar him from entry under the War Measures Act. Police informants watched him more closely after that and reported on his anti-British public statements as well as on his usual positive comments about the Soviet Union when attending peace and labour movement rallies in Vancouver, Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto, and Winnipeg. As his popularity was building in Canada and he appeared more frequently, the Mounties stepped up their surveillance and various authorities considered banning him from performing on Canadian soil. Robeson's planned 1947 concert in Toronto brought the issue to a boiling point when Mayor Robert H. Saunders ostensibly banned Robeson from speaking. Even then, however, he was able to express his political points through his choice of tunes and by stressing certain words and phrases in the lyrics.

By the 1952 concert, then, Robeson and his outspoken critical views were well known and had been dutifully reported to Canadian authorities at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels. Canadian officials had what they needed to support the State Department view that the American singer should be barred. In fact, there had been a decade of instances in which Robeson's shoot-from-the-lip tendencies had incensed cold warriors on either side of the international boundary, leading Kristmanson to conclude that Canadian authorities were no more tolerant of Robeson than were American ones. That intolerance reached a quiet crescendo in 1952 as the years of backroom taunts and threats finally came to a head when border authorities prevented him from singing and speaking in person at the Mine-Mill conference on 1 February. As it turned out, the Canadian authorities did not have to take any official action, although it is possible that Murphy and other

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[7] Mark Kristmanson, *Plateaus of Freedom: Nationality, Culture, and State Security in Canada, 1940–1960* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003), 181.

Mine-Mill Communists were aware of Ottawa's secretive role in the barring[8] and were attuned to the fact that then prime minister Louis St. Laurent had "authorized the ban."[9] Still, because the Americans acted first, the Canadian prime minister's action remained secret.[10]

Clearly, then, Canadian authorities were complicit in the banning of Robeson. Fortified with police reports that stated he had "in the past used his concerts as a cover" for his Communist activities, they put up as many roadblocks as they could. As Whitaker notes, Robeson's "quest for equality led him over the years towards definite sympathy for the philosophy of Communism, and to support struggles that were also supported by the Communists." However, he adds that, to the McCarthyites and other red hunters on either side of the border, this position was "tantamount to Communism." To ordinary Canadians, as Whitaker argues, Robeson was more likely to be recognized for his singing of "Ol' Man River" than for his political tendencies.[11] The 1952 concert represented a serious slight to authorities in both nations, and the Canadian government continued to react hostilely to it by barring the singer as late as 1956, with one exception, when he was permitted to sing but not to speak at a concert.

The Robeson banning must have struck his many admirers in Canada as an over-reaction, and Murphy would soon capitalize on that fact. After all, Robeson was a sterling entertainer with a colossal physical presence (he was 190 cm or six foot, three inches tall) who had earned a powerful international reputation. On the London stage he had created a sensation in his role as Othello, and he had captured global attention with his booming baritone voice on stage and in film, being perhaps best known for his rendition of "Ol' Man River" in the musical *Show Boat*.[12] It seemed that nowhere was a population more captivated by him than in Canada. So, on the face of it, in non-Cold-War times, it might never have occurred to Canadians that such a thing could happen to a public

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8 Fred Rose was a Communist member of Parliament from 1943 to 1947, and several other prominent Communists held public office at different jurisdictional levels. It seems possible that they could have been aware of secret cabinet discussions regarding the Robeson banning plan.

9 Kristmanson, *Plateaus of Freedom*, 212.

10 Reginald Whitaker, *Double Standard: The Secret History of Canadian Immigration* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Denys, 1987), also documents the role of the Canadian government in ensuring that Robeson's songs and speeches did not reach Canadian audiences. He alludes to the 1947 Toronto concert incident, noting the federal cabinet special committee's recommendation to ban the singer. Then he describes how St. Laurent insisted that Robeson's concert earnings while performing in Canada be subject to income tax.

11 Whitaker, *Double Standard*, 169.

12 Don Goldhamer, "Paul Robeson: A Brief Biography," posted for Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, Chicago, n.d., available at http://www.cpsr.cs.uchicago.edu/robeson/bio.html.

figure of such prominence and respect. But these were not normal times. This was the heyday of an ultra-paranoid era of Communist witch hunts in the United States and a less noisy but still pervasive repression in Canada. Robeson and other members of the entertainment industry, especially those working in Hollywood, were prime targets for cold warriors, as were Murphy and many other Communists and so-called "fellow travellers," or Communist sympathizers.[13]

The previous April, for example, Murphy was the object of an anti-Communist smear campaign in *Maclean's Magazine*, which exacerbated the situation just as Mine-Mill convention planning was getting under way. A promising young journalist named Pierre Berton had written a feature article accusing Murphy of being in charge of smelter workers who were producing heavy water, an ingredient essential to the pro-duction of the atomic bomb.[14] The article, entitled "How a Red Union Bosses Atomic Workers at Trail BC," grated on Mine-Mill activists for months afterwards as they tried to mitigate the public relations damage. Evidently smarting from the article and hoping to soothe members' concerns about the suggestion of a Communist taint, the union published a critique of the Berton article in which the author joked about the young writer seeing Trail through "scarlet-coloured glasses."[15] All joking aside, the publication of the response showed that the union felt the anti-Communist sting, especially since it was in the middle of a tough round of contract negotiations with Trail smelter management.

Robeson felt that same sting as he faced angry criticism that he was a red, a charge he denied throughout his life. And, like all blacks, he also had to deal with the fact that racial segregation was still legal in the United States, thus erecting yet another social barrier for him.[16] Nor could it have worked in his favour that he was a fearless and out-spoken critic of the Taft-Hartley Act, adopted in 1947, which, among other things, banned Communists from holding union executive positions. This must have irked the federal authorities, along with the

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[13]   James J. Lorence, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), describes the climate of fear created by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and its "Hollywood Ten" show trials.

[14]   Pierre Berton, "How a Red Union Bosses Atomic Workers at Trail BC," *Maclean's Magazine*, 1 April 1951, 7.

[15]   "Maclean's Mistake – By the Cheerful Cynic," *BC District Union News*, 30 April 1951.

[16]   Howard Fast, *Being Red: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 79, notes that Robeson "confessed to me that he was not a [Communist] party member (not then or even in his lifetime)." Buhle et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 656, states that Robeson defended the rights of Communists during the anti-Communist witch hunts of the 1940s and 1950s but that "he was not a member of the Communist Party."

AFL-CIO leadership, who had generally complied with the new legislation. As Canadian writer Laurel Sefton MacDowell argues:

> The radical minority in the labour movements of Canada and the US was purged in the late 1940s, as Communist-led organizations were seen as a threat to "free" trade unions. That minority remained loyal to Robeson and maintained contact with him, even as he came under FBI surveillance, his phone calls were tapped, and his rooms bugged.[17]

Taft-Hartley was followed by the Smith Act, 1948, which allowed the indictment of Communist Party leaders, and the McCarran Act, 1950, which permitted authorities to stifle dissent and even to create internment camps for those whom they considered subversives.[18] Robeson spoke out vehemently against these restrictive US laws, and, over the years, Mine-Mill leaders were no less forceful in their criticism of US domestic and foreign policies. By early 1952, as the Mine-Mill meeting was about to begin in Vancouver, unwittingly serving as a prelude to that first historic concert at the border, the authorities seemed determined to make examples of both.

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In late January 1952, Vancouver was hosting the fourth annual national conference of the Canadian wing of Mine-Mill as well as the ninth annual convention of Mine-Mill's BC District. An estimated two thousand delegates and guests were clamouring for answers to why Robeson was not going to sing in person as planned.[19] Labour and left newspaper reports indicate that tension ran high in the hall as the convention took on the aura of a protest meeting.[20] Across the Canada-US border, the American authorities apparently remained unconcerned about the demands of a notorious "red" union like Mine-Mill. Murphy, long self-described as "the reddest rose in the garden,"[21] had been

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17 Laurel Sefton MacDowell, "Paul Robeson in Canada: A Border Story," *Labour/Le Travail* 51 (2003): 7.

18 Buhle et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 601, notes that the McCarran Act "made provisions for the establishment of political concentration camps."

19 "Robeson Held at Border, Speaks to Rally by Telephone," *Union*, 11 February 1952, offers the two thousand figure.

20 "Robeson to Sing at Peace Arch on May 18," *Pacific Tribune*, 3 February 1952, notes that the audience was "tense" during the impromptu concert and that the meeting launched a protest against his banning. "Robeson Held at Border," *Union*, 11 February 1952, also describes the meeting as a "protest rally."

21 Allen Seager, "Memorial to a Departed Friend of the Working Man," *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History* 4 (1977): 9–14, provides a brief account of Murphy's Communist

Figure 2. Mine-Mill's western regional director Harvey Murphy, who is credited with initiating the Robeson concerts, passes the hat at the 1952 concert. *Source*: *Pacific Tribune* Archive.

instrumental in making the connection with his friend Robeson. Robeson, a vocal union supporter of the CIO who often sang at benefits for unions,[22] welcomed the union support regarding his quest to have his travel rights restored. Whether Murphy and conference organizers knew it or not, and with Canadian audiences still enamoured of the singing sensation, Mine-Mill could benefit in a public relations sense from its association with Robeson while also being seen to champion the cause of his democratic rights having been violated by government-imposed travel restrictions. Mine-Mill leadership quickly seized the opportunity to raise the issue of what Murphy and others referred to as thought control.[23] By supporting Robeson's cause, they could make

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Party and trade union activities. The actual phrase does not appear there; however, it does appear without source in Elsie G. Turnbull, *Trail between Two Wars*: *The Story of a Smelter City* (Victoria: Morriss Printing Co., 1980*)*, 74.

