

"Making Socialists": Bill Pritchard, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the Third International

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Article abstract

The legacy of the socialist party of Canada has come down to us in phrases such as economic determinism, mechanistic materialism, impossibilism, and sectarianism. The life of Bill Pritchard reveals the humanist roots of the SPC and what the party's leading thinkers owed to William Morris and the British ethical socialist tradition. That tradition was about "making socialists" who were educated, organized, and prepared to implement fully a socialist society. Bill Pritchard and other Marxian socialists, as much as they supported the Russian Revolution, were unwilling to submerge that goal in the program of the Third International. Their humanism, as much as their determinism, explains the choices they made and the legacy they left.

“Making Socialists”: Bill Pritchard, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the Third International

Peter Campbell

HISTORIANS OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY OF CANADA (SPC) and its members have tended to see 1919 as the watershed year in the history of the party. The transformation of leading SPC members from advocates of electoral politics into proponents of the general strike and the One Big Union (OBU) has quite legitimately been the focus of Canadian labour historians. As a result, however, much less attention has been paid to why more members of the SPC/OBU did not join the Communist Party in the early 1920s. With the ‘collapse of communism’ in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, however, it is perhaps timely to take another look at the reasons for the failure of more members of the SPC/OBU to become Communists. The attack on Bolshevism from the right was predictable, but why did so many Marxian socialists in countries like Canada criticize the Bolsheviks and refuse to join the ascendant Communist movement?¹

As Norman Penner has pointed out, one key to the initial success of the Communist movement in Canada was enlisting the support of the Socialist Party of Canada and the One Big Union.² The refusal of many, if not most, members of these Marxist-based organizations to support the Third, or Communist, International struck a severe blow at the early organizational efforts of the Communist Party, especially in western Canada.³

¹By Marxian socialists I mean all members of the SPC, OBU, Social Democratic Party (SDP), Socialist Labour Party (SLP), Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and Socialist Party of North America (SPNA) who traced their theoretical positions to Marx and Engels, but did not accept the theses of the Third International.

²Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988), 48-9.

³The Communist International, or Comintern, was formed in Moscow in 1919. Its primary objective was to create a world party with national sections, a task which would necessitate replacing existing socialist parties in these countries.

Unlike Penner, who has taken a fairly balanced view of the SPC/OBU refusal to support the Third International, most historians have portrayed the decision in a very negative light.⁴ William Rodney takes his cue from Communist Party leader Tim Buck, who talks about the SPC's 'sectarian passivity.'⁵ Ivan Avakumovic argues that SPC leaders were unable to take "a definite stand," a reflection of their "ambivalent attitude."⁶ The Communist Party itself describes the SPC as "dogmatic and passive," and dismisses leading SPC/OBU activist Bob Russell as an "anarcho-syndicalist."⁷ Ian Angus has been very critical, taking the SPC to task for its educational focus, and excoriating the OBU for running a "campaign against Lenin's views."⁸

Historians of the Socialist Party have done little to counter such accounts of the response of SPCers to the Third International. Ross McCormack's analysis of the SPC, which remains in many ways the best, ends in 1919, and does not deal with the SPC response to the Communist Party. Dorothy Steeves, in her biography of Ernest Winch, discusses the impact of the Third International on the British Columbia left, but says nothing about Winch's personal reaction to the Communists.⁹ Walter Young claims that the Canadian left as a whole in the years 1919-1932 was "fissiparous, elitist, paranoid and self-centred."¹⁰ Young's analysis, which appears aimed at the SPC in particular, reduces the entire history of the BC left to a caricature in which political ideologies become mere vehicles for the expression of personal ambitions. According to Young, there was genuine commitment to the cause of the working class, but it was overshadowed by the personal insecurities and inadequacies of Marxian socialists such as Ernest Winch.¹¹

⁴Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 44-69.

⁵William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 27.

⁶Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party of Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975), 18.

⁷Communist Party of Canada, *Canada's Party of Socialism: History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1921-1976* (Toronto 1982), 16, 33.

⁸Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981), 111. These criticisms notwithstanding, *Canadian Bolsheviks* remains the best analysis of the relationship between the SPC and the Communist Party. Ironically, in some ways Angus's treatment of the Socialist Party is more revealing than his rather romantic portrayal of the Communist Party.

⁹Dorothy Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver: J.J. Douglas, 1977). Mary Jordan, for example, claims that Winch did join the Communist Party in the early 1920s. Jordan may be mistaken, or have Winch confused with someone else, but his support for the Communists in the early 1930s makes the argument at least plausible. See Mary Jordan, *Survival: Labour's Trials and Tribulations in Canada* (Toronto 1975), 188.

¹⁰Walter Young, "Ideology, Personality and the Origin of the CCF in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, 32 (Winter 1976-77), 139.

¹¹Young, "Ideology," 162.

The result is a remarkably consistent, and negative, view of all Marxian socialists who rejected the theses of the Third International. The response is silence, condemnation, or the reduction of firmly held political positions to weaknesses of character.¹² More often than not history becomes a victim of political posturing. Marxian socialists who rejected the theses of the Third International were either too theoretical or not theoretical enough. They were dogmatic rather than principled, self-centred leaders who put their own interests ahead of the well-being of the Canadian working class.

The immediate need, in terms of advancing the historical debate, is to get beyond the easy condemnations which have characterized the historiography of Communism's arrival in Canada. The refusal of socialists to support the Third International was not simply a case of passivity, weakness, or theoretical dogmatism. Supporters of the SPC and OBU had their own personal, practical, and theoretical reasons which need to be entered in the ledger of historical explanation.¹³ Much of the theoretical and political confusion of the 1920s can be explained by the refusal of socialists, especially those socialists whose theoretical base was in Marxism, to join the Communist Party. The SPC/OBU contained the majority of potential Marxist adherents to the Third International, and it is the failure of many members of these organizations to support the Third International which needs to be explained.

