

A Miniature Coxey's Army: The British Harvesters' Toronto-to-Ottawa Trek of 1924

W.J.C. Cherwinski

Volume 32, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt32art03>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Cherwinski, W. (1993). A Miniature Coxey's Army: The British Harvesters' Toronto-to-Ottawa Trek of 1924. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 32, 139-166.

Article abstract

A labour shortage in 1922, the promise of a bumper yield in 1923, and increased imperialist sentiment resulted in the recruitment of nearly 12,000 British workers to assist Canadian harvesters with the 1923 prairie wheat crop. Since most of them came from the cities they found the transition to western agriculture difficult and their complaints about the treatment they endured caused considerable damage to Canada's image abroad. Nevertheless, many persevered and returned home after the harvest satisfied. Those who remained to make a new life for themselves had a harder time since they were forced to take farm work at subsistence wages for the winter. Others chose to seek work in their own trades in Canada's cities. Like many, those in Toronto faced unemployment but, with the help of area radicals the militants amongst them decided to lead a long march to demand work at reasonable wages from the Mackenzie King government. Despite unrelenting harassment from public officials they remained united and with the assistance of citizens in the communities along the way they reached the capital bedraggled but defiant a fortnight later. While their march proved futile in the short term, it was an early example of escalating militancy among the unemployed, both domestic and immigrant, which helped to focus attention on both the plight of unskilled labour in a national economy and on the short-sighted, employer-driven immigration policies.

A Miniature Coxey's Army: The British Harvesters' Toronto-to-Ottawa Trek of 1924

W.J.C. Cherwinski

THE MEN TRUDGING THROUGH the late-winter mud on the shoulder of the road between Toronto and Ottawa in March 1924 did not attract much attention from onlookers except comments about the World War I greatcoats they wore and the trademark bundles of the migrant worker they carried on their backs. Despite the men's appearance, this motley aggregation did manage a rough military order, not surprising since most of them had been in uniform only five years before.¹ Moreover, their resolve to carry a message of "work and wages" to the Prime Minister meant they had to stick together and see this ordeal through to conclusion. Although their numbers were small (fewer than 40 reached their destination), aided by local radical organizations and with resolute leadership, the Ottawa trekkers of 1924 achieved considerable success in attracting sympathy and publicity for the cause of the immigrant unemployed. Government agencies, well aware of their potential to make Canada's immigration and employment policies appear in the worst possible light, responded *en masse* to the threat.

As protests go, the Toronto-to-Ottawa march was a minor affair; even so, the marchers' story is a good one and deserves telling. Their experience from start to finish is instructive from a number of perspectives. The trek and the circumstances leading up to it encapsulate a number of social and political developments in the postwar period; indeed, Imperial-Canadian relations in the 1920s are better understood because of them. To help matters as an event with international implications, the documentary residue it generated is considerable.² Despite the nation-wide

¹ *Montreal Gazette* (hereafter *Gazette*), 3 August 1923.

² Since the march emerged out of the special circumstances associated with the 1923 harvester movement from Britain it received extensive press coverage on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition, bureaucrats in various departments followed both developments closely. While the evidence is one-sided, the mentality and the motives of the creators and collectors of the data, so concerned as they were to make their respective actions appear correct to both the

crackdown on workers' and soldiers' protests after June 1919, a local organization of unemployed and sympathizers was able to coordinate a respectable campaign at a time when the working-class movement was uncharacteristically muted and subdued. This is particularly significant when one considers the well-organized forces arrayed against all social movements in 1924. One must finally question those writers who argue that "extra-Parliamentary organization and agitation" as a strategy by the unemployed for the attainment of "significant and progressive social change" was only spawned with the Great Depression.³ Rather, that postwar unemployment created a climate of social unrest which continued largely unabated through the 1920s.⁴

...

THE STRANGE ODYSSEY of the 1924 trek began almost a year earlier and half a world away in a depressed British city. While one could argue that William Leslie, Frederick Fleming, and the others were marching of their own free will, their fate was inextricably bound both by decisions in Ottawa and by social and economic forces of which even many well-informed Canadians were not aware, but with which their lives intersected.

