

Rebel or Revolutionary? Jack Kavanagh and the Early Years of the Communist Movement in Vancouver, 1920-1925

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Article abstract

In the history of Canadian labour and the left from 1900 to 1925 the radical life of Jack Kavanagh represents an important link between the politics of pre-war socialism and post-war communism. A prominent trade union leader and revolutionary propagandist in Vancouver, he was a founding member of the Communist Party of Canada in 1921 and its first provincial chairman in British Columbia. At the level of leadership, however, the foundation period of the communist movement in Vancouver was dominated by recurring disputes between Kavanagh and the party centre in Toronto, suggesting a kind of regional factionalism. This article reviews that historical experience and assesses Kavanagh's place in Canada's radical heritage.

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ARTICLES

Rebel or Revolutionary? Jack Kavanagh and the Early Years of the Communist Movement in Vancouver, 1920-1925

David Akers

DURING THE 1919 VANCOUVER GENERAL STRIKE, the guardians of conventional 'law and order' in the city, the middle-class Citizens League, bemoaned the evils of "Kavanagh Bolshevism" and its "red-eyed vision of Soviet control."¹ Jack Kavanagh — a member of the general strike committee, prominent "platform speaker" for the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), and the provincial chairman of the One Big Union (OBU) in British Columbia — was a prime target for the establishment backlash against labour militancy in Vancouver.²

Red Scare hysterics aside, Kavanagh did, from October 1917, openly embrace the Russian Revolution and its "proletarian dictatorship," as he labelled the Soviet

¹*Vancouver Citizen*, 25 June 1919.

²On Kavanagh's role in the 1919 Canadian labour revolt, see Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1967), 66-84; Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour, 1880-1930* (Kingston 1968), 138-98; A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977), 145-54; David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 57-170; Gerald Friesen, "'Yours in Revolt': The Socialist Party of Canada and the Western Canadian Labour Movement," in *Labour/Le Travail*, 1 (1976), 139-55; Dave Adams, "The Canadian Labour Revolt of 1919: The West Coast Story," in *Socialist Worker*, 161 (November, 1990).

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government. Prior to the Vancouver general strike, he already was extolling the "discipline" of Lenin and the Bolshevik Party as a model to be emulated in Canada.³ In local working-class politics during the early 1920s, Kavanagh was drawn to the project of building "a party of a new type," becoming a founding member of the underground Communist Party of Canada (CPC) in 1921. He ascended to the executive of its 'legal' apparatus, the Workers Party of Canada (WPC), by 1922.⁴

Kavanagh's movement into the first generation of "Canadian Bolsheviks," however, was not a smooth process. It resulted, firstly, in his rancorous departure from the SPC, a provocative propaganda party, after 13 years' membership in Vancouver Local No. 1; only one week before the split he had run as the SPC candidate for South Vancouver riding in the 1921 federal election.⁵ Kavanagh also was something of a dissident in the foundation period of Canadian communism. The Vancouver communist movement's early years were shaped, at the leadership level, by disputes between Kavanagh and the CPC central Canadian headquarters over tactical and organizational questions, suggesting a kind of regional factionalism.⁶ Tensions often ran high, and Kavanagh even advocated transferring the CPC head office from Toronto to Winnipeg, an idea which "reflected western labour's traditional suspicion of any authority permanently located in central

³*BC Federationist*, 4 April 1919.

⁴For the historiography of Canadian communism, which treats (in sketchy and often inaccurate ways) the role played by Kavanagh in the CPC in the early 1920s, see William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 28-70; Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party of Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975), 16-43; Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981), 72-118; Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988), 44-69.

⁵Kavanagh placed last in the December 1921 poll in his home riding, winning only 810 votes. See *Annual Report on Labour Organization in Canada, 1921*. The following selection of historical writings assess the SPC contribution to Canada's radical heritage from various perspectives, and Kavanagh's leadership role in the party (he sat on the Dominion Executive Committee of the SPC for the first time in 1912) receives occasional attention: Ross A. Johnson, "No Compromise — No Political Trading: The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia," PhD Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975; Norman Penner, *The Canadian Left: A Critical Analysis* (Scarborough 1977); David Frank and Nolan Reilly, "The Emergence of the Socialist Movement in the Maritimes, 1899-1916," in *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979); Linda Kealey, "Canadian Socialism and the Woman Question," in *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (1984); Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," in *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall, 1985); Peter Campbell, "The Socialist Party of Canada: 'Impossibilism' Revisited," Unpublished Paper, Department of History, Queen's University, 1990; McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*; Friesen, "Yours in Revolt."

⁶Norman Penner also suggests the presence of "regional antagonism" in the foundation period of the CPC without detailing the dynamics which underscored it. See Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 63.

Canada.”⁷ Kavanagh’s association with Canadian communism, cut short in 1925 when he emigrated to Australia, was replete with rifts and reconciliations, and this article is geared toward uncovering that historical experience.

It also attempts to situate Kavanagh, an intriguing practitioner of proletarian politics, on the revolutionary left of Canada’s radical heritage. The space he has occupied until now in the historiography of Canadian labour and the left for the period 1900-1925 depicts an individual with strong syndicalist and ultraleftist leanings, tendencies which were manifest in his political activism and trade union strategy. CPC official historiography, as recorded by long-serving party chairman Tim Buck, even goes so far as to suggest that Kavanagh’s sympathy for the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the charismatic “Wobblies,” was the root cause of his stormy association with Canadian communism. “Jack had very strong syndicalist leanings,” Buck concludes. According to this assessment Kavanagh “never was elected to office in his local union largely because of these syndicalist tendencies and his vocal support, publicly, for the ideas of the IWW.”⁸ This seriously flawed perspective transforms Kavanagh from a socialist revolutionary into a syndicalist rebel.

Buck is not alone, however, in ascribing ‘syndicalist tendencies’ or ultraleftist inclinations to Kavanagh. Other historians have also contributed a good deal to this highly misleading interpretation. Kavanagh has been variously described as a “socialist-syndicalist” and “a leading supporter of dual unionism,”⁹ or as an energetic exponent “of an SPC-influenced western Canadian syndicalism”¹⁰ who “made his ultra-left-wing views widely known in western trade union circles.”¹¹

Closer scrutiny of the historical record for the early 1920s reveals, however, a dramatically different picture, and shows a socialist labour leader, deeply committed to the Marxist tradition and grappling with new developments in proletarian internationalism. Kavanagh’s political transition to communism during 1920-25 needs to be understood, firstly, against the background of the preceding 40 years of his life, from 1879 to 1919, when the elements that went into the making of a revolutionary were sifted and synthesized.

Jack Kavanagh: 1879 - 1919

BORN IN IRELAND on 12 July 1879, John Patrick Marcus MacMurrough Kavanagh grew up in England. His formative years were dominated by a familiar trinity of experience among the young, male working class of urban-industrial Victorian England — manual labour, militarism, and migration.

⁷Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 166.

⁸“Reminiscences of Tim Buck, Sessions 9-10,” typescript in the Tim Buck Papers, Volume I, MG32 G3, National Archives of Canada (NAC).

⁹Robin, *Radical Politics*, 170-1.

¹⁰Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 82-3.

¹¹Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 165.

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He entered the paid workforce at the age of eleven after Ellen Kavanagh, his mother, died; the death of his father, Thomas Kavanagh, had occurred when Jack was eight. Raised by an older brother, Jack spent the next seven years in a succession of unskilled factory and quarry jobs in the Liverpool-St. Helens district. His formal childhood education ended with his early entry into the world of wage-labour in the depressed 1890s. It was a primary education in which basic literacy skills were overlain with the transplanted religious traditions of Irish-Catholicism disseminated at a Catholic school and neighbourhood church. Although the Kavanagh boys boarded in a Protestant household, Jack's adherence to Roman Catholicism continued until he was 15 years old, and he even served as a teenaged altar-boy. It was, perhaps, a necessary beginning for a later philosophical career as a determined anti-cleric.¹²

To escape the stifling poverty of his youth, Kavanagh followed a much-travelled path by enlisting in the British Army in November 1898. His initial posting with the King's Royal Rifles in 1899, to the Cork Barracks in Ireland, proved to be an ironic, if short, return to the land of his birth. In 1900, as a batman in the daily service of the exclusive British officer class, Kavanagh shipped out for the Boer War.

His 18-month tour in the South African theatre of operations, where he was based at Pietermaritzburg in Natal, represented a major turning point in his life. The brutality of the Boer War shattered Kavanagh's illusions about the sanctity of 'Queen and Country,' and he began to doubt the logic of Empire loyalty. Jack's son, Bill Kavanagh, commented many years later on this pivotal period in his father's life: "His experiences in the army during the Boer War opened his eyes to the immorality of aggressive wars and sharpened a dawning social consciousness."¹³ Direct participation in the colonial clash of two rival imperialisms in South Africa (British versus Afrikaner) left a deep imprint on his thinking, as well as a shrapnel wound in his lower back, his ticket home to England in March 1902. "I passed through my stage of ignorance," was how Kavanagh afterwards summed up the legacy of the Boer War on a personal level,¹⁴ although he did not become a socialist overnight, let alone a revolutionary one.

He was discharged from the King's Royal Rifles in 1906 and emigrated to Canada the following year. Working his way west from Montreal (a transient

¹²For details of Kavanagh's early life, see Bruce Shields, "Interview With Jack (Patrick) Kavanagh, 24 December 1962," typescript in ABL File 3J, Archives of Business and Labour, Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, ACT; "Interview with William (Bill) Kavanagh," taped on 30 December 1988 at Alstonville, NSW, Australia (in the author's possession); 'Miscellaneous Personal Documents', Kavanagh Family Papers, Queenstown, South Australia (in the possession of Hector Kavanagh).

¹³*Tribune*, 29 July 1964. For details of Kavanagh's military career, see Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, 'Dossier on John Kavanagh', dated 19 March 1926, Series A467/1, Item SF42 (64-286), in the Australian Archives, ACT Repository.

¹⁴*BC Federationist*, 6 February 1914.

passage which included short labouring stints in the Quebec construction industry and the prairie wheatfields), Kavanagh eventually took up the tile-laying trade after settling in Vancouver in early 1908. Upon gaining his journeyman's ticket, he then embarked upon another apprenticeship — as an official in the organized labour movement with Local 62 of the Tile-Layers and Helpers International Union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Canadian Trades and Labour Congress (TLC). He was local secretary of the Tilers Union from 1909 to 1916, and represented it on the Vancouver Building Trades Council during the 1911 general strike in the city's construction industry.¹⁵

So it was among the politically-minded construction workers on the west coast of Canada, and their pre-1914 "crafts in crisis," that Kavanagh began what proved to be a 50-year involvement with the international labour movement. It was not the case that "like so many of his contemporaries Kavanagh fused his British trade union experiences into prevailing Canadian labour conditions and institutions."¹⁶ He was certainly a novice in the workers' movement when he arrived in British Columbia — active trade union membership alone, not to mention his life as a labour leader, commenced in Vancouver. So too did his formal training as a Marxist.

Kavanagh's initial revolutionary schooling came in the form of the orthodox Marxism and materialist philosophy taught in the classrooms of the Socialist Party of Canada. He joined Vancouver SPC Local No. 1 in 1908, "being dissatisfied with the other organizations in the place."¹⁷ He soon made a reputation among the radical elements of the west-coast workers movement, becoming an ardent advocate of industrial organization, an enthusiastic proponent of the general strike, and a serious student and propagandist of Marxist economics and revolutionary thought.