[22] Buhle et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 654.

[23] Lorence, *Suppression of Salt*, 4, describes the "subtle system of thought control" that penetrated Hollywood and spanned out across the rest of the United States after the HUAC hearings of 1947. He adds that "the thought control imposed by the enforcers solidified the [film] industry's reluctance to take chances and its tendency to avoid films that grappled with politically sensitive ideas."

a statement on a larger stage – a world stage. It would be a statement about repressive government actions but also a chance to comment on how fragile human freedoms could be in a capitalist state. Another factor adding tension to the situation: the concerts came as the Korean War was entering its second year. Communist parties in Canada and the United States and progressive unions like Mine-Mill strongly opposed the war.[24] Their call was for peace regardless of ideological differences. Robeson represented the fight for peace and freedom around the world, so he was a perfect partner to engage in anti-war political activity with Mine-Mill and its Communist leadership.

As the convention was about to begin, Mine-Mill district president Ken Smith (also a Communist), secretary-treasurer Les Walker (from Mine-Mill Local 480 in Trail, British Columbia), and Murphy drove the forty-eight kilometres to Blaine, Washington, to bring Robeson across the line to sing at the convention. The three returned to the convention empty handed and announced that Robeson had been stopped at the border and had had his travelling papers removed. Did they know that he would be stopped? The record says they did not. Robeson had retreated to Seattle with his travelling companion Vincent William Hallinan, a left-wing lawyer from San Francisco and legal counsel for well-known left-wing union leader Harry Bridges. Hallinan, who had also been invited to address the convention, called the border incident "typically Nazi." He had been banned as well.[25]

The next move was a prime example of Murphy's ingenuity and his shrewdness, which he learned from a long career of shenanigans – sometimes to confound employers and on occasion to slip from the constant surveillance of Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) spies. He and the others arranged to have Robeson make a telephone call from Seattle's Marine Cooks and Stewards Hall to the old Denman auditorium in downtown Vancouver. Thanks to a United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America electrician, the throng of two thousand trade unionists was able to hear one of the world's great bass-baritones sing and speak for about fifteen minutes.[26] Robeson repeated the circumstances underlying his being unable to join them in person.

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[24] Lorence, *Suppression of Salt*, 35, says Mine-Mill was in "open opposition to the deadlocked Korean conflict."

[25] "Paul Robeson 'Under Domestic Arrest,'" *Vancouver Sun*, 1 February 1952, attributes the Nazi quote to Hallinan and notes that he "was taken from a north-bound train at the border, and returned to Seattle." "Robeson Held at Border," *Union*, 11 February 1952, also notes that Hallinan had been banned.

[26] *I Came to Sing: Paul Robeson Peach Arch Program*, three-disk record album produced by the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, 18 May 1952, the cover notes for

The singer received an enthusiastic and sympathetic response when he sang through crackling phone lines. The attentive audience's emotional response must have been very moving as Robeson's voice was broadcast across the hall, illegally as it were, adding to the mixed emotions of anger and esteem that could be sensed among the gathered admirers and supporters. What the US government had done to Robeson in the minds of those gathered that day was a terrible travesty, one that many of the delegates would construe as a challenge to all people's freedom of movement, according to union reports cited below.

The reportage of the event in the Mine-Mill press and the Communist Party press conveyed those emotions and views, focusing as much on the politics surrounding the whole affair as on the music. The *BC District Union News* (hereafter the *News*) headline, for example, called the Robeson barring "A Slap at Freedom" and ran the full text of a resolution that was passed at the union's national convention. It urged "delegates to this Conference [representing thirty-two thousand Mine-Mill members in Canada] to vigorously protest against this action of the US Department of State." In vintage Mine-Mill rhetoric, the resolution stated: "This arbitrary and capricious action is a most flagrant and arrogant violation of the traditional freedoms of movement across the US-Canadian border." It then demanded that the facts of this "flagrant incident" be aired "as widely as possible," adding that "there has been mounting evidence for several years that the chiefs of the United States government look upon Canada as a part of their colonial empire, this is the first sign that they are prepared to institute an American-style system of 'thought control' in Canada."[27] Undaunted by the actions of authorities on both sides of the border, Mine-Mill had defied them by bringing Robeson's voice, if not his person, to the convention, reported the *News*, with Murphy at the editor's desk. The Mine-Mill paper added that "all the machinations of the Americans and of the reactionary forces in Canada … failed miserably."[28] In a second article, the *News* bragged: "Never has Vancouver seen such a meeting, which had been converted into a protest demonstration … Few people can remember a demonstration of that size that stood on its feet and applauded vigorously and cheered." It then criticized the media, noting: "Newspapers quickly

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which say that Robeson sang and spoke for fifteen minutes, not the seventeen that is cited by Kristmanson, *Plateaus of Freedom*, 213.

[27]   "A Slap at Freedom," *BC District Union News,* 11 February 1952. MacDowell, "Paul Robeson," 12, alludes to a Mine-Mill leaflet that refers to "the McCarthyites who seek to dictate to Canadians their particular brand of thought control."

[28]   "Slap at Freedom," *BC District Union News.*

had to play down the fact that the American government with all its powers and stool pigeons failed to prevent Paul Robeson from singing."[29]

The coverage in *Union*, the international Mine-Mill newspaper, was equally enthusiastic. Devoting only slightly less space to the event than Murphy had in the *News*, it described Robeson as "the famous Negro baritone" and published an item on page 2 that recounted details of the ban and the singer's phone concert.[30] In its next edition, *Union* added some mainstream credibility to the charges of Robeson's rights being violated by reporting that "the Portland *Oregonian* sharply rebuked what it called 'High-handed border police' who forced Robeson to remain in the US, declaring that 'US immigration authorities acted both arbitrarily and unwisely.'" Then the *Union* editor quoted the Portland daily as follows: "Who is to determine what is 'in the interest of the government,' the conservative Oregonian asks. 'The immigration service, presumably. That is high-handed action indeed.'"[31] It was a rare anti-government comment in the mainstream press of the day.

The Communist Party of Canada-Labour Progressive Party's (cpc-lpp) *Pacific Tribune*[32] filled a full page with its coverage of the border incident and phone concert coup.[33] Front-page photos of "the great Negro singer" and lawyer Hallinan appeared with a long story by Bert Whyte. Fellow Communist Harvey Murphy, the star of the piece, was quoted as saying that the American banning had turned the convention into a "protest meeting." Whyte reported every detail of the event in glowing terms, reaching a high point when he described Robeson's "golden voice" singing "the imperishable words" of "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," the Wobbly hymn to a fallen troubadour. He also sprinkled the article with some history of Mine-Mill's origins as the Western Federation of Miners and gave ample space to Robeson's remarks: "'Refusal to allow me to cross the border was an act of American administration not an act of the American people,' he said, and went

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29 "Robeson Sings, Speaks, to Vancouver Protesters," *BC District Union News*, 11 February 1952.

30 "Robeson Held at US Border," *Union*, 11 February 1952.

31 "Robeson to Sing at Peace Arch," *Union*, 25 February 1952. The *Union* also cited a letter sent to the *Spokane Review* in which Mine-Mill member J.R. Blackwell from the Coeur d'Alene region of Idaho says: "Paul Robeson has not ceased to be a great American simply because he enlisted in the fight against race discrimination and the tragic humiliation of ten million Negro Americans and other minority groups." The *Union* does not say whether the letter was published.

32 After the cpc-lpp was banned in 1940, the "*PacTrib*" was published by the Labour-Progressive Party, which served as the political wing of the cpc-lpp from 1943 to 1959.

33 "Robeson to Sing at Peace Arch on May 18," *Pacific Tribune*, 3 February 1952.

on to tell of labour's struggles, of the struggles of the colonial peoples for freedom, and the struggles of the peoples of the world for peace."[34]

Mainstream coverage of the incident was decidedly less sympathetic. The *Vancouver Sun*'s front page deflected critiques of government actions at the border, suggesting that business and labour agree that the "Ban on Robeson['s] Trip Here [was] Strictly [a] Matter for [the] US." The article then listed comments from the president of Standard Oil of British Columbia, the president of the Vancouver Board of Trade, and the secretary of the Vancouver Bar Association as well as the views of three labour leaders. Murphy, listed as a "Communist," called the banning "an attack on our rights as well as Robeson's."[35] This was in stark contrast to the "none of our business" views expressed by the business leaders. Coverage continued with a second article on page 2, in which the *Sun* quoted Robeson as saying he was "under domestic arrest."[36] The daily also described the border incident, during which "leftist trade unionists" were foiled in their attempt to pick up the singer and drive him back to the convention.