The recognition of Canada's unique labour requirements is critical to understanding the circumstances which led to the 1924 trek. A large pool of basically unskilled workers was essential, as the former Director of the Employment Service of Canada, R.A. Rigg, clearly articulated later in the decade:

One of our great problems is the necessity for maintaining in Canada, under our present industrial conditions, an enormous mobile army of workers which must be ready to drift around from pillar to post, from one area to another, quickly and freely in order to meet the demand of industry.⁵

public and their superiors, render the records surprisingly rich in detail because they systematically catalogued every detail they observed.

³Lorne Brown, *When Freedom was Lost: The Unemployed, the Agitator, and the State* (Montréal 1987), 15.

⁴See *Canada, Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Minutes of Evidence* (Ottawa 1919), 4 Volumes, for testimony on the gravity of unemployment prevalent in various Canadian cities after the war. See also Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 11-44 for a detailed discussion of the mood of profound unrest prevailing in labour circles after the war. The chapter "Ordinary Canadians" in John Herd Thompson/Allen Seager, *Canada 1922-1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto 1985) discusses some examples of unrest during the 1920s.

⁵Canada, House of Commons, Select Standing Committee on Industrial Relations, *Report, Proceedings and Evidence of the Select Standing Committee on Industrial and International Relations upon the Question of Insurance against Unemployment, Sickness and Invalidity as ordered by the House on the 21st of March, 1929* (Ottawa 1928), 44.

For Rigg and other officials responsible for manpower policy, Canada's principal industries remained those of lumbering, mining, railway and urban construction, and agriculture. Of these, the production of prairie wheat had primacy because of its importance for export earnings and the Dominion's financial wellbeing. Despite its sharply seasonal requirements, both industry and government recognized that the wheat economy had priority in tapping the labour pool. Federal and provincial governments traditionally made every effort to satisfy the demands of Western farmers for workers through the encouragement of interregional migration. On the odd occasion when national and continental sources failed to muster enough men, officials designed elaborate recruitment schemes to bring experienced British farm workers to the region in the hope that they would like what they saw and stay. Numerous private and public bodies also tried to train redundant industrial workers to become useful prairie farmers.⁶ These schemes were only partially successful at best, and even if their potential had been realized they would not have satisfied the occasional special demands made by prairie agriculture for short-term workers.

To supply sufficient men for the harvest was a special problem which required considerable coordination and effort by all concerned. The CPR had been the first to realize this and had operated cheap harvest excursions from the Maritimes and Central Canada, and on occasion from British Columbia and the United States, since 1890. Officials from the railways, the provincial departments of agriculture, and the Immigration Branch determined the number required each fall based on crop forecasts and estimates of farmers' requirements. Despite the elaborate system which had evolved, such predictions still tended to be very imprecise, resulting in either shortages or surpluses, depending on the weather and the availability of men. In addition, unruly harvesters and hostile city dwellers in the places where migrant workers congregated before and after the harvests caused further headaches for those responsible.⁷ World War One introduced one more important variable to the already-complicated seasonal prairie farm labour equation. Propaganda against the enemy enhanced fear of "foreigners" among English-speaking Canadians and contributed to a stronger identification with those who shared the English language and culture. After the war Canadian imperialists were more adamant than ever in demanding more immigrants from the United Kingdom.⁸

For politicians in London, these expressions of imperial solidarity from the colonies seemed to dovetail nicely with attempts to solve the unemployment problems caused by Britain's postwar depression. Parliament passed the Empire

⁶W.J.C. Cherwinski, "Wooden Horses and Rubber Cows: Training British Farm Workers for the Canadian Prairies, 1890-1930," *Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers* 1980, 133-54.

⁷W.J.C. Cherwinski, "The Incredible Harvest Excursion of 1908," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, V (Spring 1980), 57-80; John Herd Thompson, "Bringing in the Sheaves: The Harvest Excursionists, 1890-1929," *Canadian Historical Review*, 59 (December 1978), 467-89.

⁸George Exton Lloyd, "Immigration and Nation Building," *Empire Review*, February 1929 in Howard Palmer, ed., *Immigration and the Rise of Multiculturalism* (Toronto 1975), 55-6.