In the SPC's 'class-struggle college' on Pender Street in Vancouver, Kavanagh was introduced to the main currents of Marxist theory as they developed out of the First and Second Internationals.¹⁸ Like other SPC 'worker-students,' he was early immersed in Marx's economic writings (reprints of *Capital, Volume I* and *Value, Price and Profit* being the textbooks of choice) and other texts of the 19th-century

¹⁵See *The Western Wage-Earner*, January 1910; Department of Labour, *Strikes and Lockout Files, 1907-1966*, RG27, Volume 298, No. 3378; *BC Federationist*, 6 February 1914.

¹⁶Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 166.

¹⁷Jack Kavanagh to William Rodney, 11 January 1962. (Letter in the possession of William Rodney, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Royal Roads Military College, British Columbia).

¹⁸W.A. Pritchard, one of the SPCs leading "worker-intellectuals," to use Norman Penner's terminology, described the educational routine he encountered when he joined SPC Local No. 1 in Vancouver in 1911: "The Local possessed a good library with all the socialist classics and a great number of scientific works on various subjects ... In the winter months an economics class was held, Sunday afternoon moderated by George Morgan. Tuesday was local business meeting, Thursday a class on History by J.D. Harrington, and for a time there was a Friday night class for those interested in becoming party speakers." Penner, *The Canadian Left*, 42-43.

European revolutionary tradition, as well as writings from the diverse currents of turn-of-the-century North American socialism and social science.¹⁹ Late 19th- and early 20th-century developments in Marxist theory abroad were not ignored, however, in the years before World War I. Kavanagh and other proletarian philosophers attached to the SPC were made conversant with the writings of the Second International's principal theorists (Kautsky's *The Class Struggle*, Plekhanov's *Anarchism and Socialism*, and Labriola's *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* being prominent on the party's reading list).²⁰ Paradoxically, the SPC had in fact taken a stand against affiliating with the Second International in 1909. The extension of eligibility for International Socialist Bureau membership to "reformist" organizations such as the British Labour Party was the main bone of contention because, in SPC parlance, "such parties are not only ignorant of the principles of Socialism, but practice openly the most shameless policy of fusion and compromise with capitalist parties."²¹ At the same time, however, SPC "worker intellectuals" still explored the main theoretical trends emanating from this international current, while celebrating their class-struggle correctness in not joining it.

Kavanagh, for instance, clearly identified himself before 1919 with the legacy of the First International and, although familiar with its ideas, saw the Second as tainted by the reformism of parliamentary socialism. This did not imply, however, a total repudiation of electoral activity. Kavanagh always upheld the necessity of parliamentary action as a means of education, while regarding social reform as incapable of overturning capitalism.²² In the first political pamphlet he wrote, a 16-page review of the epic coal-miners strike on Vancouver Island from its outbreak in 1912 through 1913, he put forward his view of the unfolding class struggle. "The emancipation of the wage-slaves will not fall, like manna, from

¹⁹The literature sold by the SPC encompassed a wide range of material from around the world. The main European sources of 19th-century Marxist theory which remained constant features on the party's reading list up to 1920 and which strongly influenced Kavanagh included: K. Marx, *The Civil War in France* (his addresses to the General Council of the First International on the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Paris Commune of 1871); the writings of Friedrich Engels such as *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*; and the *Philosophical Essays* of the German-born, artisan-philosopher Joseph Dietzgen (whose "proletarian dialectics" were to be found on the bookshelves of many turn-of-the-century socialists; Marx described Dietzgen to a meeting of the First International as "our philosopher"). See Socialist Party of Canada, 'Literature Sold by Dominion Executive Committee', circular dated 1 November 1918, in Manitoba — Department of the Attorney-General — Court of Kings Bench, 1918-1920, 'The King vs. William Ivens,' RG4 A1, Public Archives of Manitoba (PAM); Robert Kilroy-Silk, *Socialism Since Marx* (London 1972), 3-32; Adam Buick, "Joseph Dietzgen," *Radical Philosophy*, 10 (Spring 1975), 3-7.

²⁰'Literature Sold by Dominion Executive Committee,' circular dated 1 November 1918, PAM.

²¹*Western Clarion*, August 1916.

²²For the materialist reasoning behind Kavanagh's rejection of parliamentary socialism, see *BC Federationist*, 14 September 1912.

heaven," Kavanagh commented, "Nor yet will they be led into freedom, as into the promised land, by inspired leaders of mankind. The workers will only be freed by those whose interest it is to do so — the workers themselves."²³ This obviously echoed Marx's 1864 position in the General Rules of the First International.²⁴ Years later, indeed until his death, Kavanagh clung doggedly to this founding principle of socialist internationalism although, to be sure, rhetoric and reality were not so easily assimilated either in the practical world of working-class politics, or in social arenas controlled by capitalism.

But although Kavanagh had little faith in the revolutionary credentials of the Second International, he was no "impossibilist" of the first-generation SPC kind. His "philosophy of practice," to use Gramsci's phrase, was a good deal removed from the Marxism espoused by E.T. Kingsley, for example, one of the party's original founders in 1905 and its early ideological mentor in Vancouver. Kingsley derided trade-union engagement in strikes, brushing them off as "commodity struggles." He called instead for workers to strike at the ballot box, with election results being the barometer of proletarian consciousness. The SPC impossibilists maintained a 'utopian' adherence to socialist propaganda as the principal weapon in the Marxist arsenal; working-class education was seen as the main means to revolution. Kingsley's analysis was the dominant local influence on the party's early ideology, but he left the SPC during World War I and joined the Labour Party in BC when it was formed in 1918.²⁵

Second-generation SPC union activists in British Columbia, like Kavanagh, intervened more directly in the day-to-day functions and fights of organized labour than their Kingsleyite predecessors. Pushed forward by the intensified conditions of class struggle on the west coast in the years 1910-14, Kavanagh and other SPC labour 'reds', such as William Pritchard, gradually assumed leadership of the Socialist Party in Vancouver. This succession occurred against the material background of a major intensification of local class conflict. It was a period highlighted by the 1911 building trades strike in Vancouver, the city's free speech fight of 1912, the two-year coalminers strike on Vancouver Island, and the IWW-led uprisings of railway construction workers in the BC interior during summer 1912.²⁶

²³J. Kavanagh, *The Vancouver Island Strike*, issued by the B.C. Miners' Liberation League, 1913.

²⁴See B. Nicolaievsky and O. Maenchen-Helfen, *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter* (Harmondsworth 1973), 283.

²⁵Gramsci cited in Alex Callinicos, *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx* (London 1983), 11. For the views of Kingsley and the SPC first-generation impossibilists, see *Western Clarion*, 24 December 1910, 10 June 1911; McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels and Revolutionaries*, 53-76.

²⁶For the history of West Coast class relations and worker organization in the immediate pre-1914 period, see James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis, and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900-1919," in *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 9-37; Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World*

In the immediate pre-1914 period, then, Kavanagh and other like-minded SPCers had a strong impact on the political character of the formerly-impossibilist party. Working-class education remained the SPC's paramount task, but its pursuit was extended in some quarters to encompass a commitment to revolutionary industrial unionism. In British Columbia, the Party expanded its ties to the radical-minded unions of skilled and unskilled workers in both urban and hinterland settings before 1914. At the leadership level this trend was represented by Kavanagh in particular after his election as president of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC) in 1912 and vice-president of the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) in 1913.²⁷ In attempting to widen their base of support, second-generation Socialist Party cadres on the west coast also gained prominence in community-based labour coalitions like the BC Miners' Liberation League of 1913-14, in which Kavanagh played a leading role.

The League was formed to campaign for the release of Vancouver Island coalminers and union officials jailed by the provincial government during the 1912-14 strike. It was conceived as a 'common front' to aid British Columbia's 'class-war prisoners', and a forum in which to protest the state's deployment of the militia on the island. While it achieved some notoriety outside Vancouver and Victoria, it was essentially a shortlived west-coast exercise, although it marked Kavanagh's arrival as the predominant spokesman of the militant left inside the BC labour movement.

The Miners' Liberation League encompassed elements from a broad cross-section of pre-war Vancouver's labour-left community: delegates were drawn from the Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP), the IWW, the BC Women's Suffrage League, the VTLC, the BCFL, and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Among the League's main activities were a series of public meetings, a succession of solidarity marches and pickets, the odd boisterous demonstration at governing Conservative Party functions, and the pamphlet history written by Kavanagh (who toured the strike zone in 1913 for the BCFL while reporting on the dispute for its paper).²⁸

The basis for the unity of this fiery and fractious coalition, as Kavanagh saw it, was the political recognition that "the State is a class institution functioning in

in *British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990), 32-56. For accounts of the big strike on Vancouver Island, see Lynne Bowen, *Boss Whistle: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember* (Lantzville 1982), 131-98; John Norris, "The Vancouver Island Coal Miners, 1912-1914: A Study of an Organizational Strike," *BC Studies*, 45 (Spring 1980), 56-72.

²⁷See *BC Federationist*, 20 July 1912, 14 November 1913.

²⁸For the history of the BC Miners' Liberation League, see *Vancouver Sun*, 11 November 1913, 9 December 1913; *Daily Province*, 15 November 1913, 20 December 1913, 10 January 1914, 7 February 1914; *BC Federationist*, 14 November 1913, 6 February 1914; *Western Clarion*, 22 November 1913; George Hardy, *Those Stormy Years: Memories of the Fight for Freedom on Five Continents* (London 1956), 51-4; Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 38, 62.

the interest of the ruling class." This view was not shared by all of the delegates, but Kavanagh was categorical in his belief that "the blame for all that has occurred on Vancouver Island rests upon the representatives of the master class, who are in power at Victoria and Ottawa, and in the last analysis, upon those members of the working class who gave them that power."²⁹

In the end, the Miners' Liberation League disintegrated over a proposal for a 48-hour general strike in BC in support of the beleaguered coalminers. The militant minority of the Vancouver labour movement, led by Kavanagh and other SPCers like Tom Cassidy, backed the general-strike call as a necessary response to the state's attack on the Vancouver Island working class. The impossibilist wing of the SPC and moderate elements from the craft unions retreated from the proposal, however, and the coalition fell apart. Still, out of the type of political activism in the community represented by the BC Miners' Liberation League, as well as on the hustings at election time and in the trade union movement generally, Vancouver's second-generation SPC 'reds' built a pre-war foundation for their personal prominence in the post-war labour revolt.

For the time being, Kavanagh's advocacy of the general strike proposal in 1913 led to charges surfacing inside the house of labour that he was an agent of the Industrial Workers of the World. At the next convention of the BCFL, some conservative delegates claimed that Kavanagh was "under the control of the IWW." He responded thus: "I have never at any time been connected with the IWW. I belong to an organization [the SPC] which bucks the IWW all the time."³⁰ Later, following the membership setbacks and internal ruptures brought on by the outbreak of World War I, the SPC revived to some extent on the heels of the anti-conscription campaign of 1917. Drawing on his experiences in the lower echelons of the British military and now "possessing the objection of a class conscious worker to participation in war on behalf of his imperialist masters,"³¹ Kavanagh emerged as an outspoken opponent of conscription and joined the select ranks of SPC platform speakers in Vancouver. Meanwhile, in war-torn Europe the foundations were being laid for a Third (Communist) International and new political models were beginning to make an impact on a handful of revolutionary socialists in Canada.

Toward the end of the War, some of the writings by Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, with their strong socialist-internationalist premises, were finding their way out to the peripheries of the world economy. These polemics supplied fresh inspiration and new insight to proletarian philosophers and

²⁹Kavanagh, *The Vancouver Island Strike*, 1, 16.

³⁰*BC Federationist*, 6 February 1914.