In the case of the Socialist Party of Canada historians have paid too much attention to the rhetoric and too little attention to the ideas and actions. Enough has been said about economic determinism, millenarianism, "impossibilism," inherent totalitarian tendencies, and anti-trade unionism. While all of these elements were present in the party, they also serve to disguise the party's overriding purpose, the making of socialists. In that sense the party was very much in the tradition of English socialists such as William Morris.¹⁴ SPC may not have read Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach," but they believed in his dictum "that the educator himself needs

¹²I am in no way overlooking the fact that the Communists felt SPC members spent too much time debating the theoretical issues. However, because the Communists and their defenders perceive as self-evident who the 'real' Marxists were, the debate is usually seen, not as a clash of valid interpretations of Marxism, but rather as demonstrating the SPC's lack of courage, commitment, and revolutionary ardour.

¹³This paper focuses on members of the SPC/OBU as the leading force in the labour revolt of 1919, but does not mean to slight the importance of similar decisions taken by members of the SDP, the SLP, the SPNA, and the IWW.

¹⁴It is not generally recognized that the SPC patterned itself after the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB), a sister "impossibilist" party also formed in 1904. The SPGB was also dedicated to "making socialists," and its Declaration of Principles was drawn directly from the writings of William Morris. The SPGB provided some of the SPC's most famous speakers, including Moses Baritz and Adolphe Kohn. See Robert Barltrop, *The Monument: The Story of the Socialist Party of Great Britain* (London 1975), 12-3.

educating."¹⁵ They were in the tradition of the British ethical socialists, committed, for better or worse, to a belief in the rationality of the workers, and the ability to educate more and more workers until a self-organized, working-class majority was ready to take over the reins of power.¹⁶

Ross Johnson is right to anchor the success of the Socialist Party in British Columbia in the distinctive political economy of the province.¹⁷ David Bercuson is correct to see the growth of labour radicalism and Marxian socialism in western Canada as a product of the working conditions and exploitation faced by western miners and loggers.¹⁸ The problem is that they have pushed "BC exceptionalism" and "Western exceptionalism" too far. There is some truth to Johnson's argument that the SPC would have been better off to forget about Canada outside BC, but that misses the point. Leading SPC theorists believed that all workers exploited by capitalism, including farmers, could arrive at a knowledge of their class position. The heart and soul of their approach was exposing the debilitating impact of bourgeois culture, the exploitation inherent in capitalist relations of production, and the repressive nature of the capitalist state. The SPC's Marxism and critique of capitalism was not tied to a particular regional political economy, a perspective which had strengths as well as weaknesses.

The party was weak in its analyses of specific historical contexts and specific industries, but its strength was a resolute faith in all workers exploited by capitalism to realize their community of interests. Although not directly influenced by Rosa Luxemburg, the SPC espoused her position. As Stephen Bronner puts it, Luxemburg argued "that consciousness could only emerge organically through a party which actively helps the proletarian base define itself in opposition to the exploitative values of bourgeois society."¹⁹ It would be difficult to find a socialist anywhere who followed Luxemburg's prescription more closely than Canada's William A. "Bill" Pritchard. As editor of the *Western Clarion* from 1914 to 1917, and a leading formulator of SPC theory in the years 1913-1919, Pritchard helped forge the SPC theoretical stance. Bill Pritchard was an insightful observer and analyst of capitalism in its regional, national, and international contexts, but he was first and

¹⁵Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1 (Moscow 1969), 13.

¹⁶Books on late-19th and early-20th-century socialism in the British Isles are legion. My understanding is largely based on Stanley Pierson, *British Socialists: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics* (Cambridge 1979); Stuart MacIntyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-1933* (Cambridge 1980); Jonathan Ree, *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture, 1900-1940* (Oxford 1984); and E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York 1977).

¹⁷Ross A. Johnson, "No Compromise — No Political Trading: The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia," PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, 1975, ii.

¹⁸David Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 1-28.

¹⁹Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound* (New York 1990), 138.

foremost a fierce critic of bourgeois political culture, the capitalist state, and bureaucracy.

Bill Pritchard did espouse a Second International determinism, and for that reason considered the Russian Revolution a bourgeois, not a socialist, revolution. But to an orthodox Marxist like Pritchard the bourgeois nature of the revolution still made it historically necessary, not some kind of mistake. He did not condemn Lenin — he simply pointed out that the level of productive forces in the Soviet Union would force him into the world market and into the capitalist system.²⁰ There is no evidence in Bill Pritchard's writings or in oral interviews done in the 1960s and 1970s that he espoused the right's reaction to the Bolshevik seizure of power. For Pritchard, the dictatorship over the proletariat, rather than the dictatorship of the proletariat, was a product of the conditions Lenin had to deal with, not a result of autocratic tendencies inherent in Bolshevism itself.

The major crisis facing the Bolsheviks was how to create an educated working-class majority in a country in which 80 per cent of the population was comprised of peasants. Near the end of his life Pritchard took the position that the Russian Revolution had failed because you could not build a socialist society on a "feudal dunghill," but in the early 1920s his argument was more nuanced and less determinist.²¹ At that time he did not rule out the possibility of the eventual creation of a socialist society in the Soviet Union. The problem was in some ways similar to that in Canada, educating large numbers of farmers as well as workers. For Pritchard there was no historical law saying that the Bolsheviks could not create a socialist society at some point — there was, however, a "law" that you could not create socialism without socialists.

Historians of the Socialist Party have made two fundamental theoretical errors: they have assumed that the "scientific socialism" of the SPC can be equated with Second International economic determinism, and they have assumed that the "scientific socialism" of the SPC and the "scientific socialism" of the Communists were the same thing. These mistakes emerge from the tendency to portray the SPC as a kind of proto-Leninist party, an approach which is both ahistorical and theoretically flawed.²² The evidence clearly suggests that, in spite of the Socialist Party's periodic insistence that it was a scientific socialist party in the tradition of Frederick Engels, its conception of how revolution would occur owed more to William Morris than to Engels. Ross McCormack is mistaken, as far as Bill Pritchard is concerned, to argue that the Socialist Party "ruthlessly subordinated

²⁰Ross McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," 16-18 August 1971, Tape 5, side A. I would like to thank Ross McCormack for access to his tapes of Bill Pritchard, and James Naylor for sending them to me.