Settlement Act in 1922 to pay half the costs of transporting "suitable" migrants to the Dominions. For Canada, however, suitable immigrants meant farm workers and domestics,⁹ and officials tried to schedule their arrival to coincide with peak demands for labour. Ironically, empire settlement schemes narrowly focused on farming tended to exacerbate the problem of seasonal labour supply. 'Real' farmers were scarce while industrial workers were plentiful. Immigration officials who were always aware of the pitfalls of bringing in urban workers were able to resist pressure from imperialists by arguing that 'factory fodder' could not adapt to the physical demands of the harvest. Nevertheless, close to 12 thousand British workers entered the country in autumn 1923, owing to the exceptionally good wheat crop.

The undoubted problems created by the 1923 British harvester movement must rest with the promotional campaign which Canada had pursued. The image of the Canadian West was that of a land of boundless opportunity where anyone with initiative, resourcefulness, and patience could find work, satisfactory wages, and eventual independence. Even in hard times, the prevalent assumption was that as long as there was farm work, there was no unemployment. Generally associated with the period before World War One, this image remained gospel to government immigration agents, railway and steamship employees, and the popular press alike, and their efforts made it into an article of faith for all workers in the United Kingdom, rural and urban, agricultural and industrial.¹⁰

While working-class opportunities in Canada were undeniably better than in Britain, the conventional image ignored such awkward realities as the seasonal nature of employment, the high cost of necessities, and the cyclical performance of the wheat economy. Immediately after the war, the agricultural picture was extremely confused. Diminished prices for grains, combined with increased acreage and the need to reestablish soldiers in civilian and preferably agricultural pursuits, made it very difficult for railway and government officials to estimate farm labour requirements. At the same time, these actors faced continual, contradictory political pressure. Western municipalities could always be counted on to complain about the men they had to feed after the harvest, especially since the previous winter of 1921-22 had been particularly bad with widespread unemployment throughout the region.¹¹ One of the principal causes, according to Calgary's

⁹J.A. Schultz, "Canadian Attitudes Toward Empire Settlement, 1919-1930," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 1 (January 1973), 237-51.

¹⁰W.J.C. Cherwinski, "'Misfits,' 'Malingers,' and 'Malcontents': The British Harvester Movement of 1928," in John E. Foster, ed., *The Developing West* (Edmonton 1983), 273-6; Susan Jacket, ed., *A Flannel Shirt and Liberty* (Vancouver 1982), introduction; James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto 1983), chapter 1.

¹¹Saskatchewan Archives Board (hereafter SAB), Martin Papers, Robertson to Martin, 13 July 1921, 30193-4; Dunning Papers, Young to Martin, 17 November 1921, 14432; Provincial Archives of Alberta (hereafter PAA), Acc.No. 69.289, file 504, Thompson to Greenfield, 17 January 1922, Cox to Greenfield, 29 July 1922.

Mayor Adams, involved seasonal workers who "spend their money pretty freely, and although they have large wages, they have frittered their money away and we find them a burden thrown on the city." Nevertheless, as his Edmonton counterpart lamented, "when you are faced with two or three or four hundred men who have no place to sleep, who are without means, you have to solve the problem."¹² Yet the Saskatchewan government had faced the opposite problem the preceding autumn when it had to rent space in Regina to house harvesters who threatened to leave with the harvest in full swing because of bad weather. To make matters worse, in 1922 the supply fell 2,000 men short of demand.¹³

Well aware that harvester labour was both a blessing or a curse, the railway and government officials sat down in June in Ottawa to estimate the 1923 requirements. Considering predictions of a bumper crop, they concluded that 12 thousand harvesters would be needed in Manitoba, 30 thousand in Saskatchewan, and 10 thousand in Alberta. Even with a special appeal to British Columbia and to the United States for men, and to the mayors of western cities, railway offices, high schools and universities, and corporations to release students and employees for the harvest, the target of 52 thousand seemed unattainable.¹⁴