³¹Jack Kavanagh, "An Episode in the Class Struggle," unpublished manuscript (n.d.), Kavanagh Family Papers. This document is Kavanagh's account of the 'Ginger Goodwin general strike' in Vancouver in 1918.

working-class activists like Kavanagh.³² The Bolshevik victory in Russia, "a bolt from out of the blue," had already electrified class-struggle socialists the world over and Canada was no exception. Kavanagh's was only one voice among many raised in support of the Bolsheviks in Russia and world revolution generally. In March 1919 at the Western Labour Conference in Calgary, for instance, when a Third International was actually taking shape, he was joined by a majority of the 234 delegates in sending "fraternal greetings to the Russian Soviet government, the Spartacans in Germany and all definite working-class movements in Europe and the world recognising that they have won first place in the history of the class struggle."³³

On the local labour scene, Kavanagh was employed on Vancouver's waterfront from the middle of 1917. He took on secretarial duties for Local 38-52 of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), where he became a leading proponent of the One Big Union idea. During the 1917-20 period, in a context dominated by actual social revolution in some countries and the increased possibilities for working-class radicalism in others, "revolutionaries emerged from the labour-union movements of the advanced capitalist countries to demand the inclusion of economic organization and action as an integral part of the socialist revolution."³⁴ Kavanagh was one of them. In Vancouver, however, the longshoremen's organization in which he was such a key figure ultimately turned its back on the OBU scheme after initially voting for it by a large majority.³⁵

During the post-war strike wave, the Longshoremen's Union in Vancouver remained the site of a highly-mixed political culture. The leadership of ILA 38-52 incorporated SPC-OBU activists like Kavanagh, Federated Labour Party (FLP) figures such as J.S. Woodsworth, and a sprinkling of IWW advocates in an often friction-ridden alliance. In 1917, for instance, when the Wobblies had begun to make their presence felt inside Local 38-52, Kavanagh objected strenuously to the

³²By the beginning of 1919 the SPC was circulating, despite state harassment, a series of pamphlets drawn from the writings of the founders of the Third International, such as: *Political Parties in Russia* and *The Soviets At Work* by Lenin; *Our Revolution* and *The Bolsheviks and World Peace* by Trotsky; and *The Crisis in German Social Democracy*, by Luxemburg, Liebknecht, and Franz Mehring. See Department of National Defence Papers, HQC2051, Volumes 3-5. RG24, No. 2544, NAC.

³³*The Origin of the One Big Union. A Verbatim Report of the Calgary Conference, 1919*, in the Robert Boyd Russell Collection, MG10, A14-2, PAM. See Dave Adams, "1919 in Canada: The Birth of a New Left," in *Socialist Worker*, 162 (December-January, 1991); Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 18-23.

³⁴Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900-1925," in *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 41. See Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," in Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *The Character of Class Struggle: Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto 1986), 90-114.

³⁵See *BC Federationist*, 22 August 1919.

union "being I.W.W.ised" and at one stormy meeting that summer "he and others were ejected from the [longshoremen's] hall."³⁶ Two years later he was bucking a more moderate trend in the union. Kavanagh denounced the withdrawal of the Longshoremen's Union from the OBU in August 1919 as the worst example of "dirtiest double crossing that had ever been seen in the labour movement."³⁷ This political factionalism continued to shape the fortunes of ILA 38-52 into the next decade, and surfaced decisively during the major waterfront strike of 1923 with some disastrous consequences.

As Kavanagh viewed matters in 1919, the OBU initiative was demanded by the surging militancy of union members across the country, and especially in the west. But it was not an end in itself.

The O.B.U. [he observed] is not expected to free the workers from wage slavery any more than the trade union is. Anyone who professes to understand any thing of sociology knows that it is not the name of an organization nor its preamble, but the degree of working class knowledge possessed by its membership that determines whether or not it is a revolutionary body It is true that the act of voting in favour of an industrial as against the craft form of organization denotes an advance in the understanding of the commodity nature of labour power, but it does not by any means imply a knowledge of the necessity of the social revolution.³⁸

The OBU experiment did not, in Kavanagh's estimation, detract from a generalized political conception of the class struggle. "There can be no question of industrial vs. political," he concluded in the fall of 1919, "the two are complementary phases of the working class movement."³⁹ There was obviously no syndicalism in this socialism.

Kavanagh's influence was not restricted to the industrial arena during the steep upturn in class confrontation evident in 1919. The broad scope of his socialism, and his skill as an eloquent and entertaining proletarian orator, was also revealed to overflow audiences at the Sunday night propaganda meetings held by the SPC in Vancouver during 'the red year'. Kavanagh was a major attraction at these crowded events, variously setting forth sharp summations of the main principles of Marxist economics, the significance of Russian Bolshevism as "a social movement for the obliteration of class rule," the prospects for revolution in Germany, the pressing need for better education and organization among the working class, as well as numerous other subjects.⁴⁰

³⁶District Intelligence Officer, Victoria, BC, to Major F.E. Davis, Assistant Director of Military Intelligence, Ottawa, 8 August 1917. Department of National Defence Papers, HQ2102, RG24, Volume 2553, NAC.

³⁷*BC Federationist*, 22 August 1919; *Daily Colonist*, 23 August 1919.

³⁸*BC Federationist*, 25 April 1919.

³⁹*Camp Worker*, 19 September 1919.

⁴⁰For a sampling of reports on Kavanagh's speeches at the Royal and Empress Theatres, see *BC Federationist*, 3 January 1919, 7 March 1919, 18 April 1919, 18 July 1919.

At this stage Kavanagh still regarded working-class education, the dissemination of socialist ideas, as the central focus for revolutionary activity. "The business of the scientific socialist is to spread class knowledge," he wrote in October 1919, "... not to draw up a plan of action for the workers to pursue."⁴¹ He was still within the orbit of the SPC and its particular philosophy of practice. While individual members intervened in the daily grind of class relations on their own initiative, the chosen function of the Socialist Party, in the final analysis, was to explain the mechanics of capitalism and to propagate Marxist ideas, not to lead workers' struggles.

With a decade of labour-political leadership in the BC workers' movement under his belt, however, Kavanagh was soon convinced of the need (in the terminology of the day) for "a party of action" on the Bolshevik model in the Canadian context, a "vanguard" formation tied to the Third International of Lenin's time. A combination of local and international influences steered him in this direction in the early 1920s, a political trajectory firmly rooted in his belief in the significance of the Russian Revolution for all Marxists. He retained a profound interest in the importance of 'class knowledge', a life-long legacy from his thirteen-year tenure with the SPC school of socialism. Only now the focus on Marxist education shifted to the direct application of this knowledge, as he put it, "for the purpose of organizing the working class for the capture of political power."⁴²

Vancouver Socialists and the Third International

THE VANCOUVER LEFT was remade in the wake of labour's revolt of 1919. The SPC splintered, the SDP evaporated, the IWW faded, and the OBU failed. With the scale of class conflict dropping off as the new decade opened, and the possibilities for militant worker organization worsening, socialists gravitated to newer political formations as the older parties slowly melted away.

In the early 1920s the local workers' movement separated more sharply into reformist and revolutionary camps: labourism and communism were the dominant trends in working-class politics on the west coast from 1920 to 1925. The Federated Labour Party (formed in BC in 1918 with several first-generation SPCers present at the creation) emerged as a vehicle for social reform. Further to the left, the new Workers (Communist) Party of Canada came to stand after 1921 for social revolution in a context clearly unfavourable for it. But if the immediate prospects for fundamental societal change appeared bleak in the early 1920s, west-coast revolutionaries such as Kavanagh believed that the shift to communism was equally demanded by the material realities of the day and the needs of the local workers' movement.

⁴¹*Camp Worker*, 30 October 1919.

⁴²*Western Clarion*, 16 April 1921.

After the high tide of 1919 had subsided, Kavanagh's initial contact with the international communist movement occurred in Great Britain at the beginning of 'the torpid twenties'. He toured England and Scotland in 1920 as president of the BCFL (which was merged into the OBU while he was away) to raise support for the imprisoned leaders of the Winnipeg general strike. He addressed the annual conference of the British Labour Party in London and lectured in many industrial centres and smaller locales on "The Iron Heel in Canada." During his six-month stay, he met with John MacLean, the former "Bolshevik Consul" in Glasgow, and other labour militants who, unlike MacLean, participated in the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920.⁴³

Kavanagh returned to Canada while the Second Congress of the Communist International (CIComintern) was in session in Moscow. "Twenty-One Conditions" for admission to the CI were endorsed by the congress to make it clear "to all organized workers what the international general staff of the proletarian revolution demands of them," in Zinoviev's words.⁴⁴ The Twenty-One Conditions constituted a blueprint for the regrouping of the left worldwide and, ideally, for the formation of a single 'world communist party' with branches in different countries. The terms of affiliation were designed to safeguard the Third International from the fate of the Second by eliminating the presence of "all centrist and reformist organizations." The criteria established by the Twenty-One Conditions, decried by some as "a model of sectarianism and bureaucratic method,"⁴⁵ set the parameters for a formal debate in the Socialist Party of Canada on the question of affiliation to the Communist International.

Kavanagh advocated accepting the Comintern provisions. In his estimation, the lessons of the Russian Revolution charted a new course for Canadian socialists: "If the Bolsheviks are Marxists, and we don't dispute it, then they are Marxists with a wider range of knowledge of tactics than most. If we are Marxists our place is with them."⁴⁶

This view was not shared by all. Fear of Russian domination in the new International exercised some influence on affiliation-opponents inside the SPC. But, as Kavanagh pointed out during the lengthy debate, Article Sixteen of the Twenty-One terms seemed to answer this concern. It acknowledged "the diversity of the

⁴³For details of Kavanagh's British tour, see W. Leonard, Secretary, Scottish Labour College, to J. Kavanagh, 12 March 1920, 'Correspondence,' Kavanagh Family Papers; *Birmingham Gazette*, 3 May 1920; *BC Federationist*, 27 August 1920. On British radicalism at the time of Kavanagh's visit, see Nan Milton, *John MacLean* (London 1973), 231-81; Hugo Dewar, *Communist Politics in Britain: The CPGB From Its Origins to the Second World War* (London 1976), 14-20.

⁴⁴Cited in Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern* (London 1985), 29.

⁴⁵Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform. Part One. The Crisis of the Communist International* (New York 1975), 107.

⁴⁶*Western Clarion*, 16 April 1921.

conditions under which the various parties have to work and fight," and stipulated that the CI "should issue universally binding decisions only on questions on which the passing of such decisions is possible."⁴⁷ "North America not being Russia, their methods are not necessarily ours," was how Kavanagh, somewhat naively, deflected complaints of impending Russian control.⁴⁸ "It is well that we should not be disturbed by thoughts of the 'Dictatorship of Moscow'," he observed,⁴⁹ and the original debate in fact proceeded to turn on far wider considerations than the 'Moscow Gold Myth,' developing instead into stormy political polemics about what actual type of revolutionary party the SPC could or should be.

In Vancouver, a centrist faction inside SPC Local No. 1 strenuously opposed the Twenty-One Conditions. This anti-Comintern group was led by J.D. Harrington, Sid Earp, Chris Stephenson, and, after his release from jail in 1921, William Pritchard, Kavanagh's erstwhile close ally both in the Socialist Party and in the longshoremen's organization. Pritchard's position on the Russian question was that "you can't build socialism on a feudal dunghill."⁵⁰ In keeping with the SPC's traditional orientation, this centre group favoured "a strictly educational program," as Harrington put it, which abstained from direct involvement in those social arenas where the class struggle was actually lived and fought out.