²¹David Millar Collection (DMC), "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Transcript 6, 2.

²²Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990), 96. David Bercuson's "conspiracy" theory of the formation of the One Big Union is also informed by equating the SPC leaders with a Leninist-style approach — real or imagined. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 86.

humanitarianism to materialism."²³ In reality, Bill Pritchard's materialism encompassed a humanitarian concern with the agency, education, and self-organization of the workers.

A close analysis of Pritchard's life and thought reveals the differences which existed between his Marxism and the Marxism of the Communist movement. Revealing that difference involves an analysis of the origins of Pritchard's ideas, and in particular the centrality of non-Marxist ideas. Of crucial importance is how Pritchard's commitment to making socialists was revealed in his position on evolution and revolution, the role of the party, and the relationship between leaders and followers in a revolutionary movement. The conclusion to be drawn from such an analysis is that Bill Pritchard's rejection of the Third International was consistent with his intellectual formation and socialist activism, and not at all surprising.

Bill Pritchard was born in Salford, near Manchester, England in April 1888. His parents, James and Priscilla, were first cousins of Welsh extraction. Like so many working-class youths in this period, young Bill appears to have been more influenced by his very religious mother than by his father.²⁴ Raised Plymouth Brethren, he attended church with his mother in a non-Conformist chapel in southeast Lancashire.²⁵

Although Pritchard's father was a textile mill worker and a coal miner, young Bill was apprenticed as a clerk in a lumber business at the age of thirteen or fourteen. In all probability his wide reading and reasonably good grade school education helped him get the apprenticeship. He was not occupied in a physically exhausting job, and was able to pursue other interests. He attended both the Manchester School of Technology and the Royal Institute of Technology at night, where he learned typing, shorthand, and some German.²⁶

Precisely what effect this strict religious upbringing had on Pritchard is unclear. His later denunciations of organized religion may have had roots in the Brethren critique of the established church and ordained ministers, as well as in his Marxism. On the other hand, he does not appear to have imbibed the pessimism about the hopelessly corrupt nature of the world for which the Brethren were noted.²⁷ Pritchard later recalled that he was idealistic as a young man, an idealism tempered by the "moral seriousness" typical of Marxian socialists from religious backgrounds.²⁸

²³Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977), 59.

²⁴Norman Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," (2 August 1973), Tape 3, side B. I would like to thank Rick Stow of New Liskeard for providing me with copies of the Penner tapes.

²⁵Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 4, side B.

²⁶DMC, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Transcript 2, 5; Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 1, side A.

²⁷Daniel Steele, D.D., *Antinomianism Revived* (Toronto 1887?), 56.

²⁸Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 1, side A. I owe the insightful description "moral seriousness" to Barry Mack, who has been brave enough to try to keep me from wrecking on the shoals of 19th-century Protestant theology.

It was as an idealistic young man that he first read *Das Kapital*, expecting a vision of the future. Instead he found a very straightforward analysis of the commodity. He later recalled that this was "something different than I had been looking for, and I just took hold of it."²⁹ Even as an idealist, therefore, there was something about the certainty of Marx's thought which, perhaps fuelled by the Calvinism of the Brethren, appealed to him. Bill Pritchard was one of any number of nineteenth-century figures who were attracted to Marxism, as Henry F. May points out, because they "hated to relinquish their humanist hopes, and yet longed to be detached and scientific."³⁰ From religious non-Conformism Bill Pritchard acquired his humanism and belief in the importance of the individual conscience, and from Marx he gained the assurance that came with seeing the socialist future as the product of unfolding material forces. Armed with both moral and scientific certainty, Bill Pritchard was already on the road to his involvement in the Socialist Party of Canada and his rejection of the Third International.

When he emigrated to Canada in the spring of 1911 Bill Pritchard was already a socialist who had read Marx. Unlike many other Marxian socialists, who could not be considered Marxists before they came to Canada, Pritchard was ready to respond to the SPC's message. It did not take him long. He arrived in Vancouver on 19 May 1911. On 21 May he heard Wallis Lefebvre of the Socialist Party speak, and on 23 May 1911 he joined the party.³¹

Pritchard's rise to prominence was aided by the internal problems in the Socialist Party. In May, the same month he arrived in Vancouver, almost the entire wing of the Ontario SPC broke away to join the Social Democratic Party. In British Columbia the SPC was in turmoil, as James Hawthornthwaite, who was an SPC member of the BC legislature, resigned from the party.³² D.G. MacKenzie, the highly respected editor of the *Western Clarion*, also left the party in 1911. A year later the party was still in turmoil, and the *Clarion* was not even published from November 1912 to March 1913.

Bill Pritchard, because he had the knowledge of Marxism and the practical skills to help the party get back on its feet, was in the right place at the right time. Bad luck in the employment arena may have led him to consider working for the party. He arrived in Vancouver during a building trades strike, so it was impossible for him to get a clerking job in the construction industry. He worked at a pick and shovel job for a month, and then got a position as an accountant with a plumbing,

²⁹Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard, Tape 1, side A. It is possible that he had already read books like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and William Morris's *News From Nowhere*. Pritchard gave his assessment of both books in an interview he did in the early 1970s. See McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 4, side A.

³⁰Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence* (Chicago 1964), 170.

³¹DMC, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Transcript 2, 7; Transcript 8, 8.