At the end of the fifteen-minute telephone call, Murphy announced that Robeson would soon offer a concert in Peace Arch Park in Blaine. Thus, he committed Mine-Mill to a potentially expensive and risky promise. Neither the cost nor the risk appeared to frighten Murphy. He had faced everything the authorities were capable of throwing at a Communist and had survived not by being timid and capitulating to cost and risk factors but, rather, by boldly stepping into the political breach. As to the cost risk, the Peace Arch concert was going to require a loan from somewhere, and, as Ken Smith relates the ironic story, the Communist leaders of the BC District Union got it from an unlikely source – the Imperial Bank of Commerce. "I think the manager expressed the feeling of the majority of the Canadian people at that time," Smith recalled in 1982: "He told Harvey, Les Walker and I that as far as he was concerned, he would be right behind any recording of Paul Robeson. And while he didn't understand the politics of the situation … he was prepared to lend the money."[37] Had the bank manager read the liner notes on the subsequent album, *I Came to Sing*, an album that some of the borrowed money had helped to produce, he might have been more reluctant to assist. The notes described Mine-Mill as "the

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[34] "'We Said You'd Hear Robeson,' Declared Murphy – and 2,000 Did," *Pacific Tribune*, 3 February 1952.

[35] "Ban on Robeson Trip Here Strictly Matter for US," *Vancouver Sun*, 1 February 1952.

[36] "Paul Robeson 'Under Domestic Arrest,'" *Vancouver Sun*, 1 February 1952.

[37] "Mine-Mill and Robeson: the Peace Arch Concerts," *Pacific Tribune*, 30 April 1982.

militant organization of the hard-rock miners and smeltermen founded in an Idaho jail in 1893 under the guns of terroristic employers and a state government in their pay."[38]

While the Mine-Mill team was busy living up to Murphy's promise, another group was organizing a two-month concert tour across the border, and it considered the Peace Arch concert merely one of several fundraising stops along the way. Duberman, in a chapter on the travel ban in his exhaustive 804-page Robeson biography, covered the events that occurred at the Peace Arch but added the following American context to the concerts. The group he refers to was the Freedom Family, publishers of a newspaper called *Freedom*. According to Duberman:

> The group started its work without a penny, and was able to begin planning for the tour only after borrowing a thousand dollars from *Freedom* newspaper, itself desperate for money. That was only the initial hurdle. It remained to be seen whether people – even progressives – would run the risk of political ostracism and possible physical injury by coming out to hear Robeson sing.[39]

No doubt it came as a shock to Murphy and company to learn that the Freedom Family was doing all the hard slogging. After all, Mine-Mill was making a monumental effort to ensure that the Peace Arch show was a grand success. Duberman does credit Mine-Mill with making the Canadian concert "the most successful single stop on the tour, from both a political and a financial point of view." He also acknowledges that Mine-Mill brought out between twenty-five and thirty thousand concert goers, while the US side mobilized only five thousand at best. But his account quickly dismisses the Canadian effort and provides extensive coverage of the many problems encountered at American concert venues.[40]

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A putative trial run for the 1952 Peace Arch event took place on 4 June 1950 at the Youth Peace Arch Rally, according to Toronto historian Stephen Endicott. He recalls that the idea grew out of a discussion at the Vancouver Mine-Mill office between Murphy, some American trade unionists, and himself:

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[38] *I Came to Sing*, album cover notes, 2.
[39] Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 400.
[40] Ibid. Robeson was associated with the fledgling *Freedom* newspaper, as was his increasingly close colleague and fellow black activist W.E.B. Du Bois.

Figure 3. Mine-Mill organizers claimed that the first of four concerts, held at the Peace Arch in Blaine, WA, in 1952, attracted 40,000 admirers, mostly from the Canadian side of the border near Vancouver. *Source*: *Pacific Tribune* Archive.

> We fell to talking about the hard times of the progressive youth
> movement in the USA under the hammering of McCarthyism
> and wondering if its BC counterpart could take some solidarity
> action. Murphy suggested a gathering on the neutral territory of Peace
> Arch Park which would be out of the reach or at least complicate
> matters for police agents. I carried the ball from there and organized a
> broad committee to sponsor the event.

The rally attracted about three thousand people and it gave Murphy
the idea "for rebuffing the authorities the next year when Robeson was
refused permission to come to Vancouver to sing at the Mine-Mill
Convention."[41] The 1950 test run may well have set the stage for what
eventually grew to four annual concerts, but, unlike the peaceful youth
concert two years earlier, there was a perceived need to have armed
guards at the Peace Arch for the 18 May 1952 event. As planning pro-

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[41] Stephen Endicott, e-mail message to author, 25 March 2011.

ceeded, the risk factor grew substantially in the eyes of the organizers. Ken Smith recollected that Mine-Mill officials stationed "some pretty husky men at the Canadian end of the truck in case the elements who were bent on destroying Paul" decided to shove Robeson across the border and subsequently have him arrested.[42] Smith and others had heard about the violent incidents at Peekskill, New York, in August 1949 when a Robeson concert had to be aborted,[43] and again following his concert before twenty thousand fans in September when "American Legionnaires and self-appointed vigilantes assaulted cars and buses filled with people, including children, leaving the concert," as Whitaker describes the incident.[44] "Hundreds of injuries resulted."[45] With Peekskill in mind, Smith recalls:

> Fortunately, they were unable to shoot because of the huge crowds that surrounded him [Robeson]. Nevertheless, we were not taking any chances, and we stationed guards at short intervals across the escarpment (that borders one side of Peace Arch Park) to make sure that no one could set up gun emplacements there. Before anybody could have moved there would have been guys on top of him.[46]

Mine-Mill local 480 president Al King's memoirs support that recollection: "We didn't announce it but several of us, mostly veterans, came the night before and spent that night and all day in the hills around the park, ready with weapons." He continues: "There'd been some serious violence from people trying to shut down Paul Robeson concerts in the US and we didn't want any of that here."[47] The Mine-Mill organizers also made sure that the flatbed truck from which Robeson would sing was positioned in such a way that "Canadian officials of the union, including me, who were *persona non grata* in the US, could stand on the Canadian side while Paul could use the truck bed on the American side," Smith recalls. Then there was the incidental but annoying problem of a *Vancouver Sun* reporter's wanting Robeson to slap on a pair of handcuffs and pose for

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[42] "Mine-Mill and Robeson: The Peace Arch Concerts," *Pacific Tribune*, 30 April 1982.

[43] Buhle et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 572.

[44] Howard Fast, a well known author and communist in the 1950s, considered the Peekskill riots "the violent prelude to the anticommunism and racism that would mark the fifties." It was, he said, "the first great open manifestation of American fascism." Buhle et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 573.

[45] Whitaker, *Double Standard*, 170.

[46] "Mine-Mill and Robeson: The Peach Arch Concerts," *Pacific Tribune*, 30 April 1982.

[47] Al King, *Red Bait!: Struggles of a Mine Mill Local* (Vancouver: Kingbird Publishing, 1998), 115.

a photograph. Smith remembers Robeson, "in his very dignified and statesmanlike manner," rejecting the idea.[48]

Despite the various problems associated with the first concert, the Mine-Mill and left press declared it a huge success. The *News* was perhaps most effusive in its praise of the "great singer's vibrant voice" and "the magic of the greatest living voice."[49] The *Pacific Tribune* came a close second, with *Union* running close behind. The *News* writer exhausted his bank of superlatives before declaring that "the numbers participating and the degree of enthusiasm attained, exceeded even the wildest dreams of the District Union sponsors. Even the sun came out to hear him." He added that "the occasion was a victory second only to Trail in the annals of the district,"[50] a reference to Mine-Mill Local 480's having beaten back the anti-Communist raiding force of the United Steel Workers of America. A story in the same edition lauded the "Victory at Trail," explaining that, "after nearly three years of the most vicious, expensive and intensive raiding campaign ever carried on in Canada, the Steelworkers under the leadership of Charles Millard were decisively defeated here on May 13-14 in an LRB (Labour Relations Board)-conducted vote of 1949 to 1669 in favour of Mine-Mill, with only 48 voting for the alternative, 'no union.'"[51]

The *Pacific Tribune* gave the event a front-page headline and photo, and followed it with a full-length report on page 3. The paper dug deep into the annals of radical labour history, suggesting that the authorities in Ottawa and Washington

> might look back to the murder of Ginger Goodwin, the Mine-Mill leader, in 1918, that brought the working people of Vancouver out into the streets in Canada's first general strike. Or they might remember the "Bloody Sunday" of 1938 when police attacked the unemployed in Vancouver Post Office and 30,000 citizens turned out to counter government policies of unemployment and privation with their own positive demand for work and wages.[52]

The article did not suggest that concert goers from as far away as the Kootenays witnessed an event of the same magnitude as these earlier

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48 "Mine-Mill and Robeson," *Pacific Tribune*.
49 "Paul Robeson Enthralled Thousands at Monster Peace Arch Concert," *BC District Union News*, 6 June 1952.
50 Ibid.
51 "Victory at Trail Gives Fresh Impetus to CM&S Mine, Mill Negotiations," *BC District Union News*, 6 June 1952.
52 "Highways to Border Clogged by Canadians Thronging to Peace Arch Rally ... 'Will Ring Around World,' says Robeson," *Pacific Tribune*, 23 May 1952.

ones, but it was in "the same high tradition. Neither obscure threats of 'trouble,' the studied smears of the daily press nor all the subtler intimidations could deter people who felt a sense of personal outrage [over the travel ban]."[53] *Union* added its own slant, calling Robeson "the greatest living voice" and reporting that the huge crowd listened to him "speak and sing for the oppressed and exploited people of the earth." Mine-Mill's international paper also pointed to the victory against the Steel raiders in Trail, enthusing that "the unprecedented turnout was a new triumph for the union fresh from its victory over CIO Steel at Trail." The *Union* writer added that there was some talk of an American Legion group from Bellingham, WA, planning to sabotage the concert, but concluded that this was unfounded. If saboteurs had been afoot, "the magnitude and enthusiasm of the audience completely daunted them."[54]

A comparison of this coverage with that of the mainstream media illustrates some striking differences. The Vancouver dailies chose to highlight the traffic jams and the presence of the border patrol, while the union and left press highlighted the injustice committed by governments in withdrawing the singer's travel rights as well as emphasizing the social and political issues that Robeson had made his life's work. Whether the editors self-censored or shared the anti-Communist views associated with Cold War thinking, apparently they were not about to publish anything that would suggest the concert was a validation of social justice causes, especially if they were being touted by a Communist-led union. It was traffic jams versus peace, justice, and the freedom of colonial peoples. Despite this dismissive treatment, by all union accounts it was a wonderfully heart-warming occasion. In a way, at least for trade unionists, it was the Woodstock of its time. Families picnicked and listened to Robeson sing and speak in several languages. Children sought his autograph. Men and women wanted to be near him, to shake his hand. By those accounts, Robeson addressed the largely Canadian audience of admirers graciously and in a statesmanlike fashion.