Conversely, the Comintern insisted that its member parties wade into the proletarian movement wherever it was manifest, no matter how marginal or mundane these engagements might appear at first glance. Communists were expected to establish an independent presence in the unions, in municipal politics (repudiated by SPC orthodoxy as the preserve of the property-owning class), or wherever else the working class could be reached. Holding fast to standard SPC ideology and its seemingly 'utopian' reading of "the Marxian philosophy," the main opponents of affiliation in Local No. 1 shared Harrington's view that "such activity would immediately involve us in a series of bitter struggles that would hamper and in the end nullify our educational work, which we believe is of the utmost importance."⁵¹

In contrast, Kavanagh and the SPC left wing moved beyond conceiving the role of a revolutionary party in purely educational terms. "If we, as a party, ever expect to attain political power on behalf of the working class, it is necessary that we be a disciplined organization," Kavanagh informed his SPC comrades somewhat cavalierly. He agreed that education was essential, but pointed out that the Marxist

⁴⁷ Helmut Gruber, ed., *International Communism in the Era of Lenin: A Documentary History* (Ithaca 1967), 291.

⁴⁸ *BC Federationist*, 20 January 1922.

⁴⁹ *Western Clarion*, 15 February 1921.

⁵⁰ Peter Campbell, "'You can't build socialism on a feudal dunghill': Bill Pritchard and the Social Road to Revolution," paper to the 70th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Queen's University, Kingston, 4 June 1991.

⁵¹ *Western Clarion*, 1 February 1921.

method was also a guide to action. It was imperative for socialists to plunge "into the organized masses of workers in order that our [educational] work may bear fruit." Kavanagh concurred with the tasks elaborated in the Twenty-One Conditions, finding "nothing in any of the terms ... to which [he] could object" — a compliance conditioned by global influences and local developments.⁵²

An international backdrop to the SPC debate, of particular importance to party members engaged in what was left of the OBU project, was put in place in Vancouver in February 1921, when the *British Columbia Federationist*, under the banner of the OBU and with Kavanagh as a trustee, began serializing Lenin's '*Left-Wing' Communism, An Infantile Disorder*. Written at the ebb tide of world revolution, Lenin's polemic addressed "Marxist Strategy and Tactics." One section was highly critical of left-wing secessionist endeavours to create "absolutely brand-new, immaculate" labour unions, untainted by the "counter-revolutionary" bureaucracy of mainstream trade union centres. It was foolish for militants, Lenin contended, "to fence themselves off" from the "reactionary trade unions" — revolutionaries "must imperatively work wherever the masses are to be found."⁵³ This stipulation was also extended to cover political formations of a working-class character which championed social reform. Institutions like the Labour Party were obviously places where workers with socialist inclinations could be found.

Lenin's argument deeply impressed many socialist and OBU activists in Canada, Kavanagh among them. With the secessionist OBU in a state of drastic decline, its challenge spent, Kavanagh deduced in early 1921 that it was a mistake to leave the AFL-TLC unions "in the unchallenged control of reactionaries."⁵⁴ From this point on, in terms of trade-union strategy, he openly returned to the idea of building a militant presence inside the mainstream labour movement, winning others along the way. By the beginning of 1922, Kavanagh could announce that "the O.B.U. of Vancouver [was] prepared to go back to the A.F. of L. where the majority of the workers are."⁵⁵

The OBU's isolation, and the fragmentation of the labour movement on the west coast in the early 1920s, was the product on one level of a slumping economy. Post-war depression and demobilization resulted in an extended unemployment crisis — by the end of 1920 some 10 thousand people were out of work in the Vancouver area alone, around half being returned servicemen. City council resorted to 19th-century Poor Law tradition in response to the crisis; urban authorities established a prison-like relief camp for single unemployed men at Hastings Park, and did nothing else.⁵⁶

⁵²*Western Clarion*, 15 February 1921, 16 March 1921, 16 April 1921.

⁵³V.I. Lenin, "*Left-Wing' Communism, An Infantile Disorder* (New York 1940), 37-8.

⁵⁴*Western Clarion*, 15 February 1921.

⁵⁵Kavanagh made this statement at the first annual convention of the Workers Party of Canada in February 1922. *The Worker*, 15 March 1922.

⁵⁶See Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 86-9; Elizabeth Anne Lees, "Problems of Pacification: Veterans' Groups in Vancouver, 1919-1922," MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1985, 98, 117.

The Vancouver Trades and Labour Council also showed little inclination to respond seriously to increasing unemployment. As the Depression deepened, its conservative bureaucracy fell back on racist notions that job loss was the product of Asian immigration. Some members of the VTLC executive even played a leading role in the formation of an Asiatic Exclusion League in 1921. Socialist activists (in the minority, to be sure, yet certainly not conforming to claims that the BC labour movement of this era was overwhelmingly "racist")⁵⁷ countered that the cause of unemployment was to be found in the capitalist system, not in its immigration patterns. "Race hatred must be eliminated," Kavanagh repeatedly told Vancouver audiences, always stipulating that "the only way in which this question of unemployment could be solved was by intelligent working class action."⁵⁸

Led by Kavanagh and other left-wing activists, organizations of jobless workers emerged in Vancouver in early 1921 to combat the state's deficient response to the crisis at the local level, and also to provide a venue for socialist education on the systemic origins of unemployment. Returned soldiers moved against joblessness first, with Kavanagh, a Boer War veteran, being the main organizer among them. In March 1921 the Canadian National Union of Ex-Servicemen (CNUX) was created with the ambitious agenda "to work toward the overthrow of capitalism, the cause of wars and of all the social evils from which we suffer."⁵⁹ Soon afterward, a broader left-wing coalition was launched in the form of a Council of Workers, the centrepiece for six months of socialist organization among the unemployed. It defined itself as an anticapitalist base from which to coordinate "common action against the Common Enemy."⁶⁰

These embryonic communist groups steered the organized struggles of Vancouver's jobless workers throughout 1921, confronting both the local state and the apathetic attitude of the labour bureaucracy with countless deputations and red flag parades. Such agitation intensified early the next year as conditions worsened, with a walk-out at Hastings Park and a boycott of relief work, and then the occupation in May 1922 of the city Relief Office by 30 jobless women. The unemployed kicked, although concrete gains were negligible. At the same time, however, these events marked the first signs of life of a new communist movement in Vancouver. Local protests against unemployment in 1921-22 were marshalled

⁵⁷See W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies*, 45 (Spring 1980); Gillian Creese, "Class, Ethnicity, and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880-1923," in Rennie Warburton and David Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver 1988).

⁵⁸*BC Federationist*, 4 February 1921, 25 February 1921. See Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 88.

⁵⁹Cited in Lees, *Problems of Pacification*, 107.

⁶⁰'Miscellaneous Press Clippings,' Kavanagh Family Papers. See *BC Federationist*, 18 March 1921; Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver 1977), 70.

in the main by a local core of Comintern followers, with Kavanagh situated at the centre of this class-struggle exercise.⁶¹

The nature of class relations encountered by Kavanagh on the west coast in the early 1920s 'downturn' served to consolidate further his support for the Comintern. He saw commonality with, not contradiction in, the CI agenda. The tactical stipulations of the Twenty-One Conditions, for instance, corresponded to certain needs of the local workers' movement as he perceived them. Writing in the SPC *Western Clarion*, he observed that:

Present economic and social conditions, together with recent events in local history, demonstrate the need of obtaining a foothold wherever power is wielded. To leave Labor Unions and Municipal Councils in the unchallenged control of reactionaries, in view of the part played by these organizations in movements of a revolutionary character, not to speak of the everyday struggles of the workers, is to assume the overthrow of capitalism as a mechanical process.⁶²

In Kavanagh's view, then, direct experience of the class struggle on a local level confirmed the suitability of the Third International's strategic directives.

Vancouver Socialists and the National Question

IT IS COMMON to assume that, in the end, fear of Russian domination was the key issue in defining the SPC position on Third International affiliation.⁶³ The discussion was a good deal more complicated, however, than this assumption allows. There were a whole series of broader political concerns wrapped up in the debate, none more significant in separating Kavanagh from the SPC traditionalists than "the national question."

The Second Congress of the Comintern concluded in 1920 that support for national liberation struggles against imperialist exploitation was a mandatory position for Communist Parties. The CI, led by Lenin, recognized that the character of national liberation movements often reflected the aspirations of a shackled, indigenous bourgeoisie, while also incorporating layers of the proletariat and peasantry in an anticolonial endeavour. Among the "plundered colonial peoples," however, an independent communist strategy of unconditional support for their anti-imperialist struggles offered a way of gathering the components of revolutionary parties while in the bargain prying apart the cracks in the international capitalist edifice. For the isolated Bolshevik government, it also was necessary "to pursue a

⁶¹See *BC Federationist*, 21 October 1921, 18 November 1921, 9 December 1921; *Vancouver Sun*, 29 January 1922; *The Worker*, 15 May 1922.

⁶²*Western Clarion*, 15 February 1921.

⁶³Historians such as Avakumovic, for example, have written off the SPC discussion of the Twenty-One Conditions as a simple display of local fearfulness of "submission to the dictates of Moscow." Avakumovic, *Communist Party of Canada*, 19-20.

policy of bringing about the closest possible alliance between all the national and colonial liberation movements with Soviet Russia." The eighth of the twenty-one conditions accordingly called for an alliance of Communist Parties with movements against colonial exploitation.⁶⁴

While this logic appealed to Kavanagh, it severely rankled the traditionalist segment of Vancouver-based impossibilism. For example, J.D. Harrington insisted that colonial liberation movements were "foolish and futile," and he failed to see "how colonies can be liberated, and to what advantage, if capitalism still rules." Sid Earp likewise deprecated the participation of Marxists in "bourgeois liberation movements" as an unnecessary engagement which "would undoubtedly tend to confuse the presentation of the Class Struggle."⁶⁵

Kavanagh opposed such views. "To contemplate the possibility of a proletarian revolution in a colony garrisoned by an Imperial State, without first overthrowing that State Power, is Utopian," he asserted. Looking to the nationalist rebellions against British imperialism in India, Egypt, and Ireland, Kavanagh argued that these upheavals "take the form of civil wars between the peoples of those countries and the British State." Neutrality was not an option in civil war, he added, and Marxists were committed to march alongside the nationalist forces, "whilst at the same time carrying on propaganda for proletarian control." The revolutionary basis for this strategic orientation was a solid one, in Kavanagh's view: "Every success of a revolting colony against an Imperialist State weakens the power of that State. A weakened State is a prerequisite to a proletarian revolution."⁶⁶

The concrete origins of Kavanagh's break with orthodox SPC antagonism to 'bourgeois liberation movements' can be traced, most immediately, to his 1920 tour of Great Britain. While there, he garnered fresh insight into the complexities of Irish oppression and was confronted directly with the national question in Scotland. He developed a deeper understanding of the class contradictions of nationalist movements in the process, coming to many of the same conclusions, it can be noted, as those already arrived at by his host at Glasgow Labour College, John MacLean, a resolute Marxist who often is misrepresented as a Scottish nationalist.⁶⁷ Like MacLean, Kavanagh came to see national liberation struggles as a crucial opening act in the "festival of the oppressed," a lever in the international

⁶⁴"Theses on the National and Colonial Question — adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International, August 1920," reprinted in, Alex Callinicos, *Marxism and the National Question* (London 1989), 22-8. See E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923, Volume Three* (London 1953), 253-8; Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton 1984), 55-6; Hallas, *The Comintern*, 49-50; Gruber, *International Communism*, 289.

⁶⁵*Western Clarion*, 1 February 1921, 2 May 1921.

⁶⁶*Western Clarion*, 15 February 1921.