³²See the *Western Clarion*, 20 May 1911, for letters commenting on Hawthornthwaite's resignation.

heating, and electrical firm. He lost that job when the firm went bankrupt during the depression of 1913.³³

What Pritchard did next is unclear, but he did become editor of the *Western Clarion* on 1 December 1914. The paper had recently published an editorial entitled "The Affirmation of German Culture," which accused German workers of being "traitors" who were "obsessed with militarism." The resulting furor in the SPC locals led J.H. Burrough, the editor, to take responsibility for the article and resign. Bill Pritchard, who had been helping Burrough and looking after the SPC's literature sales, became the new editor.³⁴

Bill Pritchard was a driving force behind putting the *Clarion* back on its feet. He improved the quality of the paper, sold subscriptions, and contributed important theoretical articles before, during, and after his stint as editor. By the time he left the editorship of the *Clarion* in 1917 he was also a leading member of the Dominion Executive Committee of the SPC.

In the pages of the *Clarion* are to be found the main theoretical positions of Bill Pritchard which help explain his response to the Third International. The key element is that his theoretical positions were not drawn exclusively from Marx. Pritchard read a great deal of literature relating to the theory of evolution, natural science, and biological and social change. In addition, he also read the *International Socialist Review* and the *New Review*, the leading journals of the Socialist Party of America.³⁵

The interpretation of the SPC as a dogmatic, sectarian party whose members were constantly quoting the first volume of *Das Kapital* only tells part of the story. On the eve of World War I the literature list of the SPC looked more like the prospectus for a university course on the thought of western civilization than the theoretical basis of a revolutionary socialist party. There were more books by Thomas Huxley on the list than by any other author. Marx's eight titles tied him in second place with Herbert Spencer.³⁶ The influence of Spencer seems downright bizarre at first. The man who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest," Spencer was the champion of individualism, laissez-faire capitalism, and ridding the economy of state interference. Yet Spencer appealed to SPC members for that very reason — he condemned the state and the people who were its leaders.³⁷

The attitude of SPCers such as Bill Pritchard to the role of the state in a socialist transformation has been seriously distorted. Mark Leier, building on the work of Ross McCormack, has argued that prominent SPCers saw the role of the workers

³³DMC, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Transcript 1, 11; Transcript 3, 7.

³⁴McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 3, side B; *Western Clarion*, 21 November 1914.

³⁵On the Marxism of the American party see Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States* (London 1987). The SPC was more like the Socialist Party of America than has generally been recognized.

³⁶*Western Clarion*, 18 July 1914.

³⁷Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology* (New York 1875), 159-77.

as almost entirely passive. Their job was to elect leaders to political office who would "institute the revolution and rule in the name of the workers".³⁸ In reality, Bill Pritchard's attitude toward the state and leadership owed more to Marx, Spencer and Marxist-based social theorists than to the example of twentieth century "Marxist" states.³⁹ The position of the Socialist Party was that the workers themselves would control the state, not the other way round. The state would be "purely an administration of industry by the working class for the working class."⁴⁰ In all probability the definition comes from Arthur Morrow Lewis, whose book *Evolution Social and Organic* may have been the most widely read text ever published by Charles H. Kerr, the Chicago publisher of socialist literature who provided almost all the SPC's books and pamphlets.⁴¹ In his analysis of Herbert Spencer, Morrow observed that socialists "are able to distinguish between 'the state' which Socialism will abolish, and the 'administration of industry' which it will establish."⁴² It is surely no coincidence that members of the Socialist Party used exactly that phrase in describing how the new society would function.

Far from endorsing a bureaucratic, leader-driven socialist society, Bill Pritchard explicitly repudiated it. He rejected Fabian socialism of the "Sydney Webb type," which called for "a management of society by the bureaucrats."⁴³ Bill Pritchard's program was Marx's program, dismantling the state and returning its functions to the workers themselves. Perhaps again we see the influence of his Plymouth Brethren upbringing, because central to the Brethren world view is a belief that each individual is his or her own leader.

Mark Leier is right, however, that in the here and now of SPC electoral politics women, Asians, and other workers from minority groups, who could not meet the property and residency requirements for running for public office, were effectively excluded from leadership positions in the party.⁴⁴ SPCers like Bill Pritchard never did reconcile their special role in the party as leaders with their commitment to the creation of a socialist society which would be carried out by the workers themselves. Yet it must be pointed out that given the extent to which so many socialist parties in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been dominated by one leader or a small elite, the Socialist Party of Canada was remarkably egalitarian at the

³⁸Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 92.

³⁹Pritchard had read Spencer before becoming editor of the *Clarion*. See, for example, the 15 March 1913 issue.

⁴⁰Quoted in McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 59.

⁴¹Richard Hofstadter claims that Lewis' book had the largest advance sale of any American socialist publication. See his *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (New York 1959 [1944]), 115-6.

⁴²Arthur Morrow Lewis, *Evolution Social and Organic* (Chicago 1910?), 160.

⁴³*Western Clarion*, 14 February 1914.

⁴⁴Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 92.

leadership level. Even in the early years of the party men such as E.T. Kingsley were not as dominant as they have sometimes been portrayed.

In reality events did force Bill Pritchard and other leading SPCers to deal with the fact that the party's electoralism left it with a very limited focus. After the BC election of 1912 the SPC had no members in the legislature. It was increasingly difficult to argue that the workers could come to power by means of the ballot box. During the war the SPC, led by members like Bill Pritchard and Jack Kavanagh, placed increasing emphasis on industrial unions. They believed industrial unions could be controlled by the rank and file, and could avoid dependence on 'parasitic' trade union bureaucrats of the AFL-type. Pritchard and Kavanagh were also instrumental in changing the platform of the SPC to legitimate industrial unionism.⁴⁵ In so doing they partially overcame the contradiction inherent in the party's electoralism, although women and non-British members never became prominent in the party.⁴⁶

What did not change, however, was the SPC's attitude toward leadership. In a March 1917 article called "The Need of Leaders," leading SPC theorist J.A. McDonald argued that in the last century students "of sociology, economics, biology, history and philosophy have produced sufficient data to entirely shatter the 'great man' theory of social and organic change." This led to the realization that "the Socialist position is impregnable. The necessity for leadership does not exist in our ranks."⁴⁷

The position on leadership was buttressed by a number of theorists who were read in Charles H. Kerr editions. Robert Rives La Monte, in his book *Socialism Positive and Negative*, argued that the age of the Great Man was gone. Thomas Carlyle, in his classic work *Heroes and Hero Worship*, had been right to argue that the hero as unattainable ideal had been important to human society, but now the ideal of the hero had been replaced by the ideal of the co-operative commonwealth.⁴⁸ Antonio Labriola, who was also read by Bill Pritchard and other SPCers, noted that "the mass of the proletarians no longer holds to the word of command of a few leaders," and "the socialization of the means of production cannot be the work of a mass led by a few...."⁴⁹

Bill Pritchard's thoughts on the subject also derived from his reading of Darwin and Marx. In a December 1916 article entitled "The Philosophy and Policy

⁴⁵ *Western Clarion*, June 1916.

