

# Unions and the Just Society



Labour movements arose in the Old World to protest a social and political system based on discrimination according to ancestry, social status, income and property. During the industrial revolution workers were not only poor, they were powerless, without the right to vote, without access to education, without any clout whatsoever in their society. What else did they have but each other—the capacity to band together to bargain as a group for decent wages and safer working conditions, and to withdraw their services if their needs were ignored.

Our forebears envisioned a New World different from the class-stratified societies they left behind. They saw Canada as a land of opportunity, not only for a handful of winners but for everyone. They envisioned a society where there would be no huge gulf between rich and poor, no elite finely educated in private schools while the masses languished in ignorance, no oppression of the powerless. They built a public education system so that all could gain the knowledge, reasoning skills and understanding to participate fully in democracy—where power is shared. Every individual with the dignity of a say, the right and responsibility of a vote. Our elected government representatives enacting legislation to further the common good. There would be no need for class conflict in the just society.

Those who settled Alberta shared this vision of classlessness. Alberta was built as much by working people as by entrepreneurs, but no working class consciousness or solidarity developed here. In *The Limits of Labour* David Bright

argues that wage earners in Alberta's early days didn't want to think of themselves as working class; they wanted to think of themselves as on their way up. The early unions of skilled workers—stonemasons, carpenters, printers, CPR mechanics—didn't sympathize with the plight of the unskilled worker, the unemployed or the ethnic immigrant. Perhaps the skilled workers thought the troubles of the unemployed workers were their own fault. We're like that here. We believe so much in individual responsibility that we're blind to the social forces creating the problems.

Working people in Alberta certainly don't see their interests as being opposed to the interests of capital. We're a province of individualists and we're hostile to the very idea of collective action. But if we think there's no need for unions anymore—that we've achieved social justice

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and equality for all—we might ask ourselves a few questions. How many employees have been downsized from extremely profitable corporations? Do workers really have a say in their conditions of work? Do the majority of Albertans have quality jobs? Who benefits more from the development of the province's resources, the worker or the stockholder? Does the legislation of this province provide as much protection for labour as for business, for the working person as for the employer? If not, why not? Why is wealth concentrated in fewer and fewer hands? Why the appetite for exclusive private schools? Why the epidemic of homelessness? Is this the kind of society we intended to build?

*Jackie Hanagan*