⁶⁷See Iain MacLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh 1983), 151.

class struggle that could be pulled to good purpose in furthering the prospects of world revolution.

The Irish case attracted his particular attention, partly as a result of his own Irish-Catholic lineage and, also, no doubt, because of his memories of the Cork army barracks. In the early 1920s, "he became very active in the Irish Independence Movement," as Tim Buck recalled.⁶⁸ In reporting on his 1920 British tour to labour meetings in Canada, for instance, Kavanagh consistently put forward his new view of the Irish situation — a contentious practice in some circles, given the SPC's conventional disdain for the class content of anticolonial movements. Kavanagh argued that Irish nationalism "was not as formerly a purely Bourgeois movement, but had now taken on a very pronounced proletarian complexion."⁶⁹ At a packed public meeting at Vancouver's Pender Hall in August 1920, he acknowledged that "the Sinn Fein movement itself was simply an attempt to introduce in Ireland a government of Irish capitalism instead of English capitalism." Nevertheless, he concluded, "it had become a workers' movement by reason of its Labor element moving to the left."⁷⁰

Kavanagh began to play a prominent role in the activities of Vancouver's Irish Self-Determination League after 1920. The Irish question produced a local controversy when a Sinn Fein representative, Lindsay Crawford, visited Vancouver in 1921. Slated to speak in the Dominion Hall, Crawford was vilified by a contingent of "Empire loyalists" who unsuccessfully lobbied civic authorities to ban the meeting. They vowed to prevent Crawford from speaking nevertheless. In response to this attack on free speech, and in support of the Irish cause, Kavanagh called for independent working-class intervention. At an emergency meeting in the Loggers Hall he inveighed against "the White Terror" tactics of the "local dictatorship of the bourgeoisie." He called for an alliance of the "red" and the "green" to answer the challenge.

Members of the OBU and some AFL-TLC unions, the CNUX, the Council of Workers, and the Irish Self-Determination League agreed to form "a body of ushers" to guard the Sinn Fein speaker, enabling Crawford to address a full house. After his speech, Kavanagh took the platform "not for the Irish question simply, but Ireland for the Irish worker," suggesting in his short statement that the Irish nationalist movement "contains the germs of that proletarian revolt." As the *BC Federationist* noted afterward, "the red and green ribbons did not go so badly together after all."⁷¹

The internationalist current in the West Coast workers' movement, a militant minority, surfaced strongly in the Dominion Hall free-speech defence action, its

⁶⁸Reminiscences of Tim Buck, Sessions 9-10, NAC.

⁶⁹Minutes of Meeting on 3 August 1920, Winnipeg OBU Central Labour Council Minutes, 1919-1921, MG10, A14-2, No. 15, PAM.

⁷⁰*BC Federationist*, 27 August 1920.

⁷¹*BC Federationist*, 29 April 1921.

views articulated most forcefully by Kavanagh. Still, ambiguities abounded in his assessment of the fight for national self-determination on other fronts. Where the national question mattered most was at home; during the period of Kavanagh's 18-year stay in Canada it was most crucial in relation to the province of Quebec and the culture of French Canada. Yet of this problematical Canadian issue he was at best dismissive. In the very early 1920s, when he considered Quebec nationalism most fully in his writings, Kavanagh situated the rising demand for French-Canadian autonomy in the context of an earlier experience. Quebec separatism was analogous, in Kavanagh's terms of reference, to the Boer independence movement in South Africa. "There is a vast difference," he argued in the *Western Clarion* in 1921, "between the Quebec and Boer secessionist movements and those in the other dependencies [he was referring to Ireland, Egypt and India]. There is no threat to vested interests in the above mentioned, whilst it is very much in evidence in the case of the revolting colonies."⁷²

But by placing Quebec separatism in the same category as Afrikaner nationalism Kavanagh was departing, whether he realised it or not, from general application of the Comintern line on the national question. The theses adopted on the issue at the Second Congress of the CI, prepared by Lenin, emphasized the separation of "the oppressed, dependent nations which do not enjoy equal rights from the oppressing, exploiting, privileged nations."⁷³ In the Canadian historical setting, the Québécois had clearly been conquered militarily by the English, and francophone culture was subordinated systemically to the dominant anglophone culture. The Afrikaners of South Africa also lost their independent republics after being conquered by British imperialism; Kavanagh had witnessed the conquest first-hand. Yet Boer demands for national self-determination represented something very different from the aspirations of Quebec separatists. Unlike the Comintern's theoreticians, Kavanagh failed to make the key distinction between an "oppressing nationality" and an "oppressed nation." Afrikaner nationalism amounted to a claim on the right to use state power as a means of dominating the oppressed majority of black South Africans. In contrast, French-Canadian nationalism reflected a history of colonial subordination.⁷⁴ But broader debates among local communists on the Quebec situation still lay in the future. In 1921, in the months following the Sinn Fein defence action, the Vancouver revolutionary

⁷²*Western Clarion*, 16 April 1921.

⁷³"Theses on the national and colonial question — adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International, August 1920," reprinted in Callinicos, *Marxism and the National Question*, 22.

⁷⁴See Callinicos, *Marxism and the National Question*, 16; Connor, *The National Question*, 55-6. On French-Canadian nationalism, see Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, *The Dream of Nation: A Social and Intellectual History of Quebec* (Toronto 1982), 48-65, 167-217; Fernand Ouellet, "The Historical Background of Separatism in Quebec," in Ramsey Cook, ed., *French-Canadian Nationalism: An Anthology* (Toronto 1969), 49-63.

left splintered and regrouped around the program of Canadian communism, and Kavanagh's internationalist ideals were incorporated, after a shaky start, into a party premised on Bolshevik politics.

It was tough going in a milieu dominated by the resurgent trinity of Canadian class relations in the twenties — capital, the state, and conservative business unionism — and the first generation of Canadian communists was largely isolated in a hostile world. They were also unsure exactly where they were going. The Twenty-One Conditions spoke of the absolute necessity for "democratic centralism" to be the guiding principle of party organization everywhere, but understanding of this concept was far from widespread. Indeed, the basic text of Bolshevik party-building, Lenin's 1902 classic *What Is To Be Done?*, was not available in English translation until the end of the 1920s.⁷⁵ Early Canadian followers of the Third International were flying by the seat of their pants, so to speak, adapting to local conditions as best they could the hints or glimpses of Bolshevik theory and practice that came their way. In the beginning, this produced a strong tendency to mimic well-known aspects of the Russian precedent: to emphasize, for instance, the revolutionary purity of underground agitation, a tendency ironically corrected in the end by the Comintern itself.

The Communist Underground in Vancouver, 1921

THE SPARSE HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS of the beginnings of organized communism in British Columbia point to the setting up of a branch of the Workers Party of Canada in Vancouver in December 1921 as the first step.⁷⁶ The creation of a 'legal party' did indeed mark the opening of communist activity in the public domain. But, in fact, the communist movement arrived on the west coast fully six months earlier. The Communist Party of Canada was established in Vancouver in June 1921 as an underground organization, led initially by Jack Kavanagh.

The history of the communist underground in Vancouver in the second half of 1921 was distinguished by internal strife. Rifts among the West Coast's original communist cadres stemmed, in the main, from the new party's romantic infatuation with illegality. At its inception the CPC outlawed itself — the state did not ban it. In Vancouver "undergroundism," to apply Ian Angus's terminology⁷⁷ to a local context, undermined unity, and Kavanagh was at the centre of the controversy. His troubles began at the party's 'constituent convention.'

⁷⁵See Stuart MacIntyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (Cambridge 1980), 214.

⁷⁶See William Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia* (Vancouver 1937), 144; Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 90-1.

⁷⁷"Perhaps the most blatant symptom of the leftism of the early Communist movement in North America was what might be termed 'undergroundism,'" writes Angus in *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 91.

Attended by 22 delegates using pseudonyms, this meeting was held on a farm near Guelph, Ontario, on 23 May 1921. The convention had been arranged by the Pan-American Agency of the Comintern to unite the two existing communist groupings concentrated in central Canada, extensions of the split in the United States between the Communist Party of America (CPA) and the United Communist Party (UCPA), each claiming to be the legitimate envoy of the Third International. Jack MacDonald, Tom Bell and 13 other Guelph delegates were attached to the CPA, while Maurice Spector, Florence Custance, and three others spoke for the smaller UCPA.⁷⁸ In addition, two leading members of the Socialist Party of Canada had been specially invited by the Comintern's representatives. Toronto SPC Secretary, William Moriarty, was one. The other was Kavanagh, who travelled east under the name 'Strong.'⁷⁹

The Guelph gathering quickly agreed on a program for a united revolutionary party. The CPC was envisaged (in language laced with the ultra-left tone of the meeting) as a highly centralized formation that would "prepare the working class for the destruction of the bourgeois state and the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship based upon Soviet power." But the decision to make the new Communist Party "an underground, illegal organization,"⁸⁰ in keeping with this aspect of Bolshevik history in Russia, caused dissension. At least, it displeased Kavanagh in particular.

Memories of wartime bans and post-war police raids in Canada were still fresh, yet Kavanagh "insisted that there was no necessity to remain underground."⁸¹ Given the political context in which the formative conference of the CPC was taking place, his position was justified, if unpopular. State repression of radicalism had eased, and there was no general witch-hunt against the left in progress. Indeed, the SPC was still openly debating the question of affiliation to the Comintern in the pages of the *Western Clarion*. But the routine equation of revolutionary activity with illegality dominated the Guelph proceedings, and Kavanagh's opposition to undergroundism was brushed aside. "I was termed a centrist by Spector and others,"

⁷⁸See Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 70-2; Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 47-51.

⁷⁹See Kavanagh's account of this period in, 'Jack Kavanagh to the ECCI of the Communist International, Moscow, 12 January 1931'; 'Jack Kavanagh to the National Conference of the Communist Party of Australia, 30 March 1931,' typescripts in the James Normington-Rawling Collection, N57-251/375, Archives of Business and Labour, ANU. Details of Kavanagh's role in the early CPC are also available in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) file on him, a copy of which was supplied by Dr. G. Kealey, Department of History, Memorial University, Newfoundland. For Kavanagh's part in the Guelph meeting, see the following correspondence: Fred W. Kaplan to Jack Esselwein, 28 May 1921; Sgt. R.B.C. Mundy to T.A. Wroughton, Asst. Commissioner, "E" Division, RCMP, Vancouver, 11 January 1922; RCMP, Personal File on Jack Kavanagh, 1921-1924. (Hereafter cited as RCMP File).

⁸⁰Cited in Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 38-9.

⁸¹'Kavanagh to the ECCI of the Communist International, 12 January 1931.'

he later recalled.⁸² The prevailing sentiment at the unity convention was, in Spector's words, "that broad public activity was necessarily associated with the compromise of principles."⁸³

Kavanagh deferred to the majority for the time being. He was appointed CPC organizer for British Columbia (labelled District No.6) and returned to the coast in June 1921 as Vancouver's first member of the Canadian section of the Third International. But his doubts about the new party's self-imposed illegality soon resurfaced.