⁴⁶ It should be noted, however, that an East Indian member, Husain Rahim, who was on both the BC and Dominion Executive Committees of the SPC, became the party's expert on Freudianism and psychology. In addition, the SPC made a concerted effort to organize Japanese and Chinese workers during World War I.

⁴⁷ *Western Clarion*, March 1917.

⁴⁸ Robert Rives La Monte, *Socialism Positive and Negative* (Chicago 1914), 15-7.

⁴⁹ Antonio Labriola, *Essays on the Materialistic Conception of History* (Chicago 1908), 59. Bill Pritchard refers to Labriola's criticism of the 'Great Man' theory in the *Clarion*, May 1915.

of a Revolutionary Party," Pritchard argued that in "the same way the Darwinian law explains organic evolution, the Marxian law explains social evolution."⁵⁰ Central to that social evolution was the capturing of state power. How the socialist society would actually be created, and what character it would take, however, was up to the workers themselves. They were the revolutionaries, and their "leaders" could not tell them what to do.⁵¹ Only a fool, however, could believe that the transformation from capitalism to socialism could be accomplished without suppressing the capitalist masters who controlled the politicians.⁵²

Historians of the SPC have never understood how the party could combine this almost Marxist-Leninist conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat with a theory of revolution based on electing members to parliament. The answer has to do with the way the SPC defined revolution, and what the party was prepared to do if a socialist government was elected and the capitalists refused to hand over the reins of power.

There are several points which need to be cleared up. First, the SPC was not made up of a bunch of armchair intellectuals with no personal courage and a penchant for useless debate. H.M. Fitzgerald, one of the SPC's leading educators and platform speakers, had fought in one of the South American revolutions.⁵³ As early as 1907 a *Clarion* editorial entitled "The Ferocity of Class Rule" argued that the workers had to take whatever action was necessary to "prevent themselves being murdered by a wanton, unscrupulous and bloodthirsty ruling class."⁵⁴ Four years later Maritimer Fred Hyatt stated that the workers would be justified in taking up their rifles in a revolutionary situation if the capitalists refused to give up "the reins of government."⁵⁵ Even D.G. MacKenzie, that pillar of "impossibilism," recognized during World War I that the coming revolution could not be peaceful.⁵⁶ Bill Pritchard was more circumspect in his assessment, and was at times vague about how the revolution would take place. There can be little doubt, however, how Pritchard saw the transformation taking place. He had no illusions about the vote, recognizing that it was merely "an expression of opinion," which had no intrinsic value to the revolutionary. And if the "masters" refused to acknowledge the workers' political mandate? "So much the worse for the masters."⁵⁷

⁵⁰*Western Clarion*, 16 December 1916.

⁵¹McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 4, side A. Pritchard's position on leaders was remarkably similar to that of Eugene Debs. The great American socialist once said: "I never had much faith in leaders. I am willing to be charged with almost anything, rather than to be charged with being a leader." Quoted in Bert Cochran, "The Achievement of Debs," in Harvey Goldberg, ed., *American Radicals* (New York 1969), 170-1.

⁵²*Western Clarion*, 16 December 1916.

⁵³*BC Federationist*, 20 September 1918.

⁵⁴*Western Clarion*, 30 March 1907.

⁵⁵*Western Clarion*, 18 November 1911.

⁵⁶*Western Clarion*, February 1916.

⁵⁷*Western Clarion*, August 1916.

Bill Pritchard's commitment to the socialist revolution, in the Soviet Union as well as the West, was much more than rhetorical. This was why he favoured the SPC's very rigorous admission standards. He did not want any worker supporting the party who was not willing to go the whole way toward overthrowing the ruling class and destroying the state. The insistence by the SPC that workers understand precisely what they were talking about was fuelled by a desire that the workers themselves know exactly what was required of them. The problem, of course, was that the SPC had no way of knowing how the workers would react until faced with an actual revolutionary situation.⁵⁸ It was this very problem that Lenin attempted to overcome by means of the vanguard party and constant revolutionary agitation. It was this weakness in the SPC program which led SPCers such as Jack Kavanagh, A.S. Wells, and H.M. Bartholomew to join the Communist Party.

The problem with Bill Pritchard and the SPC was not determinism, it was idealism. Given a choice between "some elite that is leading the mob," and waiting 500 years for the workers to be educated, Pritchard chose to wait.⁵⁹ He and other SPCers refused to outline exactly how the revolutionary transformation would take place, or what the new society would be like, because it was the workers who were the revolutionaries. They would create the socialist society themselves.⁶⁰

How the theory played out during the labour revolt of 1919 can only be understood in terms of Bill Pritchard's labour and socialist activities in the years 1917-19.⁶¹ When Pritchard left the *Clarion* in 1917, he got a job as a shipper in a sawmill and became a member of the International Timberworkers, an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor. While there his efforts to organize a union were impeded by the sawyers and saw filers, who wanted to form their own craft union.⁶² When he joined the longshoremen, he experienced a similar split between the dock workers in the International Longshoremen's Association and the warehouse workers in the ILA Auxiliary, the Marine Warehousemen & Freight Handlers' Union.⁶³

⁵⁸Exactly why the SPC failed to deal with this problem more extensively is unclear. The One Big Union was the main avenue of dealing with the problem, but the very confusion surrounding the formation of the OBU indicates that the problem was more skirted than dealt with.