The prospect of a harvest labour shortage in 1923 brought a predictable response from the prairie press, appealing for concerted government action to save the "enormous" crop.¹⁵ The transportation interests, correctly seeing a window of opportunity, through "national necessity" decided to act unilaterally. On 16 July, both Canadian Pacific and Canadian National instructed their United Kingdom agents by telegram to move with haste to secure male farm labourers as soon as possible. For those ready to sail between 1 and 15 August, the package would cost £15 to travel from a British port to Winnipeg and the usual half-cent-per-mile harvester rate from there. Once hired, the men would get \$4.00 per day plus board, and when they had worked a month they would qualify for a 25 per cent reduction in the return fare. The next day they informed the Department of Immigration and Colonization of their actions.¹⁶

Immigration officials were horrified that the companies could be so presumptuous, especially about the alleged \$4.00-guarantee. Once the damage was done, the department made every effort to divest itself of responsibility for and avoid the expected criticism of the harvester movement.¹⁷

¹²National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Department of Labour Records (hereafter RG27), Vol. 113, file 600.02-48, "Report of Proceedings of Unemployment Conference, 5-7 September 1922," B32-4.

¹³*Ibid.*, B10-1; *Saskatchewan Department of Railways and Industries Report, 1921-2*, 54.

¹⁴PAA, Acc.No. 69.289, file 503, Smitten to Greenfield, 22 July 1923, file 519, Memo, Ross to Greenfield, 31 July 1923.

¹⁵*Calgary Herald* (hereafter *Herald*), 27 July 1923.

¹⁶NAC, RG76, Immigration Branch Records (hereafter RG76), V.672, file 907095, Memo, Blair to Egan, 15 April 1924.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

These departmental concerns were justified. In their zeal to impress their employers with statistically-satisfying results, agents of the transportation companies typically exaggerated wages and ignored mention of working conditions and hours of work. They translated "competent farm labourers" to mean "no experience necessary" on the assumption that anyone could work on a farm. In addition, they led many recruits to believe that they could move into their accustomed trades immediately after the harvest.¹⁸ Finally, they told prospective harvesters that they need not carry much money besides that required for ship and rail passage.¹⁹

For workers unemployed for months and even years, the Canadian harvest was an opportunity too good to miss and they "besieged" the recruiting depots situated in London, Belfast, Glasgow, Southampton, and Edinburgh. By the time the last ship sailed 10 days later, 11,718 had signed up to find fortune and adventure across the Atlantic.²⁰

Newspapers in Canada wrote effusively about the high calibre of migrants aboard. The first group of 300 alone contained three clergymen, according to the *Montreal Gazette*, while the rest were university students, engineers, engine drivers, electricians, and clerks, in short, "as mixed as a bunch of 1914 army recruits."²¹ The majority were married with families, and an estimated 95 per cent were ex-servicemen, defenders of the empire, the "right sort of people." The reports made no mention of the lax selection procedures involved: some bore obvious war wounds or exhibited other disabilities such as shattered appendages and serious lung ailments. To make matters worse, very few had experience with farming, "or any other form of outdoor work" for that matter.²²

Outside of the bedlam which accompanied the departure of the last boat on 10 August, the crossing was without incident. So also was the disembarkation, despite a few indignant complaints that Englishmen had been forced to wait in a Québec city compound while "foreigners" cleared Immigration ahead of them.²³ Even the train trip across country was without incident.

Once the British harvesters detrained in Winnipeg, a number of them no doubt disappeared after contacting family and kinship associates who had already found homes and jobs for them.²⁴ For the majority who had come for the harvest, however,

¹⁸ *One Big Union Bulletin*, 30 August 1923.

¹⁹ *Leader*, 22 August 1923.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Lloyd Roberts, "The British Harvesters in Canada," undated typescript article; *Gazette*, 25 August 1923.

²¹ *Gazette*, 3 August 1923.

²² *Ibid.*, 9 August, 25 September 1923; *Ottawa Citizen* (Hereafter *Citizen*), 23 August 1923; *Toronto Globe* (hereafter *Globe*), 5 September 1923.

²³ *Citizen*, 13 August 1923; *Globe*, 13 September 1923.