Kavanagh made little headway in his first attempt to build an organized communist presence in Vancouver. He was able to recruit to the CPC a handful of militants, such as A.S. Wells, the FLP-aligned editor of the *British Columbia Federationist*; SPC-OBU activists James G. Smith and R.W. Hatley; and the leader of the Lumber Workers Industrial Union, J.M. Clarke, an SPCer too. But systematic organizing work by communist activists in the labour movement was hampered by the new party's fetish for secrecy. The fact of being underground, if really in party-name only, prevented the small core of communists from translating their influence in the radical pockets of working-class life in Vancouver — such as the remnants of the OBU and the left-wing organizations of war veterans and the unemployed — into meaningful membership gains for the CPC. Police agents reported, for instance, that "as to the Communist movement generally on the Coast, there is every indication that the principles of the Party are being pounded into the organized unemployed by such men as Kavanagh, J.G. Smith, A.S. Wells, and others, but so far there is nothing whatever to show that there has been any action taken by the appointed representative of the C.P. in Canada, Kavanagh, to organize 'locals' in any shape."⁸⁴

To many workers who encountered this first generation of Canadian communists, the underground perspective must have seemed esoteric and odd. Others may have shared William Pritchard's disdain for "sewer-pipe revolutionaries."⁸⁵ Still, in the final analysis, the question of legality was the most important internal issue in the foundation history of North American communism. The shortlived infatuation with illegality nearly wrecked the American movement, tearing it into two sections.⁸⁶ Similarly, although not on the same scale, opposition inside the

⁸²Kavanagh to the ECCI of the Communist International, 12 January 1931. "Maurice Spector I did not consider reliable," Kavanagh wrote to Rodney in 1962. See Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 92.

⁸³Maurice Spector, 'The Constituent Convention of the Workers Party of Canada, February 1922.' This report to the Fourth Congress of the Comintern is reprinted in the documents section of Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 339-43.

⁸⁴Unsigned to the Officer Commanding "E" Division, Vancouver, 25 November 1921, RCMP File.

⁸⁵*Western Clarion*, 16 July 1921.

⁸⁶See Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York 1957), 197-225.

Canadian party to the ultra-left underground orientation, sustained in late 1921 by Kavanagh and his supporters in BC, ushered in the first significant split in CPC history. This rupture early revealed the potential for disunity between some of the leading party cadres on the west coast and the head office in central Canada.

Convinced of the correctness of the underground approach it was pursuing in 1921, the Central Committee of the CPC took a dim view of the organizational delays and general lack of progress in British Columbia. As a result Kavanagh's expenses were cut off only a matter of months after the Guelph unity convention. Organizers from the United States Communist Party were sent to Vancouver at the request of Canadian leadership in order to hurry things along. Kavanagh responded by distancing himself from the CPC underground while campaigning for Third International affiliation inside his old stomping ground, the SPC.

By autumn 1921, then, the nascent communist movement in Vancouver had split into two camps — the official underground apparatus now coordinated by transplanted American CP activists, and the pro-Comintern element still attached to the SPC headed by Kavanagh. According to police reports in November, "agents of the Communist Party of America are at work, and those conducting the work are opposed in principle to Kavanagh, and they in turn are opposed in no uncertain manner by Kavanagh and Smith particularly."⁸⁷ Indeed, the situation was even more complicated. While James Smith departed from the CPC along with Kavanagh, other local activists, such as A.S. Wells and J.M. Clarke, maintained their ties to the underground party and advanced their own claims to the vacant leadership positions.⁸⁸ This highly fragmented situation resulted in division and acrimony among Vancouver's first-generation communist cadres, laying a foundation for future convulsions in the local movement.

Jack Kavanagh and the Workers Party of Canada, 1922

KAVANAGH'S BREACH with official communism in 1921 was shortlived. Disillusionment with the strictly underground character of the CPC was not confined to Vancouver. General isolation from the labour movement aroused concern "that unless the Party adopted a new orientation in the question of public activity, the Communist Party would be condemned to stagnation," as Spector put it.⁸⁹ The Third Congress of the Comintern, where the defensive "united front" tactic was formally enunciated, already had instructed the American party "to escape from

⁸⁷Unsigned to the Officer Commanding "E" Division, Vancouver, 25 November 1921. See Mundy to Wroughton, 3 August 1921; 'Communist Party of Canada — Organization in the West,' report dated 1 August 1922; RCMP File. "I have never had a good opinion of the U.S. Party," Kavanagh told Rodney in 1962.

⁸⁸'Report Re: Socialist Party of Canada, *et al.*,' dated 25 December 1921; 'Report Re: Workers Party of Canada,' dated 7 January 1922; 'Report Re: The Workers Political Party of Canada,' dated 26 January 1922; RCMP File.

⁸⁹Spector, 'The Constituent Convention,' in Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 340.

illegal organizational forms." The CPC followed the same advice by launching a two-party system some weeks before its southern counterpart. Delegates from Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec met in the Toronto Labor Temple on 11 December 1921 to lay the basis for the 'legal party' — the Workers Party of Canada.⁹⁰ Significant left fractions of the West Coast, Kavanagh included, immediately linked up with the new, open formation.

Two days after the WPC preliminary conference, Vancouver SPC Local No. 1 finally voted on affiliation to the Comintern. It was a heated climax. A police spy at the meeting recorded that "Kavanagh and Pritchard came pretty nearly to blows in connection with their differences regarding the question of affiliation with the Third International."⁹¹ The outcome of the vote was thirty-seven against, twenty-four in favour. Kavanagh led the internationalist minority out of the SPC and into the Workers Party, announcing the split in a statement titled 'The Parting of the Ways'. "We will go forward with the revolutionary workers of the Third International," the breakaway group declared.

Upon this question of affiliation, of going forward into the working masses in order to organize them for their revolutionary task the [Socialist] party has split ... Those whom we have hitherto looked upon as revolutionary Marxists refuse to accept the task which the International Communist movement has laid before them. To them the academy is preferable to work among the masses. In the academy let them stay.⁹²

The statement was signed by Kavanagh, Smith, Hatley and Wells. Apart from them, former SPCers like O. Mengel and William Bennett were drawn to the WPC. The Vancouver branch also attracted some left-wing members of the FLP, such as the 'red dentist' Dr. William Curry, and several activists from the Canadian National Union of Ex-Servicemen and the Council of Workers joined up. Among the unions, a handful of militants from the various sections of organized labour were won to the new party as well: for example, J. Flynn of the AFL-aligned International Union of Steam and Operating Engineers; P. Floyd of the Hod Carriers, Building and Common Labourers Union; and Dick Higgins of the Industrial Workers of the World.⁹³

Despite the shift to open activity, and the prospect of enhanced working-class unity, Kavanagh was still faced with a dilemma. He had argued uncompromisingly in the SPC for Comintern affiliation on the basis of the Twenty-One Conditions. The political organization which adhered to those conditions — the CPC, Canadian section of the Third International — remained underground. The Workers Party

⁹⁰See Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 46; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 96; Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 55.

⁹¹'Report Re: Socialist Party of Canada,' dated 30 December 1921, RCMP File.

⁹²*BC Federationist*, 6 January 1922.

⁹³See Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia*, 144; Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 90; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 75-6.

was a half-way measure. In name alone it did not conform to the Comintern's admission requirements, which Kavanagh had upheld so staunchly. The two-party system posed a thorny credibility problem as far as he was concerned. He subsequently travelled to the inaugural national convention of the WPC, held in Toronto in February 1922, "with an original program calling for an open Communist Party with frank acceptance of the twenty-one points."⁹⁴

Prior to the convention, Kavanagh and other western delegates caucused with the Communist Party leaders. The former SPC left-wingers "suspected that the Eastern delegates were working for a moderate, milk-and-watery program," and they pushed for open alignment with the Communist International. Kavanagh also "insisted upon declaring for the Dictatorship of the Working Class" as part of the WPC programme.⁹⁵ ("The necessity of teaching an acceptance of the principles of the 'Dictatorship', of training the workers to become habituated to the idea of its necessity, is one of the lessons learned from the Russian Revolution," he had written during the SPC debate on the Third International.)⁹⁶ For this stance in Toronto he "was called a Leftist by the same people" who had labelled him a 'centrist' at Guelph the year before. But after many long hours of heated discussion an accord was finally arrived at. The Workers Party would adopt the principle of proletarian dictatorship, while recognising "more or less openly the spiritual leadership of the Communist International" without formally seeking admission to it.⁹⁷

The WPC paper, *The Worker*, enthused that it was an agreement which "indicated the coming together of East and West," a step toward national unity symbolized by Kavanagh's presence in the chair during convention proceedings. "Chairman Kavanagh's opening address," *The Worker* reported, "was significant of the changes that have swept into the minds of workers since the Russian Revolution and the establishment of a workers' republic."⁹⁸ He was elected to the

⁹⁴Spector, 'The Constituent Convention,' in Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 341. See 'Kavanagh to the ECCI of the Communist International, 12 January 1931'; 'Kavanagh to the National Conference of the Communist Party of Australia, 30 March 1931.'

⁹⁵'Kavanagh to the ECCI of the Communist International, 12 January 1931'; Spector, 'The Constituent Convention,' in Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 341.

⁹⁶*Western Clarion*, 16 March 1921.

⁹⁷'Kavanagh to the ECCI of the Communist International, 12 January 1931'; Spector, 'The Constituent Convention,' in Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 342. R.B. Russell, an OBU delegate to the WPC convention, learned "from conversation that although the Convention was slated to start Friday morning, that in reality most of the contentious matters had been dealt with at a preliminary conference held during the earlier part of the week, and at which ... only the influential delegates from the important centres were taken into conclave." Russell was unable to ascertain what had actually taken place, but he was "assured by the Western Delegates who were in attendance that the West had been able to force their viewpoint on the Eastern Delegates after a somewhat heated debate." 'Report of R.B. Russell, Attending Convention of Workers Party of Canada, Held at Toronto, Ontario, on February 17th, 1922,' typescript in the Mary Veronica Jordan Collection, P626, PAM.

⁹⁸*The Worker*, 15 March 1922.

WPC national executive committee and named editor-in-chief of party publications. Reunited with the still-underground Communist Party, he also was delegated to attend the Comintern Fourth Congress on behalf of the CPC.⁹⁹

Kavanagh never went to Moscow. But the decision to send him was not countermanded, as one account has it, "because the party could not afford to have experienced organizers away for a comparatively long period at such a crucial time in the public party's life."¹⁰⁰ In fact, Kavanagh did not attend the CI Congress precisely because he had broken again with Canadian communism before the gathering transpired. The unity across regions achieved at the WPC convention proved transitory. Within months, Kavanagh was at odds with party leaders from central Canada and their local supporters in Vancouver. Dispute, this time centred on applying the united front tactic on the west coast in relation to trade union policy, and provoked the first split in the Workers Party.

The WPC founding convention adopted a resolution on labour unions in line with Lenin's injunctions in *Left-Wing Communism* — "the Workers Party will oppose all dual unions or secessionist efforts." Instead, the party geared itself toward "the formation and development of a left wing" inside existing trade unions.¹⁰¹ This stand alienated diehard One Big Union supporters like R.B. Russell of Winnipeg, but Kavanagh and Vancouver's other ex-OBU activists agreed that it was imperative for the revolutionary left to return to the mainstream of Canadian labour. "The past twelve months have shown," Kavanagh commented during the prolonged debate, "that because we have not had the say so in the Central Councils [of AFL-TLC unions], we have no power, and as a result we have left the power in the hands of the reactionaries."¹⁰² The WPC policy of strengthening the militant presence in local union councils also met with Kavanagh's approval; he was already exhorting (unsuccessfully) the Longshoremen's Union to seek affiliation to the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council again.¹⁰³ But one particular aspect of the way in which labour unity was pursued by the party in British Columbia left Kavanagh fuming.

The quarrel stemmed from the CPC Central Committee decision to relinquish control of the province's leading labour newspaper, the *British Columbia Federationist*, to the VTLC, without consulting Kavanagh. He had placed the paper in the hands of the WPC at the beginning of 1922 as a trustee for the OBU's defunct Vancouver Central Council. It was a major boost for the new party in BC to have singular access to a weekly newspaper. But in principle the *Federationist* belonged to all of BC labour, not just one party. While the WPC proclaimed the necessity of

⁹⁹See Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 51-2; Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 56-7.