By the time the crowds started their trek homeward, Mine-Mill knew it had a major victory to celebrate in spite of media efforts to downplay the crowd size. Mine-Mill publications said that up to forty thousand came. Communist papers set the number at between twenty-five and thirty thousand. The mainstream press estimates were less generous.

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53 Ibid.
54 "30,000 Hear Robeson Border Concert Sponsored by Canadian Mine-Mill," *Union*, 2 June 1952.

Duberman notes that "the American press estimated *total* attendance at five thousand; the Canadian press put the figure seven times higher."[55] Kristmanson takes issue with Murphy's crowd count of forty thousand, arguing that the "obstreperous union organizer" did not get it right. By Kristmanson's calculations, not more than five thousand could have been accommodated at Peace Arch Park. He offers this comment:

> The union's photographs contain no evidence of even 15,000 people. Through sheer repetition, Harvey Murphy and Tom McEwen in the *Pacific Tribune* fixed their high estimates on the public record despite caustic press attacks labeling them "Red Press Agents" directed from Moscow. Yet, of the two organizations reporting the *lowest* figures, the RCMP counted 5,000, but oddly enough the Soviet news service *Tass* reported just 4,500.[56]

Ironically, the *New York Times* offered the same low crowd estimate, as did the Soviet news agency *Tass* in a page 12 squib that labelled Murphy "a self-acknowledged Communist."[57] King, whose sister Olive Anderson was Murphy's secretary and had chartered twenty-three buses to ensure that people had rides to the park,[58] recalls in his memoirs that "there were reporters from *Life Magazine* and the *Reader's Digest*, from Canadian and US newspapers and there were cameras from KING-TV in Seattle." But their reports on the concert, where "all [had] come to listen to a 'red' singer,"[59] seem to have been lost, if they bothered to file them at all.

The *Vancouver Sun* and the *Vancouver Province* both gave the concert front-page, albeit perfunctory, coverage. The *Sun*'s front-page photo caption read: "Crowds from both sides of the line thronged Peace Arch Park Sunday for the concert by Negro singer Paul Robeson. Huge crowd gathered around a stage erected right on the border from which the leftist

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[55] Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 400.

[56] Kristmanson, *Plateaus of Freedom*, 223. His rationale for arguing that the crowd could have been no larger than five thousand seems questionable in that it is partially based on his view that onlookers would have been concentrated exclusively around the speakers and the flatbed truck from which Robeson sang. This does not account for the many thousands that could have been situated in picnic areas where they might not be able to hear or see the concert but could still walk over to see the singer and then return to their picnic tables and blankets. News reports indicate that the crowds ebbed and flowed, so were larger at some points than others. Using Kristmanson's crowd estimation method, the half million who attended the historic Woodstock music festival in 1968 might also have been over-estimated. This might also be said of the one hundred thousand people who gather annually on Parliament Hill for Canada Day.

[57] "CANADIANS HEAR ROBESON – Barred from Leaving US, He Sings across Border to Rally," *New York Times*, 19 May 1952.

[58] Kristmanson, *Plateaus of Freedom*, 214.

[59] King, *Red Bait*, 117.

singer was heard. Traffic jam was so bad that officials finally closed the border for an hour."[60] Perhaps wisely, it did not offer a crowd estimate. Had it been a low estimate, as suggested by its sister mainstream dailies the *Province* and the *Vancouver News-Herald*, then it would have had to explain how such a significant traffic entanglement had resulted. This also might have been true of the *Province*'s use of the figure "15,000," the estimate cited by "Customs officials." Nevertheless, the Robeson admirers caused "a traffic jam nearly three miles long[, which,] at its peak[,] clogged King George Highway Sunday." The daily added: "Many who parked their cars on sideroads and walked more than a mile to the US-Canada border heard only a part of the hour-long program by the American Negro who has become a controversial political figure." The paper also mentioned Murphy, mistakenly identifying him as the Mine-Mill "president."[61] In its photo caption on page 3, the *Vancouver News-Herald* put the number at ten thousand. Like the *Sun* and the *Province*, the *News-Herald* focused on the traffic jams. Concert-goers "jammed roads for miles around," noted the daily, while also assuring its readers that "the open-air concert was free of incidents as border patrols roamed through the crowds."[62]

Mine-Mill's *Union* took issue with crowd estimates in American newspapers, saying in a photo caption that "this was the largest gathering in the history of the Northwest." The weekly set the figure at thirty thousand, adding that the crowd was so large that "300 extra police of the border patrol were busy all day disentangling it." *Union* further reported that "first radio and newspaper reports from BC essayed to minimize the attendance, but later editions set the figure at 30,000, forced to this by police reports of the traffic jam. Seattle papers ignored the entire event, according to reports received from that city." Stretching the numbers game farther afield, perhaps in an effort to lend more credibility to the event, *Union* reported on the Freedom Family-organized concert tour:

> The Peace Arch concert was one stop in a nationwide concert tour marking Robeson's 54th birthday. Two evenings later, 2,000 concert goers turned out in Seattle to hear Robeson. Since then he has appeared before audiences of 3,500 in San Francisco, 3,500 in Berkeley, 2,300 in Los Angeles and 1,500 in Denver.[63]

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60 "Border Closed by Traffic Jam as Crowds Swarm to Hear Robeson," *Vancouver Sun*, 19 May 1952.
61 "Three-Mile Car Jam at Robeson Concert," *Vancouver Province*, 19 May 1952.
62 Photo caption, *Vancouver News-Herald*, 19 May 1952.
63 "3,000 hear Robeson," *Union*, 2 June 1952.

The *Trail Daily Times*, dubbed "The Trail Tory Times" by Local 480's King,[64] didn't think the event merited more than a paragraph from the *Canadian Press* wire service, even though several Trail workers ventured to the border at Blaine that May. Its front-page item estimated the crowd size at six thousand, all of whom gathered to hear the "Negro baritone," who "spoke briefly to the crowd along themes of peace and the brotherhood of man. But most of the time he sang." Like other mainstream news coverage, the *Times* article stressed that "there was no disorder" as "Scores of Washington state patrolmen and immigration officials mingled with the vast crowd."[65] The *Canadian Press* story noted that Mine-Mill had sponsored the concert, but the *Times* did not mention that the union's largest BC local was well represented at the border. The weekly *Rossland Miner* offered no coverage at all, although Rossland was home to the first Western Federation of Miners (WFM) local in British Columbia and possibly all of Canada. The WFM, precursor to Mine-Mill, had organized Rossland gold, silver, and base metals miners as early as 1895. A few years later, the *Rossland Miner* would proudly recount that early history and boast of the historic local miners' union hall.[66] But it did not bother to report on local attendance at the Robeson concerts. Former Mine-Mill Local 480 member Elmer Pontius, for example, recalled the sense of rapture he felt at being in the huge crowds. He had risked the long journey by car from Trail with other union members and fellow Kootenay Communists, and he remembered driving straight back to Trail in the wee hours of the next morning.[67] Buddy Devito, a former Mine-Mill organizer in Sudbury, Ontario, who would later serve as the smelter city's mayor, also recalled driving to the 1952 concert to watch "Harvey Murphy have more fun than Paul Robeson."[68]

Following the success of the 18 May concert, Murphy and the others immediately began to plan the next concert for the following summer. Meanwhile, a recording of the 1952 concert went into production. The $33^{1/3}$ and 78 rpm records, perhaps borrowing the title *I Came to Sing* from a line in a poem by Chilean Communist poet Pablo Neruda, would

[64] King, *Red Bait*, 72.

[65] "Paul Robeson Sings at Border," *Trail Daily Times*, 19 May 1952.

[66] "Mine-Mill Convention Recalls Colourful History of Miners' Union of 1895," *Rossland Miner*, 14 July 1955.

[67] Videotaped interview with Elmer Pontius conducted by the author, 19 July 2010, in Trail, British Columbia. Pontius continued to be a member of the Communist Party until his death on 21 June 2011 at age eighty-three. See "Obituaries," *Trail Daily Times*, 27 June 2011.