⁵⁹McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 3, side B.

⁶⁰McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 4, side A.

⁶¹I agree with Greg Kealey's use of the phrase "labour revolt," and also that the events of 1919 must be seen in national and international contexts. I would agree with the critics, however, that his position on 'Western exceptionalism' is overstated. See Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 11-44. The other 'seminal' article in the debate is David J. Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier, 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (June 1977), 154-75.

⁶²Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 3, side B.

⁶³J.S. Woodsworth describes the antagonism between the two unions in his *On the Waterfront* (Ottawa n.d.). Auxiliary members had less job security and a lower status as a result of working the warehouses and river barges, not the ships.

As a result of his experiences organizing sawmill workers and longshoremen, Pritchard became much more receptive to industrial unionism and activism in the economic field. Yet the shift was deceptive, because he called for organization "according to class and the needs of a class," not according "to industries and the needs of industries." The wartime increase in union membership did not indicate radicalism, because "the first indication of class knowledge in the ranks of organised labor will be an influx of such into the political party of their class."⁶⁴ Bill Pritchard supported the increase in union membership, the necessity for industrial unions, and the creation of the One Big Union. None of those developments, however, necessarily implied a more radical working class. Right or wrong, Pritchard believed that demonstrating the class knowledge required to become a member of the SPC was a better indicator of socialist intent.

The late war period made the question of social change a more immediate one, and the evidence was mounting that the struggle between the state and the working class was taking on more immediate dimensions. In effect, the SPC had to temper its theoretical commitment to a revolution brought about by an educated, working-class majority in favour of a programme of action to take advantage of working-class protest in the here and now. In order to do that, they had to argue that action could proceed, in particular the formation of the One Big Union, with only the support of the "active minority" in the labour movement.

Bill Pritchard did not believe that working-class organizations sprang from nowhere; they were always the creation of a minority of the workers.⁶⁵ When Pritchard endorsed this position, however, he was not endorsing a Leninist conception of revolution. The exact opposite was true; by taking this position, he was explicitly admitting that the situation in Canada in 1919 was non-revolutionary. The decision to proceed with the formation of the One Big Union meant that the real revolutionary change could only come in the future when a majority of the working class was organized and class conscious. The evidence is overwhelming that the intent was not political revolution, and the great majority of Canadian workers, including most workers in Winnipeg, were not socialists in any meaningful sense. For Bill Pritchard the strike did demonstrate, however, that the workers were capable of stepping into the breach, organizing, and performing the jobs usually done by the ruling class.⁶⁶ In essence, how the workers conducted themselves was the real lesson of the strike, not what actions they intended to take.

The Winnipeg strike leaders continually exhorted the workers to remain calm and non-violent, because labour was in no position to get into an armed confrontation with the state. The strike represented an important affirmation of the revolutionary potential of the Canadian working class, but that potential would not be realized for some time to come. Bill Pritchard's revolution, when it came, would

⁶⁴ *Western Clarion*, August 1917.

⁶⁵ *Vancouver Daily Sun*, 21 March 1919.

⁶⁶ DMC, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Transcript 6, 9-10.

be a social and cultural, not just a political, revolution. The workers would not only be ready for political revolution, but also prepared, before that revolution, to create a socialist society themselves. For Bill Pritchard, the socialist revolution would be accomplished by "society," meaning a working-class majority, educated in "proletarian science," organized as a party.⁶⁷ It was a very idealistic conception of revolution. The revolution had to happen, not only in open conflict between worker and capitalist, but also in the minds of the workers.

Bill Pritchard believed that a revolution was of necessity a political act — he did not believe that a socialist society could be created by workers' councils, soviets, the unions, or a general strike. This was, of course, a fundamental disagreement with Lenin, and would help produce the rift in the early 1920s between old allies like Bill Pritchard and Jack Kavanagh. It also clearly distances Pritchard from syndicalism. Ross McCormack's claim that at the British Columbia Federation of Labor conference in March 1919 "Pritchard and Kavanagh led the syndicalist attack on craft unionism and political action" is very misleading.⁶⁸ Pritchard flirted with workplace-centred socialism while involved with the Lumber Workers in the spring of 1919, but his model was the British Shop Stewards' movement, not the IWW or French syndicalism. Pritchard respected the IWW for its attempts to organize loggers and other transient workers neglected by the American Federation of Labor, but he also considered it a breeding ground for police spies.⁶⁹ Bill Pritchard supported the self-emancipation of the workers, but those workers needed to be disciplined and educated.

Nor did the labour revolt of 1919 change his attitude toward the role of leadership. Bill Pritchard did not think that the failure of 1919 was a failure of leadership. The problem was very obvious to him — not enough rank and file workers understood socialism or were willing to act to implement it. The working class was still much too easily taken in by the capitalist press, and it would obviously be some time before it was ready to implement socialism. For Bill Pritchard, the main purpose of a revolutionary party was not dictating tactics to the rank and file workers, it was pointing out to them the ways in which they were deceived by the capitalists and their "henchmen."

In effect, Bill Pritchard did not abandon the centrality of educating the workers during the labour upheaval of 1917-19. Nor did he, as Ian Angus points out, abandon political action for direct action.⁷⁰ The weakness of David Bercuson's *Fools and Wise Men*, and to a lesser extent Ross McCormack's *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, is that during the labour revolt SPCCers like Bill Pritchard appear on the scene, literally *deus ex machina*. They are individuals with little past

⁶⁷ McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 4, side A.

⁶⁸ McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, 157. Why McCormack makes this claim is hard to understand. Bill Pritchard, when he was interviewed by McCormack, denied being a syndicalist and repeatedly scoffed at the claim that the OBU was syndicalist.