¹⁰⁰Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 59.

¹⁰¹*BC Federationist*, 24 February 1922; *The Worker*, 15 March 1922.

¹⁰²Kavanagh was cited in 'Report of R.B. Russell, Attending Convention of Workers Party of Canada, 1922,' PAM.

¹⁰³See 'Report No. 7 Re: J. Kavanagh, Vancouver, 2 January 1922,' RCMP File.

uniting all militant elements in the unions, the party's sincerity could be questioned on the west coast where it alone controlled the foremost propaganda vehicle of the BC labour movement.¹⁰⁴

Kavanagh was aware of the contradiction, and proposed a solution. The *Federationist* was deeply in debt so he recommended to the Comintern's Pan-American Agency "that it be allowed to go into liquidation, and a new paper started." But other Vancouver WPC leaders, principally A.S. Wells, *Federationist* editor, and J.M. Clarke, the prominent trade unionist, took a different tack. In collusion with Tom Bell, a party official from central Canada who was on an organizing tour for the WPC in the west in early 1922, editor Wells "entered into an arrangement with the A.F. of L. officials whereby he would keep his job if the paper was given back."¹⁰⁵ At least this was how it went according to Kavanagh. Although Wells later resigned from his post, by May 1922 negotiations were underway to return the weekly to the council of international unions.

By July, the VTLC was publishing the *Federationist* as its official organ, with Clarke of the Lumber Workers Union seated on the editorial committee. Kavanagh was incensed. The deal struck him as outright capitulation "to the reactionary Trade Union officialdom," a united front "from above" which only served to strengthen the conservative labour bureaucracy while further isolating militant unionists.¹⁰⁶ Accompanied by a small group of supporters, including his close ally James Smith of the Carpenters Union, Kavanagh abandoned the WPC. It was a bitter break. He caustically denounced the manner in which "some members of the Workers Party gave the control of the *Federationist* into the hands of the reactionaries under the guise of tactics, and have camouflaged the morass of opportunism into which they have sunk with the cloak of a United Front."¹⁰⁷ Politically outraged and personally slighted, he remained aloof from Canadian communism for more than a year.

Once the dust settled, the Pan-American Agency of the Comintern reviewed the actions of the WPC/CPC leadership in the handling of the *Federationist* episode. The CI representative, a Lithuanian named Carl Jensen (Charles Scott) did not approve of the outcome. In particular he chastised Bell (who among others had clashed with Kavanagh during the legality debate at Guelph in 1921 and again over the two-party system in Toronto in 1922) with trying to score a personal victory over Kavanagh. Police agents reported that "Scott blames T.J. Bell for the whole situation at Vancouver. Bell aligned himself with Wells and Clarke to make a

¹⁰⁴See 'Kavanagh to the National Conference of the Communist Party of Australia, 30 March 1931'; Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 116.

¹⁰⁵'Kavanagh to the National Conference of the Communist Party of Australia, 30 March 1931.'

¹⁰⁶'Kavanagh to the National Conference of the Communist Party of Australia, 30 March 1931.'

¹⁰⁷*Western Clarion*, 16 May 1923.

personal triumph. Hence the loss of Kavanagh and the present weak condition of the Party [in Vancouver]."¹⁰⁸

Jack Kavanagh and Canadian Communism, 1923-1925

DESPITE THE FACTIONALISM that marked its beginnings, the West Coast communist movement slowly gained momentum. The Workers Party in BC registered twelve branches with a total of 439 members by the end of 1922 — "this despite mistakes and blunders that would have wrecked any organization less firmly rooted in the soil of working class struggle," Tim Buck claimed at the first convention of District No.6 in early 1923.¹⁰⁹

In Vancouver, the communists carved out space on the radical edge of the workers' movement under the rubric of united front strategy. WPC activists continued to lead in organizing jobless workers, arranging a conference of union representatives with a deputation from this constituency in September 1922, for example, which paid special attention to unemployment among women.¹¹⁰ Soon afterward, the WPC issued a call for "a united political front on the part of the workers" to contest a municipal byelection. As a result a Labor Representation Committee was formed in December 1922, made up of delegates from the VTLC and twelve unions, the WPC and the FLP, the Unemployment Conference Committee and the Ukrainian Labour Society, and other working-class organizations. The labour candidate topped the civic poll on this occasion.¹¹¹ The Workers Party also pushed ahead with unifying efforts in the industrial field. A Vancouver branch of the Trade Union Educational League was established in February 1923 to promote industrial unionism through the amalgamation of the existing craft unions.¹¹²

Meanwhile, despite its overtures, Kavanagh steered clear of the communist movement in this period, instead devoting all his energies to union work on the

¹⁰⁸ 'Report Re: Workers Party of Canada - Administrative Council,' dated 17 December 1922, RCMP File. The Comintern's delegate in Canada did not share, then, the reading of the 1922 fight over the *Federationist* put forward later by historian Ian Angus. The CPC's swift action in unloading the paper, Angus argues, was a sign of its growing political maturity, showing a greater understanding of the united front tactic. Angus concludes that "faced with a choice between keeping Smith and Kavanagh [sic] and maintaining principle, the party chose principle. It was a good beginning." Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 118. But the Comintern's agent (Jensen/Scott) in Toronto saw it very differently at the time, judging the direct transfer of the paper to VTLC control to be a major blunder. In his view it was a move that only weakened the party's already tenuous presence among Vancouver's trade unions by needlessly alienating Kavanagh, one of the most important links between the CPC and organized labour.

¹⁰⁹ *BC Federationist*, 2 February 1923; *The Worker*, 15 February 1923.

¹¹⁰ See *BC Federationist*, 6 October 1922.

¹¹¹ See *BC Federationist*, 24 November 1922, 15 December 1922; Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia*, 144-6.

¹¹² See *BC Federationist*, 23 February 1923; Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 94.

waterfront. His respite from party activity lasted into the summer of 1923. Gradually, however, he drifted back into formal contact with the Vancouver branch of the WPC. He was one of the speakers, for instance, at a mass meeting called by the Workers Party in July 1923 to protest against sending troops to Nova Scotia to break the Cape Breton coalminers strike. Representing the International Longshoremen's Association, Kavanagh urged his Columbia Theatre audience to transform the AFL-TLC unions into fighting organizations. "If the workers could not build an organization to throw out Sammy Gompers, they could not overthrow capitalism," he reportedly said.¹¹³

Kavanagh's estrangement from the WPC was ending, but his feud with Wells and Clarke, stemming from the *Federationist* affair, was still heated. The party's national leadership, heeding the instructions of a Comintern representative, was anxious to reunite Kavanagh with the communist movement. An opportunity to negotiate a truce arose in September 1923 when the annual convention of the Canadian Trades and Labor Congress was held in Vancouver. The role of conciliator was played by Jack MacDonald, national secretary of the CPC and chairman of the Workers Party. He managed to smooth over past differences and Kavanagh rejoined the WPC.¹¹⁴ The reconciliation was sealed by his selection as the left-wing candidate for the presidency of the TLC at the Vancouver convention.

The TLC election was prefaced by a heated exchange between the two contestants — Kavanagh and the ultraconservative incumbent, Tom Moore. It took place during the debate on a resolution calling for the "total exclusion of all Orientals" as a cure for unemployment. Such resolutions were pointless, Kavanagh argued. He pressed instead for the incorporation of Asian immigrants "into working class organizations," declaring defiantly that "the Oriental crews on ships coming into Vancouver have a better understanding of working class solidarity than many of the labor fakirs who continually attend this Congress." Moore was infuriated by the crack about 'labor fakirs' and demanded that it be withdrawn or Kavanagh be expelled from the convention. Kavanagh agreed to "word it differently," saying "instead of labor fakirs, some of the men who are riding on the back of labor and who attend these Congress meetings."¹¹⁵

Verbal jousting aside, the challenge of the militant minority was easily deflected by the entrenched bureaucracy in the election for president. Moore received 136 votes to Kavanagh's forty.¹¹⁶ While class-struggle socialists like Kavanagh resisted the dominance of the right-wing bureaucracy, rejecting the reaction and racism of certain 'labour statesmen', their opposition remained peripheral in the early 1920s.

¹¹³*BC Federationist*, 3 August 1923.

¹¹⁴See 'Report Re: Workers Party Activities, Vancouver, 17 September 1923,' RCMP File.

¹¹⁵Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, *Report of the Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention, Vancouver, September 10th to 14th, 1923*, 82, 132.

¹¹⁶See Avakumovic, *Communist Party of Canada*, 43.

The Moore machine's conservative hegemony within the TLC was symptomatic of a working class in retreat. The employing class attacked organized labour with a renewed sense of confidence in the 1920s — the 'open shop' was a top priority on the corporate agenda. For example, a concerted union-busting campaign was unleashed on the Vancouver waterfront within a month of the TLC convention. The Shipping Federation on the west coast launched a frontal assault on ILA Local 38-52, the city's largest and most militant union, "in a struggle complete with fisticuffs, gun fire and armed strikebreakers."¹¹⁷

The confrontation arose from the Shipping Federation's refusal in October 1923 to entertain Longshoremen's Union contract demands. "The real object of the employers was to smash the union," Kavanagh pointed out.¹¹⁸ An overwhelming majority of the union's 1400 members voted to strike and a nine-week struggle ensued. But the odds were stacked against the cargo-handlers and dock-workers. The ship-owners set up a hiring hall to recruit strikebreakers and moved a contingent of shotgun-toting guards onto the waterfront to protect them. An armed launch patrolled the scene as well. To worsen matters, several craft unions refused to honour the picket line, making a mockery of principles of labour unity and weakening the strike. Kavanagh never tired of telling how "the teamsters and other grades of workers allowed the Longshoremen to be slaughtered by the company."¹¹⁹ The ILA was demolished in Vancouver by the end of 1923, replaced by a company union.

Before the strike was broken, Workers Party unionists spearheaded isolated efforts to build labour solidarity. In the VTLC in early December the communist minority put forward a motion calling for a "general sympathetic strike" in support of the embattled longshoremen, but the proposal was sidetracked by moderate elements. One leading member of the council assured the citizens of Vancouver "that sanction for a general strike or anything approximating direct action [would] not be given," as such ideas were confined to a "small body of radicals in the movement." In the individual unions where they occupied leadership positions, predominantly in the building industry, the communists achieved some measure of success, passing resolutions instructing members "to stay off all work on the waterfront until the I.L.A. strike is settled."¹²⁰

Within ILA 38-52 itself the actual direction of the strike was contested by several political factions in the union, with communists, socialists, and syndicalists crossing swords continually over the best way to conduct the fight. A rank-and-file

¹¹⁷ Martin Robin, *The Rush For Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933* (Toronto 1972), 212.

¹¹⁸ *Saskatoon Phoenix*, 9 October 1924.

¹¹⁹ *The Worker*, 26 July 1924. See "Man Along the Shore!" *The Story of the Vancouver Waterfront as Told by Longshoremen Themselves* (Vancouver 1975), 50-2; Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 92-3.