[68] Telephone interview with F.E. "Buddy" Devito conducted by the author, 27 March 2011, in Fruitvale, British Columbia.

be sold to help defray the cost of the concerts. The record sold out, according to Ken Smith.[69] Mine-Mill was going to reap the public relations benefits of the concert as much as possible, and who could blame it? Its leadership was ostracized from the main labour movement, hunted by Cold War-minded authorities, and hounded by police spies. The McCarthy hearings and those of the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities (HUAC) had the effect of dampening any public sympathy there might have been for red unions. Public opinion, shaped by fear, was shifting substantially to the anti-union side, and that shift made the success of the concerts all the more imperative for Mine-Mill and the Communists.

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The second Peace Arch concert was held on 16 August 1953, and the *News* again provided enthusiastic coverage. It billed Robeson as "this great singer and fighter for the Negro people,"[70] but this time the paper also dubbed him "the greatest voice of our time" and "a man whom future historians will rate as one of the very few great men of the age, and the greatest of living Americans." In sharper political language, the *News* reported that Robeson had used "fighting words" to demand "freedom for the exploited and down-trodden of the earth, and forecast peace and brotherhood in the world, despite the efforts of American reaction." As in 1952, the paper gave the singer a platform to express his political views, something that was largely denied him in the mainstream media. He told the crowd that he was "still fighting for the freedom and dignity of all men" and: "To those who dare to question my patriotism and my love for America, I say that my people and I own a great piece of this America, broken to cultivation and fertilized by our sweat and blood." He added: "We created the primary wealth of the United States, we planted and harvested the cotton, then the tobacco, and after that the indigo. No power on earth is going to stop me speaking out for my

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[69] "Robeson on CKLN," *BC District Union News*, 29 May 1953, praised Mine-Mill's Kootenay region business agent Bill Muir for getting the record played over Nelson, British Columbia, radio station CKLN on 18 May 1953, the anniversary of the first concert. The paper reported that the station manager tried to renege on the contract to play the recording because he was concerned that the federal authorities might not find it permissible: "Bill finally persuaded the manager to [call] long distance [to] Ottawa and get a clearance. It was forthcoming just in time, and thousands of people in the district who hadn't been able to go to the Peace Arch last year heard the complete program." The story took a poke at the "over-cautious manager" and stated that "it was shameful that such a voice should be denied the people through the malice of a few evil persons in high positions."

[70] Photo caption, *BC District Union News*, 10 July 1953.

Figure 4. Large and admiring crowds travelled from as far away as the Kootenays to hear Robeson, an outspoken critic of US president Harry Truman, sing famous songs like "Ol' Man River." *Source*: *Pacific Tribune* Archive.

people."[71] Whether Mine-Mill managed to get another bank loan to assist with concert costs is not mentioned, but the *News* reported that $1,090 was collected at the intermission.

Bert Whyte, again reporting for the *Pacific Tribune*, described Robeson's singing as "short, passionate and eloquent" and quoted the singer's pledge that "no force on earth can make me retreat one-thousandth of one little inch!" Robeson noted the recent truce in the Korean conflict and used it to call for amnesty for those who had been jailed for speaking out against Western involvement in the war. He then explained, in much bolder terms than he had at earlier concerts, why the US government had taken away his passport: "Because they said that out of my own lips I have been convicted of struggling for the independence of the colored people of Africa, and thus I have been 'meddling' in the foreign affairs of the government. That's just too bad, because I'm going to continue to 'meddle' in such matters." Robeson also spoke to the crowd about his political motivations: "I speak as one whose roots are in the soil of my land – my father was a slave – my father and forefathers toiled in cotton, tobacco, indigo – toiled in the great, primary wealth

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[71] "Thousands Greet Robeson at Annual Mine Mill Peace Arch Gathering," *BC District Union News*, 18 August 1953.

Figure 5. Mainstream media reports focused on the traffic jams at the 1952 concert, while labour and left publications reported on the substance of Robeson's anti-colonial, anti-racist remarks. *Source*: *Pacific Tribune* Archive.

of my country – I have a right to speak out on their blood." Robeson then talked about his fellow artists, saying: "Our strength comes from the people, and we must serve the people; not from above the people, but with the people, on such stages as this [the back of a truck], on the picket lines, wherever people are fighting for a better way of life. I will never apologize for fighting for and with the people."[72] Murphy then led the crowd in three cheers. When he asked the members of the crowd if they liked Robeson, they responded loudly that they did. Murphy wasn't satisfied, so he asked again and the response was even louder. "Even Senator McCarthy down in Washington must have heard that one," Whyte quotes Murphy as saying. *Union* also gave Robeson space to tell his story and demand freedom, but it was a much shorter story than had previously appeared in the international Mine-Mill paper.[73]

The *Vancouver Sun*, again seeming to look for controversy, reported that the "RCMP said the singer was heckled by the occupants of 50 cars

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[72] "'Artists Come from the People, and We Must Serve the People': Robeson Thrills Thousands at Peace Arch," *Pacific Tribune*, 21 August 1953.
[73] "BC District Union and 25,000 Welcome Robeson to Peace Arch," *Union*, 31 August 1953.

parked on the Blaine side of the arch. There was no major disturbance."[74] Concert organizers denied that any heckling had occurred. The *Vancouver News-Herald* offered no coverage of the event, but the *Province* was surprisingly generous with its crowd estimate of thirty thousand. The *Pacific Tribune* had claimed more than twenty thousand were on hand when Robeson arrived, and it also quoted the Mine-Mill estimate of twenty-five thousand, noting: "Estimates of members of the audience ranged from 18,000 to 25,000." Now the *Province* had even topped those probably inflated figures. The *Sun* was far less generous, with its low estimate of only three thousand, inciting the *Tribune* to remark that "the *Sun*'s absurd figure of 3,000 is just as plainly a lie as [is] its cooked-up report of 'heckling.'"[75]

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The third Peace Arch concert went ahead on 1 August 1954, as scheduled, and Mine-Mill's *Union* used the occasion to lash out at the authorities in a story penned by none other than Harvey Murphy. After assuming he spoke for all Canadians in expressing their deep "love" and "respect" for Robeson, he criticized the American public as follows:

> Canadians simply can't seem to understand … the apathy of the American people towards the injustice done this great singer and Negro leader, which apathy, they feel, makes every American who succumbs to it equally guilty with the State Department of violating the Constitution by refusing guaranteed liberties to Mr. Robeson.

He further argued that more damage was being done to the international standing of the United States "than could be accomplished by a propaganda troupe of fifty McCarthys to this country, each accompanied by his two punks. There would be a lot of laughter over the latter picture; but the State Department's deprivation of Robeson's liberty is productive only of contempt." Murphy also used his *Union* column to brag about the success of *I Came to Sing*, the recording that Mine-Mill had produced: "The disc jockeys know this well; of all first rank singers on the platters, he [Robeson] is probably the most favored, and the recordings of the first Peace Arch concert in 1952 were sought by Canadians far and wide,

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[74] "Robeson Heckled at Peace Arch Concert," *Vancouver Sun*, 17 August 1953.
[75] "How Many People Were at Great Border Rally?" *Pacific Tribune*, 21 August 1953.

the majority of them probably quite indifferent to either Communism or trade unionism."[76]

Not to be outdone by the Mine-Mill papers, the *Tribune* also published a pre-concert article. A few days before the event, the paper said that the "outstanding world artist and beloved fighter for people's rights" was still battling for the return of his passport. It added: "The recent 'get Robeson' campaign in the US has failed dismally."[77] This might have been wishful thinking as the State Department continued to withhold the singer's travelling rights. The paper also noted that Mine-Mill had invited the athletes competing in the British Empire Games at Vancouver to attend the Peace Arch event. Perhaps it was an attempt to garner some ever-diminishing mainstream news coverage on the coattails of the international sporting event.

The *News* avoided any overt political statements in its 1954 concert reports, choosing to lead with a lengthy description of the fine Sunday weather, followed by a comment on Robeson's "vibrant voice."[78] The editors then let Robeson make his usual political points, and this time more than ever he trained his sights on Washington: "I want to warn the State Department that I will still fight for the freedom of colonial people throughout the world." With the American people "awakening to the fear pall of McCarthyism," he continued, "I am getting more opportunities to sing and trouble over halls to sing in is less frequent. I think our people are getting wise to the propaganda that has blinded them of late years."[79] The *News* conceded that its audience forecast of thirty thousand did not rise beyond a disappointing fifteen thousand. *Union*'s Ted Ward agreed with that assessment, sang Robeson's praises, then also let him do the talking: "All of us here believe in the oneness of mankind, but a few greedy people have got the power in their hands, and want to keep my people as industrial serfs. But time is running out for them, and they cannot turn back the clock of history."[80] The *Tribune*, too, put the audience figure at fifteen thousand.

Mine-Mill Local 480's the *Commentator* was a somewhat late entry in the race to spread the word about the concerts, and it had to play

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[76] "Canadian M-M Council Announces Another Robeson Concert at Border," *Union*, 21 June 1954.

[77] "Robeson Sings at Peach Arch on Sunday," *Pacific Tribune*, 30 July 1954.

[78] "Thousands Cheer as Robeson Sings Again to Canadians," *BC District Union News*, 31 August 1954.

[79] Ibid.