²⁴ A. Ross McCormack, "Networks among British Immigrants and Accommodation to Canadian Society: Winnipeg, 1900-1914," *Histoire sociale — Social History*, 17 (November 1984), 357-74.

circumstances conspired to make matters difficult. The few who had made prior arrangements with farmers went out to work at once, but the majority took their chances and waited for instructions from agriculture department officials. Since most of them were broke they had to beg on the street to survive. Unfortunately, delays in getting their assigned work place forced still others to panhandle, and even when they arrived at their designated farm hot weather, sawflies and rust, which reduced yields, caused an even longer wait for some to get their first Canadian money, and outright disappointment for others.²⁵

To compound the British harvesters' difficulties they soon discovered Canadian farmers under the pressure of harvest to be stingy, tough, impatient, and demanding. Moreover, a few were not above exploiting the unsuspecting as one novice harvester discovered after he had worked without food for seven hours only to be told that he would receive only board and room for his efforts. The more common complaint came from men who were refused jobs of any sort because they lacked experience; for them, real fear set in that they would not get in the 30 days work to qualify for cheap passage home.²⁶ Meanwhile, those who did get jobs at an acceptable rate found their inadequately clothed and shod bodies incapable of taking the cruel punishment which stooping meant even for seasoned returnees. Seven hundred quit after only a few days in the field.²⁷

Destinations in the United States were popular choices for harvesters who left early, although most sought refuge in any large urban centre. Some chose Vancouver but the majority returned to Winnipeg to seek work. However, with little money in hand most had to seek short-term assistance from City Hall, charitable organizations like the Salvation Army, or affinity groups like the Orange Lodge to tide them over. Where these were inaccessible, no doubt the harvesters fell back on kinship networks for assistance as well.²⁸ Some of them could not wait, however, and demanded immediate passage home from the transportation companies which, they argued, had deceived them with promises of high wages and good working conditions in Canada. Still others blamed harvesters from other parts of the country for making matters worse through their competition.²⁹

Local radical groups had watched the harvester movement with interest from the beginning. *The Worker*, the Communist organ published in Toronto, long critical of imperial migration policy as merely a ploy to dump unemployed British

²⁵*Citizen*, 25 August 1923; *Regina Leader* (hereafter *Leader*), 24 July, 21 August 1923; *Globe*, 13 September 1923; *Gazette*, 8 October 1923; *London Times*, 29 August, 17 September 1923.

²⁶*Leader*, 22 August 1923; *Citizen*, 22 August 1923.

²⁷*Leader*, 16 August 1923; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Smith to Macnaghton, 21 February 1924.

²⁸McCormack, *op. cit.*; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Report, Hunt to Little, 19 February 1924.

²⁹*One Big Union Bulletin*, 17 January 1924; *Leader*, 22 August 1923; *Citizen*, 24 August 1923.

industrial workers on the colonies,³⁰ appeared to welcome the harvester movement for the potential political points which could be scored. The 5 September issue featured an editorial "Fifty Thousand Men Wanted!" which foresaw problems with urban unemployment once the harvest was over. A cartoon on the same subject punctuated *The Worker's* argument. Once the British were in Western Canada, the paper was quick to recognize their plight as the 9 September feature story "Harvesters Exploited and Unscrupulously Misled Dumped on Prairies Without Cent Government and Rail Companies Responsible" announced.³¹

The other major radical newspaper, the *One Big Union Bulletin*, also stressed that the British harvesters were the victims of misrepresentation but saw a benefit to the working-class movement from their presence:

On the whole ... these our new countrymen are conscious of their status in society and can be relied upon to stick with the rank and file movement of the working class. It is but one more lesson to them of the ruthlessness of capitalism and they will soon find their place among the militant workers of Canada.³²

Once the disappointed harvesters returned to Winnipeg, local radicals began a street campaign to discredit the governments and the railways.³³ The *One Big Union* and the local Communist Party helped organize a demonstration in Market Square to coincide with a letter-writing campaign to newspapers throughout Canada, and worse still, in the "Old Country" describing the harvesters' predicament.³⁴ However, public officials were quick to try to extinguish this early brush fire as they immediately announced jobs for the dissatisfied in the bush or in railway construction at 20 cents an hour.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Saskatchewan government, with the most to lose if the harvest were threatened through negative publicity, confronted the men right at the rally with offers of \$4.00-a-day jobs for those willing to work. Reports indicate, however, that the offer was rejected unless the men could get signed contracts from employers on the spot.³⁶