⁶⁹ William. A. Pritchard, *Address to the Jury* (Winnipeg 1920), 209.

⁷⁰ Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks*, 73.

and no future. Seen in relation to Bill Pritchard's upbringing, however, and in the context of his involvement with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in the 1930s, his very real turn toward direct action and industrial unionism must be understood in terms of a particular moment of Canadian labour history. Even in 1919 Bill Pritchard did not believe that revolutions could be made. The stage was set for his clash with the Communists and old allies in the SPC who supported the Communist party.

When Bill Pritchard emerged from prison in February 1921 he was not in very good shape physically. When he spoke at the Columbia Theatre in Vancouver in late March he had just recovered from a bout of influenza. The *Sun* reporter noted that he "appeared to be weak. He used his chair as a support in speaking."⁷¹ Pritchard himself recalled that "I came back a sick fellow — very sick — and had to convalesce for a while — and that's why I've got a little hearing trouble."⁷² In addition, Pritchard's wife had been under tremendous strain during the trial and his imprisonment, and the family was without a steady source of income during this period.⁷³ Pritchard's support for the OBU was now lukewarm at best and, as David Bercuson points out, it was not long before he was back longshoring.

Exactly when supporters of the Third International approached Pritchard to join them is unclear, but it was likely in the spring or early summer of 1921. By then Pritchard's old SPC allies, most notably Jack Kavanagh and Joe Knight, were working actively to undermine the SPC and OBU, and convince all their members to support Lenin's 21 points.⁷⁴ Exactly who approached Pritchard is not known, but he later recalled that he "had never known them in the labour movement or socialist movement."⁷⁵ Bill Pritchard was a proud man. He had just suffered through a painful prison sentence on behalf of the Canadian working class, and now some Communists who had not even participated in the labour revolt of 1919 were telling him that he had to join them.⁷⁶ He was not willing to accept that a party directed from Moscow knew more about how to operate in the Canadian context than he did.

This encounter may help explain the vitriolic nature of an article Pritchard published in the *Western Clarion* in July 1921. In it he demonstrated his contempt

⁷¹Vancouver *Sun*, 28 March 1921.

⁷²DMC, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Transcript 5, p.8. Pritchard's car ran for about six months after he got out of prison.

⁷³Helena Gutteridge recalled that Ernest Winch collected money for Pritchard's family while he was in prison. University of British Columbia Special Collections, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection M397, Box 55A: Folder 16, *Interview with Helena Gutteridge*.

⁷⁴The OBU members in Winnipeg knew about Kavanagh's activities at least by the spring of 1921. Provincial Archives of Manitoba, One Big Union Central Labour Council, *Executive Minutes*, 27 June 1921.

⁷⁵University of British Columbia Special Collections, PC 3803 U54, Tape Recordings, SP Series #5.6, "Interview with Bill Pritchard."

⁷⁶Pritchard knew about the activities of Comintern officials from the United States operating in Canada. *Western Clarion*, 16 July 1921.

for the decision to form an underground Communist Party at the recent meeting in Guelph, Ontario by referring to "Our friends of the rat-hole persuasion (by choice)." Pritchard saw the move as senseless, because as "one who has reason to know a little of the present highly developed espionage system in existence today I protest."⁷⁷ Pritchard insisted that socialists, to be effective, had to carry out their educating and organizing work in the open when the state allowed it. So much has been made of the SPC's sectarianism that it is almost unknown that the SPC prided itself on its openness — the picnics in Stanley Park were open, the speeches were open, even the business meetings were open, and anyone could ask questions about how the SPC operated.⁷⁸ For Bill Pritchard the organizing of an underground party went against the entire tradition of openness and education in the Canadian socialist movement as he knew it.

While the timing of Pritchard's encounter with the Comintern officials, and exactly what happened during the meeting, may never be known, it is evident that Pritchard was very put off by the experience. He resented the fact that "Moscow came out, not with any advice, but with directives," and that the Communists simply assumed they knew more about how to operate in a Canadian context than the socialists who had been around since before World War I.⁷⁹ As Norman Penner has very astutely pointed out, it seemed as if the Marxian socialists were not good enough Communists to be involved in organizing the new party, but they were good enough to join it once it was formed.⁸⁰

Pritchard's rejection of the Third International even led to an abrupt break with old ally Jack Kavanagh. Canadian labour historians, writing about the Western Labour Conference and the events of 1919, have made Pritchard and Kavanagh symbolic of Canadian labour radicalism. Yet by late 1921 Kavanagh and Pritchard were on opposite sides of the fence. Indeed, in December 1921 the two old comrades nearly came to blows at a meeting of the SPC.⁸¹ This was not, as Walter Young would have it, the product of ego or paranoia. It was about the life and death of the Socialist Party's vision of how the socialist future would arrive. Theories of personality, character, or dogmatism will not do — we are dealing here with one of the great watersheds in the history of socialist thought.

Like Bob Russell, Bill Pritchard thought that the Communists were going backward, not forwards, by placing so much stress on leadership and the role of the vanguard party.⁸² Like Russell, Pritchard continued to believe that socialism

⁷⁷*Western Clarion*, 16 July 1921.

⁷⁸McCormack, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 4, side A.

⁷⁹Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 5, side A.

⁸⁰Penner, *Canadian Communism*, 48.

⁸¹Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Kavanagh File, *RCMP Reports*, 30 December 1921. I would like to thank David Akers for pointing out this reference to me.

⁸²Russell, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, attacked what he considered the Communist Party's adherence to the 'Great Man' theory of history. The argument proved quite successful

could only be built on the knowledge and capacity for self-organization of the workers themselves. As he explained to the Lumber Workers in the fall of 1921, an organization was not composed of cards, books, or officials; it was "built up upon the knowledge possessed by its members."⁸³ If the ship was going down, Bill Pritchard was going down with it.