[80] "15,000 Cheer Robeson's Border Concert Sponsored by Canadian M-M," *Union*, 16 August 1954.

catch-up with its June 1954 edition.[81] The back-page article, illustrated with a photo of Robeson, seems to be original reportage rather than reprints from the provincial *News*. Though there is no byline on the story, the tone is redolent of Murphy's preachy pen. Reminiscing about the convention events of February 1952, the article states: "We protested then and we are still protesting, and with Paul, we will keep on fighting for those things we all hold in common 'so long as there is a drop of blood in our bodies.'" The *Commentator* also pointed out the irony of holding the concerts at the Peace Arch, with its hinged gates and the inscription "May these gates never be closed," noting: "But those gates are closed." This was an added incentive to its readers across the Kootenays to "get to the Peace Arch on the appointed day, by car, by train, by thumb or by God." Once there, the gathered forces would

> by sheer weight of numbers, counted in the thousands, force those gates open again, so that not only the continental canned generals, the Skywanis and the rotund Rotarians may pass freely back and forth, but also you and I, Paul Robeson, Vince Hallinan and a score of others may also enjoy the privilege of visiting freely with our friends and neighbours, at will.[82]

Whether many smelter workers in Trail or mine workers at Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada operations in Riondel and Kimberley heeded that call to travel the six hundred and fifty km to the coast is not clear. To be sure, there likely were Kootenay people among the throng at all the concerts. In its July 1954 issue, the *Commentator* seemed to take some ownership of the pro-Robeson events on behalf of Local 480 members as it offered the local leadership's rationale for supporting the concerts:

> We in Mine Mill in Canada may well feel proud of our having taken a leading role, through our Annual Peace Arch Robeson Concerts, in a fight, which not only involves civil liberties but also our rights as Canadians to determine whom we wish to hear sing and speak. It is our answer to the McCarth[y]ites who seek to dictate to Canadians their particular brand of thought control.[83]

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[81] The *Commentator* had been publishing intermittently since the fall of 1938 as a key weapon in the fiercely opposed organizing drive at the smelter in Trail. By the time of the concerts, the drive was solidly in the hands of the local's Communist leadership. That leadership most certainly attended the 1952 and 1953 concerts. In his memoirs Al King recalls being at Peace Arch Park for the first concert (King, *Red Bait*, 115), so it seems odd that the paper would not have printed coverage before 1954.

[82] "Paul Robeson Sings," *Commentator*, June 1954, 8.

[83] "Why the Annual Robeson Concerts Sponsored By Mine Mill in Canada?" *Commentator*, July 1954, 8.

By the 1954 concert, the three Vancouver dailies seemed to have lost all interest in Robeson and Mine-Mill's efforts to help him. There was no coverage in any of them. As noted above, they had not given the events major coverage in the two previous years. In fact, as has been shown, the reports were skimpy, often just a photo and a cutline, and the focus was geared to exposing a public disruption rather than to highlighting the music, the political issues being expressed, or the wrongdoing being protested. Now they simply ignored the concerts altogether.

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In its April 1955 edition, the *News* ran a photo of Robeson and advertised the fourth annual concert,[84] and, in its May edition, it announced that there would be two concerts, one at Peace Arch Park and one at Patterson, WA. The latter location, near the Canada-US border crossing that was closest to Trail residents, would thus be a much shorter drive for those smelter and mine workers, some six thousand of them, who may have previously wanted to attend the Peace Arch events. Their hoped-for attendance was the likely intent of the double concert proposal. The audience numbers had been decreasing steadily, and Mine-Mill needed to devise a way of taking Robeson to its members rather than asking them to make the trek to him. The *News* noted a further reason for the Patterson location: "The Patterson concert will synchronize with the holding of the National Convention at Trail, taking place on July 17, and will be within easy ride of Trail, Kimberley, Spokane, and Coeur d'Alene points." The *Commentator* noted, rather presumptuously, that the concerts were "now the outstanding musical event of the Northwest."[85]

Robeson had "a new buoyancy in his bearing," the *News* reported in its coverage of the 24 July concert, "and his voice rang with the joyous accents of freedom." A large photo of the singer-activist greeting Canadians at the border accompanied the article, which estimated that year's crowd at "over 12,000 Canadians and Americans." The paper, now issued monthly, also brought news of a new success: "Indeed, the crowd itself was swayed with the enthusiasm of victory, following the news that he is now permitted by the US State Department to go to Canada."[86] It was a Pyrrhic victory at best, however, because it would take until June 1958, not long after Robeson's sixtieth birthday, for

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84 Photo caption, *BC District Union News*, April 1955.
85 "He Sings Again!" *BC District Union News*, May 1955.
86 "Paul Robeson Greets Canadians with Victory's Thrill in Bearing and Voice," *BC District Union News*, July 1955.
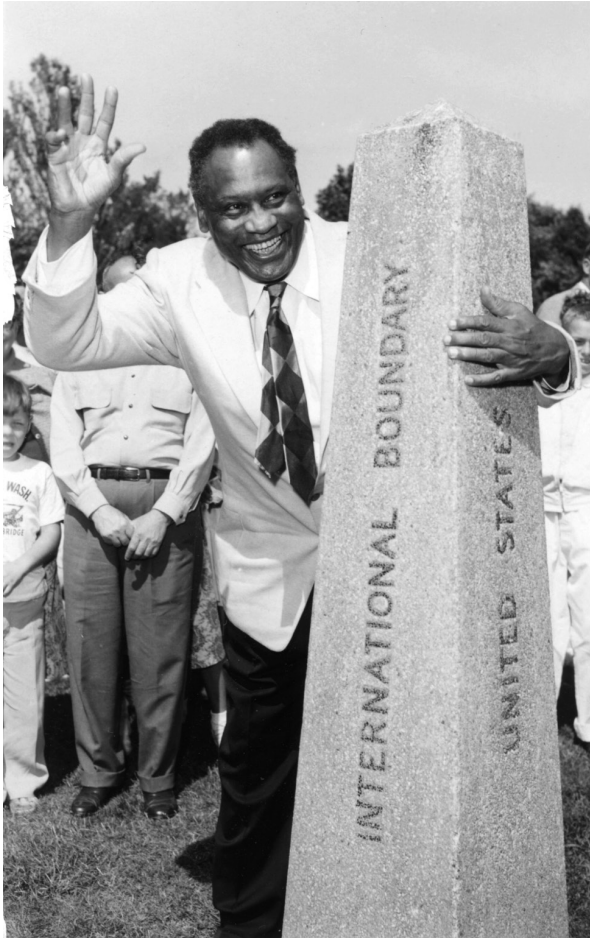
Figure 6. Acclaimed singer and actor Paul Robeson clutches the international boundary marker in 1955 as he nears the end of his struggle to regain his passport from the US State Department. *Source*: *Pacific Tribune* Archive.

the US Supreme Court to overturn the State Department's decision to ban the singer from travelling abroad.[87] By then, Robeson's career had been virtually shattered by many years of red baiting and officially sanctioned harassment. The article continued in an optimistic tone,

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[87] Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 463, notes that the court came to a 5-4 split decision on a related case that also covered Robeson's case. In summary, it lifted the ban, stating that the department "had no right to deny a passport to any citizen because of his political beliefs." It further found that the "Passport Division had no right to demand that an applicant sign an affidavit concerning membership in the Communist Party."

listing the seventeen songs sung, and, again, the repertoire included the labour movement anthem "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night." The *News* writer could not resist injecting an observation that seemed to have a slightly religious tinge to it: "In conclusion of his program he recited and then sang William Blake's 'Jerusalem,' and the hearts of the audience thrilled to the final words of promise of no rest until, 'We have built Jerusalem, in this our green and pleasant land.'"[88] The article reported that Murphy gave Robeson a copy of *Fatherless Sons*, a new book that chronicled the struggles of a hard-rock miner, prompting Robeson to remember the support shown him by Welsh miners in the Rhondda Valley. "'One thing I've learned,' said the great singer, 'is that the tradition of the miners, particularly regarding solidarity and their love of freedom, are the same throughout the world.'"[89]

Union picked up on the victory line in a photo caption on page 5 of its 1 August 1955 edition. The photo shows Robeson walking, presumably towards the international boundary. The paper said that fifteen thousand attended the concert, a high estimate even by comparison to that of the *Tribune*, which would go no higher than ten thousand. *Union* offered no more than a photo and a caption on the event, perhaps suggesting that the international union surmised that the concerts would increasingly diminish in popularity and that they had possibly outlived their political usefulness. The limited coverage may have been a clear signal that there would be no more international support for continuing the annual concerts into a fifth year. Still, the paper celebrated Robeson's victory. "This concert is a first step, however grudgingly given, toward my complete freedom of movement," the paper quoted the singer as saying to the cheering crowd: "The leaders are around the peace table now, and that they are is due to meetings like this all over the world."[90] There was no way of verifying how much influence the concerts might have had in securing an uneasy truce in Korea, of course, but this did not stop Mine-Mill from laying some claim to it.