The first flush of protest faded quickly once the harvest was in full swing and with reports of worker shortages and rising wages. Consequently, the British

³⁰4 July 1923. See also the 24 July 1923 issue for an editorial which described the Salvation Army's farm workers' training facility at Hadley, Essex as a slave-producing workshop and the cartoon "The Crystal Gazers" in the 22 August 1923 issue regarding the imperial conference of that year and its relationship to the importation of sweated labour.

³¹An editorial "The Harvest of the Harvesters" in the same issue claimed that the men had been brought to Canada under false pretences.

³²30 August 1923.

³³*The Worker*, 5, 19, 26 September, 3 October 1923.

³⁴*Citizen*, 24 August 1923; *One Big Union Bulletin*, 1 November 1923; *Gazette*, 6 February 1924; *London Daily Mail*, 24 August 1923; *London Times*, 29 August, 17 September 1923.

³⁵*Leader*, 16 August 1923; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Smith to Macnaghton, 21 February 1924.

³⁶*Globe and Gazette*, 31 August 1923.

harvesters were instrumental in taking off and storing the largest crop on record,³⁷ and many who persevered earned enough money to send some home to their families.

The early protest did have an effect, however, and even before the crop was off a debate began on the merits of the movement and its possible consequences. Aside from the general conclusion in many prairie papers that the complainers were just urban slackers who were useless for harvest work at any wage³⁸ and should not have entered the country, concern was expressed regarding the harvesters' fate once the crop was in. Reflective of those who believed, based on past experience, that the country was courting trouble by letting them stay was Saskatchewan Premier Charles Dunning who privately confided that the best thing to do was to send them home after the harvest and thus avoid problems with winter work and urban unemployment. The majority opinion, however, reflected the hope that they would find permanent farm work attractive and in the spring they would start farming on their own using the services offered by the Soldiers' Settlement Plan.³⁹

Since the optimistic scenario had always been the plan, public agencies mobilized their resources to place the British harvesters somewhere before winter set in to stay. Provincial offices of the Employment Service of Canada, through its central office in Ottawa, coordinated a national search for vacancies and by mid-October reported that they had found 7846 farm jobs, 6334 openings in lumber camps, and 460 in railway construction available, with wages ranging from \$15.00 a month plus board for farm work to \$50.00 a month in the bush.⁴⁰

Since only 347 of the nearly 12 thousand British harvesters departed Canada under the 30-day rule it must be assumed that the remainder did not qualify for a cheap return fare or that they wished to exploit this once-in-a-lifetime chance to cut ties with a dismal past. For example, of the minority who had been given accommodation at the Winnipeg Immigration Hall after the harvest, 4322 in all, 912 were placed on farms as far away as Québec, another 160 went to the bush, while 76 got work with one of the railways, and 98 accepted jobs as general labourers.⁴¹ Others, however, had no intention of spending the winter at such menial tasks and a few even "openly stated they would go to gaol than accept farm and

³⁷*Citizen*, 12 September 1923.

³⁸*One Big Union Bulletin*, 24 January 1924, reprinted an editorial from the *Winnipeg Free Press* which agreed with Immigration Minister J.A. Robb's assertion that Canada "has no room for idlers and slackers." "Shirkers Not Wanted," editorial, *Leader*, 3 April 1924. See also *Free Press*, 28 September 1923.

³⁹SAB, Dunning Papers, Dunning to Smith, 27 July 1923, 28925-9; *Citizen*, 21 September 1923; *Leader*, 28 September 1923.

⁴⁰*Leader*, 20 October 1923; *Citizen*, 9 and 20 October 1923.