Care must taken, however, not to confuse Pritchard's attitude toward the Communist Party in Canada and his views on what was happening in the Soviet Union. In the 1970s he made the argument that it was impossible to construct socialism in such a backward economy, but in the 1920s and 1930s he disagreed with prominent Second International theorists like Karl Kautsky, who argued that the entire Bolshevik program had to be scrapped. If the Communists in the Soviet Union could keep from being drawn too deeply into the capitalist system, raise the level of the forces of production, and educate the workers, they could eventually create a socialist society. This was all to the good, but they could not impose a model of how to do it on a country like Canada.

Pritchard disagreed with American Communists like William Z. Foster, who claimed that Lenin was already instituting a proletarian programme. He believed, on 1 May 1922, that "the present Russian programme is a capitalist one, imposed upon Soviet Russia by conditions beyond her control." There could be "no royal road to emancipation," because socialist concepts had to become pervasive in the society. Socialism could not be created without socialists.⁸⁴

Pritchard assumed that the Bolsheviks had as their main objective the program of the Socialist Party of Canada — "making socialists." Making socialists was Bill Pritchard's life, and he was willing to endorse a wide range of socialist programs in order to accomplish that goal. Under Russian conditions, the dictatorship of the proletariat was a necessary form of discipline for the Russian people and a defence against the counter-revolution.⁸⁵ In the speech following his trial in 1919 he had defended the dictatorship of the proletariat as "the suppression of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie."⁸⁶ What was appropriate for a country emerging from the oppressive regime of the Russian Tsar, however, was not appropriate for a country with a history of parliamentary democracy.

Bill Pritchard demonstrated a greater appreciation of what the Bolsheviks were going through than some Canadian Communists did. Now was not the time for righteous leaders or melodrama.⁸⁷ He condemned Canadian Communists because they constantly acted as if the classless society was the "New Jerusalem", which

in his organizing efforts in Nova Scotia in the mid-1920s, and earned him the reputation of being an anarcho-syndicalist among Canadian Communists.

⁸³ *BC Federationist*, 23 September 1921.

⁸⁴ *Western Clarion*, 1 May 1922.

⁸⁵ *BC Federationist*, 29 February 1924.

⁸⁶ Pritchard, *Address to the Jury*, 120.

⁸⁷ *Western Clarion*, 1 May 1922.

descended from heaven ready-made. In an obvious shot at Communist Party members Pritchard stated:

today some of our revolutionary Utopians philosophise on the 'overthrow', and elimination of capitalism, as if it could be done by a turn of the hand, and over night. They seem to forget the psychological factors, the long struggle in the intellectual and moral field, the vast and petrified heritage of slavery and superstition, which must be conquered.⁸⁸

For Bill Pritchard the long term social and cultural revolutions were as important as the actual seizure of power, which was but a necessary stage in a longer evolutionary process. The 'real' revolution was the education of the workers.

For Bill Pritchard revolution occurred at the level of ideas, as much as it involved the revolutionizing of the forces of production.⁸⁹ Pritchard believed that revolutions were born within the confines of capitalist society and in minds of the workers. It was Karl Marx, not the Industrial Workers of the World, who said that when people "speak of ideas that revolutionize society, they do but express the fact, that within the old society, the elements of a new one have been created."⁹⁰ In the socialist future, said Marx, "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."⁹¹ Bill Pritchard's emphasis on self-education and the individual conscience may have derived more from his religious background than from his reading of Marx, but there is no doubt that combined the two sources provided Pritchard with a powerful ideology with which to oppose the Communists. Underground parties were not the way to go when the Canadian state permitted open socialist education.

In 1925 the *Western Clarion* ceased publication and the Socialist Party disbanded. Bill Pritchard had lost the SPC and irrevocably split with the Communist Party of Canada. From 1925 until 1938, when he moved to the United States, Pritchard remained a resolute opponent of the Communist Party, most notably during his involvement with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in the 1930s. Yet even during the depression he defended the Soviet Union, and continued to believe that the Soviet people had to work out their destiny in their own way.

Bill Pritchard's scientific socialism was a humanist socialism — he shared William Morris' utopian vision, Herbert Spencer's hatred of the state, and Proudhon's belief that the real revolution was the education of the workers. Scientific socialism was not economic determinism or mechanistic materialism — it was a form of materialism in which the education of the workers, "making socialists," was the central concern. SPC theorists did believe they were armed with

⁸⁸ *BC Federationist*, 29 February 1924.

⁸⁹ During his trial speech Pritchard said that "the fight I carry on amongst my fellow-workers is a fight with ideas." Pritchard, *Address to the Jury*, 13.

⁹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Harmondsworth 1985), 102-3.

⁹¹ Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, 105.

the "truth" according to Marx and Engels, but workers and farmers had to come to that truth through their own analysis of the capitalist system, and then change that system in their own way. The role of the Marxian socialist was to lift the veil of deception imposed on the workers by the capitalist state and its institutions, not to demand allegiance to a program developed in a different national context.

Bill Pritchard's rejection of the Third International led him away from active revolutionary politics. For a time in the 1930s he even came to question the ability of the workers to respond to reasoned rather than purely emotional appeals. Yet for all his weaknesses, for all the mistakes and vagaries of his political life after rejecting the Third International, he did not abandon the ideal of making socialists.

Perhaps the Canadian left was a mess in the 1920s, as Walter Young suggests. But Young misses the essential point that in whatever direction Bill Pritchard, Ernest Winch, Bob Russell, George Armstrong, Charles Lestor, and other Marxian socialists went, they clung tenaciously to their belief that the consolidation of capitalism would some day lead to the uniting of the workers. It might take 500, it might take 1,000 years, but only an educated working-class majority could realize socialism.⁹² Only socialism could prevent what Marx called the common ruin of the contending classes, and only the mass of the workers were capable of realizing it. Somewhere along the way the workers themselves had to realize the need for it. They could be led to engage in revolutionary acts, but they could not be led to socialism.

⁹²Penner, "Interview with Bill Pritchard," Tape 5, side A.

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