The *Tribune*'s Ted Ward, now a veteran Peace Arch concert reporter, wrote a background article a few days before the 1955 event in which he retold the entire saga of the four concerts.[91] The main story was reserved for the editor himself, the venerable Tom McEwen, a veteran of years of battling with the avidly anti-Communist Canadian labour leadership both as a leading Communist and as a critic of the established labour

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[88] "Paul Robeson Greets Canadians," *BC District Union News*.
[89] Ibid.
[90] "Going to Canada," *Union*, 1 August 1955.
[91] "Robeson Concert at Border," *Pacific Tribune*, 22 July 1955.

movement during the early 1930s, when he headed up the Communist Workers' Unity League (WUL) to organize the masses of unemployed workers. McEwen opened his piece with a quote from "the great American and world artist." Robeson told the smaller than usual crowd: "As an artist I come to sing, but as a citizen I will always speak for peace, and no one can silence me in this." Then McEwen gave his former WUL lieutenant Harvey Murphy, "the veteran Mine-Mill leader," a chance to laud Robeson: "The whole world owes a great debt of gratitude to its outstanding American artist for his courage in standing up and fighting for his people."[92] As had been the *Tribune*'s habit throughout the four concerts, McEwen also offered his readers some Mine-Mill history in his reportage.

> Here a group of Chinese-Canadians sat, as if in a temple, while the vibrant challenging voice sang the battle songs of the New China. And beside them, a group of miners and longshoremen listened intently, some wiping away a tear while pretending to blow their noses as the deep rich voice softly ended the song Joe Hill … "I never died said he" – a truth borne out by last week's Canadian constituent convention of a great union in Rossland in an old hall filled with the Western Federation of Miners, forerunner of the fighting Mine-Mill.[93]

McEwen could not resist taking one last poke at the mainstream media for its failure to accurately report the crowd sizes:

> That the Vancouver daily papers have little intention of ending their cold war policies was indicated by the *Vancouver Herald*, whose knightly chess player, Sir Michael Bruce, in reporting the concert reduced the audience to 'nearly a thousand.' I hope he did better at his chess than in his nose counting, otherwise it must have been hard on many of his readers who attended this outstanding cultural event.[94]

The *Vancouver Province* provided a noticeably subdued report on the "Famed Negro singer," refusing to take the symbolic step across the border, having heard the news that the US State Department was lifting the travel ban. The reporter estimated the crowd at ten thousand, the same figure cited by the union and left press. Once again, the paper mistakenly appointed Murphy "president" of the union, a consistent error throughout the four years of coverage but perhaps an indication

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[92] "Canadian Tour Planned: 10,000 Hear Robeson at Peace Arch Park," *Pacific Tribune*, 29 July 1955.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

of the prominent role played by "the reddest rose."[95] The *Vancouver Sun* predictably focused on something other than the social justice issues that continued to be stressed by Robeson and Mine-Mill. This time an enterprising reporter had interviewed the "Negro singing star" about his financial situation. "It has cost me $2,000,000 in cash since 1947 for remaining loyal to my political convictions," the paper quoted the "burly bass singer" as saying.[96] The reporter gave Robeson credit for his ability to still "thrill an audience with his voice at the age of 58," but he also felt compelled to mention that the concert was sponsored by the "red-tinged Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers' Union." Clearly, the *Sun* editors were still very much fighting the Cold War in 1955. Finally, the *Sun* reporter even allowed as how the singer "expressed strong hopes for world peace as a result of the recent summit conference in Geneva and contended that world leaders are being forced to make peace because of the insistence of people everywhere."[97] Former Mine-Mill president Ken Smith recalled that there was some *News-Herald* (formerly the *Herald*) coverage of the fourth concert. Apparently, the daily ran the headline "He Kissed a Negro." And, as Smith remembered it, that's "exactly what Harvey Murphy did when Paul entered the Peace Arch grounds."[98]

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Thirty years after the first Robeson Peace Arch concert, the *Tribune* revisited the event in 1982, when Mine-Mill was only a historical memory and when labour and left-wing political victories were becoming fewer and farther between. As writer Dan Keeton notes, "the unusual concerts were the progressive movement's solution" to the banning of Robeson. He adds: "The series of concerts remains a testimony to the efforts of a militant union which turned an attempt by US officials to defeat Robeson and his internationalist, working-class principles into a victory which won for the outstanding progressive his right to travel freely again." Keeton discussed the union's role in orchestrating the concerts with retired Mine-Mill national president Ken Smith, who was BC district president in the early 1950s, but Smith didn't speculate about the political motivations behind the concerts. Nor did the article dwell on the fact that not everyone on the left in this postwar period

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95 "Robeson Sings But Remains on US Side," *Vancouver Province*, 25 July 1955.
96 "Missed Fortune in Television, Says Singer Paul Robeson," *Vancouver Sun*, 25 July 1955.
97 Ibid.
98 "Mine-Mill and Robeson," *Pacific Tribune*.

was supportive of the concerts. The union movement in Canada and the United States was falling into lockstep with Cold War thinking about Communists. The CIO, which owed its early successes in organizing to the Communists, had purged eleven of its unions through convention decisions in 1949 and 1950 because they were led by Communists.[99] Mine-Mill was one of those unions. To show support for a Communist-led union's publicity seeking concerts, no matter how pure the larger cause, was not something the untainted CIO unions were likely to do, especially given the kind of witch hunting that dominated the political landscape.

Another political element perhaps offers a further explanation for the avid anti-Mine-Mill attitudes among some union leaders: the power struggle that was under way between the CPC-LLP and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which became the New Democratic Party in 1961. The two parties were at war with each other over which one should win the hearts and minds of working-class voters and thus command the labour movement vote. For years, Murphy and other Communists had openly criticized the CCF, calling them "social fascists," a term that had been abandoned before the concerts took place. The party journals and the labour press were filled with invective around this issue. So mean-spirited was the debate that the CCF publication of record, the *CCF News*, carried not a single word about any of the concerts. By contrast, as we have seen repeatedly above, the CPC-LLP's *Tribune* gave them substantial coverage. The CCF, and one of its strongest union supporters, the Steel Workers, seemed determined to wipe out the Communists, and, apparently, they were not prepared to give any credit to a leading red union regardless of the rightness of its concerts' causes.

The raids in Trail were another factor influencing how labour leaders viewed the concerts. They were among the most vicious of raids, with the Steel Workers employing the anti-Communist tactics that had become commonplace in the United States. As mentioned earlier, when the first concert took place in May 1952, the Steel Workers had just lost a major Labour Relations Board vote to represent the smelter and mine workers in the Kootenays. Financially, Steel had to add six thousand dues-paying members to its ranks to make the raid pay. Politically, if it could succeed in delivering those workers' votes to the CCF, it would strengthen its status in the party. But for a raft of historical reasons, the workers of

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[99] Dray, *There Is Power*, 444, writes that Communists were "perhaps the best organizers in the country." On page 510, he adds that CIO president John L. Lewis welcomed Communists as members, declaring: "I do not turn my organizers and CIO members upside down and shake them to see what kind of literature falls out of their pockets."

Trail and the two other communities had decided to stay with their Communist-led union. Coming on the heels of that legal decision the concerts' success sweetened the Mine-Mill victory. In a way, however, it might have given the union a false sense of security. After all, the Mine-Mill of the 1950s was a pale image of its former self, the more radical, more communistic WFM. When the WFM changed its name to Mine-Mill in 1916 in an effort to launder the union's radical image, it began a long decline towards becoming a much-defanged political force. Certainly the union continued to be progressive on issues it identified as critically important. It remained anti-racist, anti-war, anti-capitalist, and pro-workers' rights to a fault, but it was a pariah in the postwar world of legal compromise. It had enemies everywhere, and its leaders were constantly harassed by police, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, RCMP spies, and other agents assigned to expose Communist union leaders and scare members of their unions into abandoning them.

Mine-Mill might not have been the radical union it was in the old days, but it was still viewed as far more radical than the Steel Workers of the 1950s. Constitutionally, it had a much more progressive line on issues such as race, war and peace, women's equality, and women union members' right to participate. It was also decidedly farther to the left than most other unions. In the preamble to the Mine-Mill constitution, for example, it states boldly: "We hold that the class struggle will continue until the producer is recognized as the sole master of his product."[100] It was Mine-Mill that saw the concerts as a multi-faceted opportunity to engage in the political moment. Though Mine-Mill may have garnered kudos from some quarters for taking on the fight for Robeson's constitutional rights, it was also fighting for its own survival at a time when history had been seized by the forces of the radical right. As MacDowell argues, "Mine Mill's rhetoric about civil liberties, while genuine, also reflected its interest in broader civil liberties for its leaders, so that they could work politically without constraints, and create a better climate for their views." It was also consistent with the tactics used in the Communist Party's early campaigns, in which the rhetoric of freedom and democracy was used to try to protect its leaders. MacDowell further notes:

> This consistent position by Communist activists was self-interested, but it inadvertently helped protect the civil liberties of others as well.

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[100] King, *Red Bait*, 32.

The larger audience attracted to Robeson's concerts wanted to see him, undoubtedly, but many were also concerned about guarding civil liberties in a period when policy-makers determinedly escalated security measures.[101]

Somewhat in agreement with MacDowell is historian Benjamin Isitt, who characterizes the concerts as symbolic of the defiant attitude that marked the BC Communists and the BC Mine-Mill leadership. In his 2008 PhD dissertation he calls the Peace Arch concerts an "unlikely series" and argues that the Cold War meant that such cultural events were purged from the historical record.[102]

When that first Peace Arch concert became a reality in the Cold War spring of 1952, it must have seemed that the stars had truly aligned for Robeson and Murphy. The collaboration with Robeson was a chance for the union to build public support for its many causes. With him as a willing partner, the union leaders could make a much broader statement about all the things they believed in and all the things that made them trade unionists, that made them want to carry on as more radical trade unionists than the many who had succumbed to the union bashing of the times. It allowed Mine-Mill, and indirectly the CPC-LLP, to spit in the face of the governments that had been harassing its leaders for decades. Such harassment had been a daily reality for Murphy since the 1920s.[103] Indeed, he was frequently on the run from the Mounties. Reid Robinson, the international Mine-Mill president at the time, was also hounded by authorities who believed him to be a Communist. At the hidden behest of the CCL leadership, they thoroughly harassed him when he came to Canada in the late 1940s, even arresting him for the purpose of deportation.[104]

Were Murphy, Robinson, and Robeson truly a threat to national security? Clearly the RCMP Security Service, Canada's spy agency of the day, and its political masters believed they were. RCMP agents diligently

[101] MacDowell, "Paul Robeson," 10.