⁴¹*Leader*, 2 and 10 October 1923; *Gazette*, 12 September 1923; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Smith to Macnaghton, 21 February 1924; Telegram, Gelley to Blair, 10 February 1924.

bush work."⁴² They argued that they were skilled tradesmen and they wanted appropriate employment. Failing this, they threatened to spend the winter in one of Winnipeg's Immigration Halls. Finally the Department agreed to pay the cheap harvest excursion rate to send a number to central Canada where the prospect for industrial jobs appeared to be better.⁴³

Toronto alone absorbed 1,700 of those men who arrived before the end of September but later arrivals found the situation increasingly bleak with widespread unemployment.⁴⁴ Even jobs in the woods vanished because employers found British harvesters too green. As one paper company official lamented, while "it hardly seems right to be employing Poles, Finns and other foreigners when Britishers are idle," his firm preferred specially imported workers for their superior experience.⁴⁵ Moreover, the prime farm jobs had also disappeared leaving only those which hardly paid enough to sustain even a single man, let alone one with dependents in Britain. To add to the problem farmers demanded year-long contractual commitments so as to realize a return on what they considered winter charity.⁴⁶

Farm work meant at least bed and board in return for chores but for the men who remained unemployed in the towns and the cities simple subsistence was a serious problem. Help from municipal sources was out of the question as some of the estimated 250 to 300 harvesters in Toronto discovered when they were told they had to fulfil residence requirements to get relief.⁴⁷ Appeals to family and friends proved equally fruitless and yet the government was loath to deport them because of the expense involved.⁴⁸ As a consequence, some resorted to panhandling and others to petty theft to stay alive. Only the inordinately severe winter saved more from these humiliating alternatives as a series of snowstorms brought shovel work at 15-25 cents an hour. Even these small mercies had their price, however, as three harvesters were killed by a locomotive while working in the Canadian National Railway yards during a blizzard.⁴⁹

Again, as in Winnipeg, public response was surprisingly good. Church groups did what they could for those of their own denominations supplemented by the YMCA, the Salvation Army, and the Sisters of the House of Providence. Occasional-

⁴²NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Memo, Gyles to Gelley, 10 March 1924.

⁴³See *Ibid.* entire file for a detailed account of the Winnipeg situation. By the time the affair was over, the immigration department had paid to send 1750 to the "Eastern provinces." Telegram, Gelley to Blair, 10 February 1924.

⁴⁴*Gazette*, 6 October 1923; *Globe*, 8 October, 30 November and 5 December 1923.

⁴⁵*Globe*, 6 October, 30 November and 8 December 1923.

⁴⁶NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Mitchell to Fraser, 22 February, 2 April 1924.

⁴⁷*The Worker*, 22 December 1923.

⁴⁸NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Fraser to Mitchell, 22 February 1924; Memo, Jones to Barnett, 17 March 1924; *Globe*, 11 January 1924.

⁴⁹*The Worker*, 5 January 1924; *Globe*, 6 October 1923, 8 January 1924; *Canada, House of Commons Debates*, 20 May 1924, 2350; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Mitchell to Fraser, 22 February 1924.

ly even private citizens offered groups of unemployed free restaurant meals, and some theatres showed free movies to help them pass the time, indicating the degree of local concern for the plight of the jobless.⁵⁰ The British Welcome and Welfare League, a kinship organization specifically dedicated to help newcomers from the British Isles down on their luck, provided food, lodging, and the amenities of "home" to 50 harvesters, and, with money secretly supplied by the federal and Ontario governments and the two railways, it organized a "huge" Christmas dinner for the men. However, the men discovered that they would not be fed before they were marched to church to listen to a sermon on the prodigal son.⁵¹ Even this source of help soon evaporated because the League's money ran out shortly after the new year.⁵²

Since most of the harvesters stranded in Toronto came with trade union experience, primarily as metal workers and allied tradesmen from the Amalgamated Engineering Union, local labour and leftist organizations were able to provide valuable assistance as well. While their union travelling cards may have opened doors to employment at other times,⁵³ during the winter of 1923-24 they proved useless in Toronto at least. However, the men's trade union affiliation provided an *entré* to the Labour Temple where they found people genuinely sympathetic to their predicament and willing to help. Toronto Trades and Labor Council (TTL) Secretary William Varley led a deputation, which included Tim Buck of the Communist Party, to Toronto's City Hall in mid-December to cast light on the newcomers, while Varley alone arranged a meeting with officials from the federal labour department and the Soldiers' Settlement Board where 142 unemployed British workers aired their grievances.⁵⁴

As time went on, TTL headquarters became especially important to the harvesters still in Toronto. To those who had no other religious or fraternal affiliation the building became a refuge, and a place to exchange information necessary to survive in a strange place. In addition, the Labour Temple became a focal point for the development of structures which would lead eventually to efforts to alleviate the situation.