¹²⁰ *Strikes and Lockout Files*, RG27, Volume 331, No. 95.

correspondent to *The Worker*, who used the pseudonym "Disgusted," observed that "many of the I.L.A. sympathizes with the C.I., some the S.P. of C., some Industrial Unionism, [but] not many will want to organize again in the A.F. of L." This state of political fragmentation had left the union rudderless, and on this question of leadership "Disgusted" was impelled "to mention here that Jack Kavanagh has been sick for quite a spell so now the waterfront workers are in a predicament."¹²¹

Kavanagh was blacklisted once the ILA was driven off the docks. He returned to the construction industry and took on official duties for Local 792 of the International Hod Carriers, Building and Common Laborers' Union, a communist stronghold in the Vancouver workers' movement. After a long absence, one not of his own choosing, he was finally seated as a VTLC delegate in early May 1924.¹²² Despite Kavanagh's setbacks and outright defeats in mainstream labour activism in the early 1920s, he never wavered in his adherence to the communist tactic of "boring from within" the existing unions, although he may have differed with party headquarters about the best way to apply this strategy specifically in the West Coast context. His article in *The Worker* in autumn 1924 defended CPC trade-union policy from a local historical perspective:

The Communist Party is opposed to any action that will still further weaken the forces of Labor. Much sneering is at this time engaged in by many ... at the idea of capturing the Trades Congress of Canada or the A.F. of L. The left wing groups may or may not capture the machinery of office. But, for the benefit of those unaware of the history of the Labor movement in this country, I would point out that the greatest movement in recent years of the workers in North America, both in scope and effect, was the Western General Strike of 1919, and THIS WAS ONLY MADE POSSIBLE BY THE CONTROL EXERCISED IN THE CRAFT UNIONS BY THE LEFT WING ELEMENTS.¹²³

Interpretations of Kavanagh's role in the communist movement in Canada that ascribe syndicalist tendencies to him, which supposedly underpinned his often turbulent relationship with the CPC, obviously misrepresent the actual political character of the man.¹²⁴

¹²¹*The Worker*, 5 January 1924.

¹²²See *BC Federationist*, 9 May 1924.

¹²³*The Worker*, 18 October 1924.

¹²⁴Ironically, even Ian Angus seems to suggest that it was Kavanagh's 'secessionist' temperament in the realm of labour organization which was the source of his periodic clashes with the CPC Central Committee over trade union strategy — a position similar to Tim Buck's glaringly inaccurate analysis. Angus argues that in the Vancouver context, Kavanagh was unable to work with the moderate leaders of the AFL-TLC unions in the 1920s because he "had fought for the OBU against those men." Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 117. That was certainly the case in 1919, but by 1921 at the latest Kavanagh had deemed the OBU a tactical error and strongly supported the communist line of "boring from within" the mainstream unions. During 1922-23, his quarrels with CPC headquarters most importantly turned on

One source of contention between Kavanagh and the central Canadian leadership was removed in the spring of 1924 when the cumbersome two-party system was eliminated. The underground formation was liquidated in April and the WPC changed its name to the Communist Party. The united front policy remained intact and in British Columbia it was extended to encompass the emergence of a provincial section of the Canadian Labour Party (CLP) in 1924. The united front tactic, in the form originally envisioned by Lenin and Trotsky, presupposed the political and organizational independence of the revolutionary party in any alliance with the reformist wing of the workers movement, and Kavanagh did not deviate from these specifications in his relations with the CLP on the west coast. The CPC's intervention into labourist politics in BC, directed by him, followed a course of critical support.

The organizing meeting of the CLP British Columbia section was held in Vancouver on 29 April 1924. The 96 delegates represented the VTLC, 28 unions, three FLP branches, and the English and Finnish units of the Communist Party in the city. Kavanagh made his presence felt at the outset of the meeting. He sought assurances that the proposed Labour Party would not require its political affiliates to submerge their separate identities within the electoral coalition. The delegates dutifully agreed "that there would be no sinking of the identity of any working-class political party" admitted to the CLP. During elections, all candidates would run under the CLP banner, but affiliated parties were free to carry on their own propaganda.¹²⁵ The independent political character of the Communist Party thus secured within the broader alliance, Kavanagh next tested the extent to which freedom of criticism was to be permitted.

At the first annual convention of the CLP in BC in May 1924 the party's objective was enunciated as "the abolition of capitalism, and securing for the producers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry." When the program came up for discussion, Kavanagh took the opportunity to pose a revolutionary critique of reformist practice, challenging the assumption that capitalism could simply be overturned by parliamentary methods:

He stated that means as well as ends should be discussed and considered: that five years of war in Europe where workers were massacred in [the] thousands; the smashing of the Longshoremen's Union in Vancouver; besides numerous other incidents, local, national and international should be sufficient to convince any thinking person that the democracy we lived under was a dictatorship of capital; and that the workers could only vanquish their enemies through the institution of a dictatorship of the working class until the last vestige of capitalism had been smashed, and the counter-revolutionary activities of the bourgeoisie had been suppressed.¹²⁶

differences concerning the application of the Comintern united front tactic to Canadian conditions, and were not the product of some imagined syndicalist streak.

¹²⁵ *Labor Statesman*, 2 May 1924; *The Worker*, 24 May 1924. See Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 95.

¹²⁶ *The Worker*, 14 June 1924.

Kavanagh's speech enraged "the watch-dogs of constitutionalism," as *The Worker* termed the Federated Labour Party delegates, and an intense, but open, debate on the merits or otherwise of capitalist democracy followed his pointed remarks. The communists then introduced a resolution to include "the establishment of a Workers' and Farmers' Government" in the objectives section of the CLP program. It was defeated, but only by a vote of 23 to 17.¹²⁷

The CLP ran 16 candidates in the provincial election of June 1924: three of them won seats in the BC legislature. The Communist Party also focused electoral attention on the municipal arena, particularly in the working-class wards of South Vancouver where it had strong ties to the district's unemployed organization. Endorsed by the CLP, O. Mengel and J.G. Smith of the CPC were elected to one-year terms on the South Vancouver Council in 1924 and 1925 respectively.¹²⁸

Soon after the establishment of the CLP on the West Coast, Kavanagh left Vancouver on an extended national organizing tour for the Communist Party. He held meetings in the mining camps of Alberta, addressed the Saskatoon Trades and Labour Council, gave shop-gate lectures in Winnipeg, and nominated Tim Buck for the presidency of the TLC at its 1924 convention in London, Ontario.¹²⁹ He returned to the coast late in the year. In the remaining months of his participation in CPC affairs, Kavanagh engaged mainly in educational activity in Vancouver. He instructed the weekly study-class on Marxist economic theory in the party's Homer Street hall, and was the principal speaker at the regular propaganda meetings held in the Columbia Theatre, addressing subjects like "The Paris Commune," "Imperialism," and "Lenin's Works."¹³⁰

When Kavanagh left Vancouver for good in April 1925, it was for strictly personal reasons and did not represent any sort of political retreat from the communist movement. He linked up with the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) immediately after resettling in Sydney, New South Wales. He acted as its chairman for the remainder of the twenties and was appointed a candidate member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International in 1928. But his association with official Australian communism proved to be as contentious as his period in the Canadian movement had been. With the consolidation of Stalinist hegemony in the Third International well underway, Kavanagh was deposed as the Australian party chairman at the end of 1929, expelled from the CPA as a "right-deviationist" at the beginning of 1931, readmitted to the party after a half-hearted "self-criticism," then expelled again as a "semi-Trotskyist" in 1934.¹³¹ Kavanagh's life

¹²⁷*The Worker*, 14 June 1924. See *Labor Statesman*, 30 May 1924.

¹²⁸See *Labor Statesman*, 27 June 1924, 5 December 1924, 23 January 1925.

¹²⁹See *The Worker*, 21 June 1924, 26 July 1924, 18 October 1924. Kavanagh kept a rough notebook during his tour which is contained in the Kavanagh Family Papers.

¹³⁰See *The Worker*, 13 December 1924; *Labor Statesman*, 16 January 1925, 23 January 1925, 8 February 1925, 20 March 1925.

¹³¹For the history of Kavanagh's role in the Australian left from 1925 to 1964, see my forthcoming PhD thesis titled, "A Capacity for Leadership: Jack Kavanagh and the Workers

on the left in Australia, where he remained a militant activist in the workers movement until his death in 1964, was punctuated by political turmoil and continued a turbulent trend set in motion in Canada.

Conclusion

IN THE YEARS after Kavanagh's departure, the Communist Party in British Columbia gradually grew into a major institution of working-class radicalism, sinking deeper roots in the unions and reviving the unemployed workers' movement during the Great Depression. For two decades after 1925, communist activists on the West coast, as elsewhere, stood at the centre of the drive for industrial organization in the workplace and the struggles of the jobless in many communities, and benefited from the foundation built by first-generation CPC militants.

These early communist cadres were far more isolated in the 'downturn' of the 1920s. Still, as the Vancouver example illustrates, an organization claiming the revolutionary heritage of Marx and Lenin (formed well before Stalin recodified and gutted Marxist-Leninist ideology) emerged out of the splits and realignments in the local left which followed the labour revolt of 1919. Materially grounded in the Russian Revolution, the program of the Third International steered segments of Canadian socialism toward building a Communist Party, with Kavanagh being one individual example of this often uneven process.

In a period of demobilization and depression, the new revolutionary current, modelled in the early 1920s in ambiguous and uncertain ways upon the Bolshevik example, still endeavoured to make organizational gains, however marginal. The mobilizations of Vancouver jobless workers, for instance, established one terrain for communist intervention, and local activists also attempted to go "to the masses" by building links to the trade unions.

Revolutionaries like Kavanagh gradually staked out a minority space in the conventional trade union movement in the early twenties, completely rejecting the OBU experiment in the process. Intent on reconstructing a left-wing presence in the mainstream unions, the communist movement posed a radical, if restricted, critique of the numbing conservatism of a hegemonic labour bureaucracy. After its unnecessarily-secret beginnings, the CPC also related to a broader milieu of working-class politics in the early 1920s. In localized and often contradictory circumstances, first-generation CPC militants showed a willingness to support national liberation struggles in principle and practice, and to intervene in labourist formations like the CLP. By engaging actively in this shortlived 'united political front,' radical worker-

Movement in Canada and Australia, 1879-1964," History Department, Queen's University. His association with Australian communism has received some attention from historians there. See Frank Farrell, *International Socialism and Australian Labour: The Left in Australia, 1919-1939* (Sydney 1981), 66-72; Margaret Sampson, "'Understand Capitalism to Abolish it': Jack Kavanagh and Australian Communism of the late twenties," Unpublished Paper, History Department, University of Newcastle, NSW, 1988.

intellectuals like Kavanagh in BC were able to challenge, if only rhetorically, the limitations of parliamentary reform as an anticapitalist strategy and to speak instead of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as a stepping stone to socialism.

Certain features of the internal history of the CPC were also taking shape in the foundation period of Canadian communism. Regional antagonism certainly played a role in the political disputes that affected the party in the early 1920s. Western Canadian concerns, for instance, found an executive outlet in the erudite figure of Jack Kavanagh. In the history of radical politics in Canada from 1910 to 1925, he acted as a local link between pre-war socialism and post-war communism and emerged as British Columbia's "best-known socialist labor leader."¹³² The formative years of Vancouver's communist movement were moulded by recurring phases of disagreement between the Kavanagh-led faction in the west and CPC headquarters in Toronto. Moreover, a state of contentious relations between the West Coast and the centre continued to influence the Communist Party long after Kavanagh was off the scene. "BC was always being criticised for being leftist and too militant and not properly analysing the situation," according to long-time CPC organizer Jack Scott. In speaking of the Popular Front era of the 1930s, a political context mediated by the international triumph of Stalinism and the doctrine of "Socialism in One Country," Scott pictures the BC section as "a thorn in the side of the Party leadership."¹³³ The origins of this dissenting tradition in West Coast communism clearly stretch back to the early 1920s, and can be discerned at the leadership level in Jack Kavanagh's disjointed experience with Canadian Bolshevism.

¹³² Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 74.

¹³³ Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927-1985* (St. John's 1988), 28.

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