[102] See also Benjamin Isitt, *Militant Minority: British Columbia Workers and the Rise of the New Left, 1948–1972* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

[103] RCMP Security Service reports obtained by the author under Canadian Access to Information legislation reveal the extent of police surveillance on Murphy since at least 1929.

[104] Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism and Canadian Labour* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 96-99, explains the complicated background of the Robinson harassment, revealing that the Canadian government was "taking its cue from the [anti-Communist leadership of the Canadian Congress of Labour]" when it arrested Robinson "and held him for deportation on a charge that he advocated the violent overthrow of the Canadian government." On page 121, Abella further explains that Murphy objected so strenuously to the CCL position on Robinson that he found himself suspended from the Congress for two years.

collected news clippings and noted observations from the time of that first telephone concert in early 1952 onward.[105] Was there a legitimate reason for Canadian authorities to fear these people politically? These questions will be revisited by scholars of the left for generations to come. For Kristmanson, Robeson's presence posed a threat of a different sort. His appearance before a vast audience such as that at the Peace Arch concerts "gave people courage to turn and resist illiberal tendencies in the Western Democracies,"[106] and so, "five decades on, the unreconstructed Robeson remains intolerable to conservatives and liberals alike."[107] What legacy did the concerts leave behind? Did they resonate with future generations of progressive trade unionists? A re-enactment of the concerts at the Peace Arch in 2002 sponsored by the left-wing Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives suggests that they did. It brought back to life a time when some unions were still interested in challenging the hegemony of large corporations, and, though the event did not attract the tens of thousands of participants that Murphy claimed attended the first concert in 1952, for the people who did attend it was a time to celebrate and to revive that historic moment if only for a few hours. American actor Danny Glover read from some of the Robeson speeches that had so enraptured the big crowds of the day. The young trade unionists in attendance at the 2002 event said that knowing the history of the concerts had inspired them to become leaders of the labour movement.[108] They also acknowledged that they were emboldened by seeing Glover's portrayal of Robeson's persistently unwavering stand for freedom, fairness, and solidarity. The re-enactment also showed them what a union was capable of doing when confronted with the frightful power of a state crazed by a discriminatory ideology. Finally, it was a way of remembering something that is so easily forgotten: uncomfortable history. In 2002, only a few months after the jetliners smashed into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, the world was moving towards a more or less permanent state of war, with the United States assuming an even greater role as global policeman. The calls for peace that Robeson made back in the 1950s resonated that day in 2002, as they still do today.

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[105] Rᴄᴍᴘ Security Service reports obtained by the author under Canadian Access to Information legislation include these items in various reports.

[106] Kristmanson, *Plateaus of Freedom*, 203.

[107] Ibid., 182.

[108] *Working TV* took footage of the 2002 re-enactment, which includes comments from participants. It is available at http://www.workingtv.com/herewestand.html.
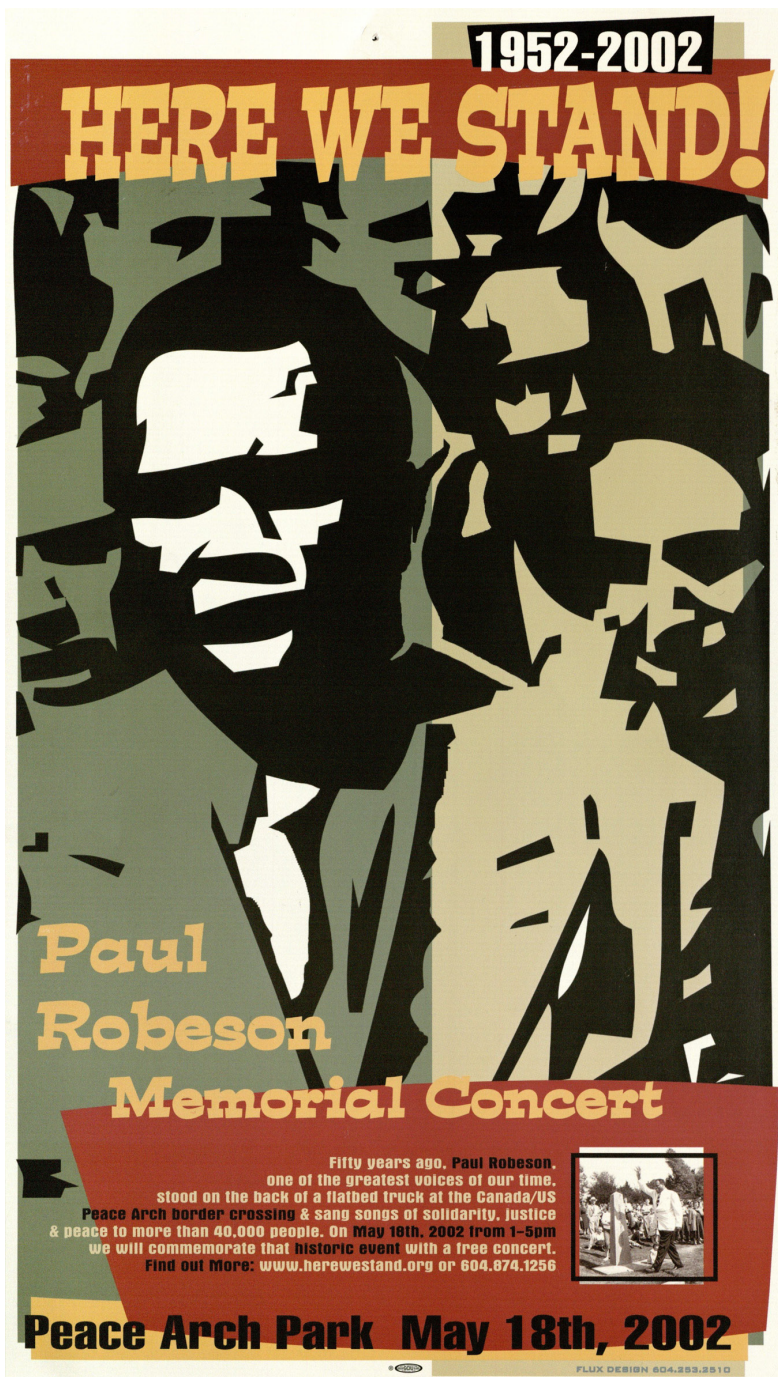
Figure 7. A poster advertising the 50th anniversary of Paul Robeson's memorial concert at the Peace Arch border crossing south of Vancouver, May 2002. *Source*: the author.

Whatever their legacy, the concerts are a too-little-remembered part of labour-left history, and those who developed the ingenious strategy have gone largely unsung, including Murphy, whom Local 480 president Al King credits with the Robeson concert idea. He "created the space for all this to happen," King recalls in his memoirs.[109] He goes on to say that the concerts were a huge victory for the union and the left in general: "If he'd never done anything else in the labour movement, that was one glorious strategy that came out of his fertile imagination."[110] Murphy died in 1977, a year after his friend Paul Robeson, largely forgotten by the labour movement he had served throughout his life. According to his son, the late Rae Murphy, only a few of his oldest mining comrades stayed in touch with him, and he was no longer asked to address union strike rallies as he had once done so passionately.[111] Mine-Mill, too, has been relegated to a back seat in labour-left history. When it merged with the Steel Workers in 1967, it ceased to be a political force, and its creative approach to unionism, epitomized by the concerts, had become a dim memory.

Historians who have studied the concerts and Mine-Mill's role in creating them will know that they were a feat of notable proportion, and while they may simply be a footnote to more expansive studies of other aspects of labour-left history, they are nevertheless worthy of thorough examination as a unique contribution to the Cold War struggles of the 1950s. Some may argue that it was Murphy, the opportunist, who benefited most from the success of the events. Others may see it as a smokescreen behind which were hidden the Communist union leaders who had been purged by a mainstream labour movement perhaps too anxious to comply with the new postwar order of social and economic compromise. Of course, there was also the ostensible rescuing of Paul Robeson, but the concerts were so much more. They were a platform upon which the important issues confronting workers and the world could be addressed, and for once the movement could command an audience far greater than that to which it was accustomed. People listened when Robeson came to sing. Mine-Mill, Murphy, the left, and trade unionism were the beneficiaries of a moment that is largely lost today.

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[109] King, *Red Bait*, 118.

[110] Ibid., 117.

[111] Audiotaped interview with Rae Murphy conducted by the author at Murphy's Mississauga, Ontario, home, 26 May 2008. Note: Rae Murphy died on 6 March 2011. See "Deaths," *Globe and Mail*, 7 March 2011.