In the first instance leadership and guidance for Toronto's unemployed, the British harvesters included, came from various groups either from within or associated with organized labour. *The Worker* never allowed the migrants' plight to slip from sight and when winter set in the paper featured a story describing in

⁵⁰*Globe*, 3, 14 January 1924.

⁵¹*Globe*, 4, 10, 14 December 1923; *The Worker*, 22 December 1923; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Jones to Barnett, 17 March 1924. The immigration department's share of the bill was \$180.00. Morisset to B.W.W.L., 12 January 1924.

⁵²*Globe*, 22 January 1924.

⁵³NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Jones to Barnett, 17 May 1924; McCormack, *op. cit.*, 373.

⁵⁴*Globe*, 17 March 1924.

detail the conditions the men were forced to endure in the city.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the Communist Party helped the TTLC and remnants of the OBU to raise money, to convene the Labour Forum to discuss the plight of the jobless, and to organize demonstrations in Queen's Park to focus attention particularly on their British brethren.⁵⁶ In due course, however, leaders from the ranks of the displaced Britishers themselves took the initiative. One was William Leslie, already noticed by the immigration officials and branded "a well-known red [*sic*]."⁵⁷ In all likelihood the RCMP security service had had him under surveillance as soon as he had arrived in Canada.⁵⁸ However, Leslie acquired a local reputation as a disturber early in December after a Labour Temple speech in which he declared that he and his colleagues from Britain would mobilize the unemployed to sweep Canada's "shining bald heads" from power. Described by the *Toronto Globe* as "loquacious and pedantic," his efforts were largely rhetorical until February 1924 when he broke a window at the Immigration office to focus attention on the harvesters' plight and was arrested.⁵⁹

The second leader to emerge was James Law, not a harvester at all but a marine engineer from Dumbarton, Scotland who, after several visits to Canada, had immigrated permanently with his family in the spring of 1923. An ex-serviceman who had given up his right to a pension for \$600 cash in 1920, his work history, according to his surveillance file at Immigration, alternated between unskilled jobs and unemployment largely because of recurring trench foot.⁶⁰

Early in March, Law and Leslie brought together some of Toronto's British unemployed and the harvesters to form The British Harvesters' Immigrant Group, an umbrella organization to formalize the protest. Initially the Group's goal was to find ways to draw attention to the rumoured mistreatment of deportees by Immigration authorities. Their most notable effort resulted in a question raised in the British House of Commons concerning 21 harvesters who had been "imprisoned in cells and deprived of fresh air and exercise" at the deportation centre in Halifax.⁶¹ Group members, however, soon felt that something more dramatic was necessary. This resulted in a new organization called the Harvesters' and Immigrants' Union whose objective was a 300-mile march from Toronto to Ottawa to confront the Prime Minister with a demand for jobs at union rates. Until then they vowed not to accept work under any circumstances.

⁵⁵"Experiences of Destitute Immigrant Homeseekers," *Worker*, 22 December 1923.

⁵⁶*Ibid.* and 2 February 1924; *One Big Union Bulletin*, 17 January, 28 February 1924; *Globe*, 19 January 1924.

⁵⁷NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Memo, Fraser to Jolliffe, 17 March 1924.

⁵⁸S.W. Horrall, "The Royal North-West Mount Police and Labour Unrest in Western Canada, 1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 61, 2 (1980), 173-4.

⁵⁹*Globe*, 11 December 1923; 26 February 1924.

⁶⁰NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Memo, Fraser to Jolliffe, 17 March 1924.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, Fraser to Barnsted, 27 February 1924.

At first, the organizers hoped to convince not only the stranded harvesters but all the British unemployed in the Ontario capital to make the two-week trip, but, despite their shared experience, this proved futile since the men differed markedly in background and aims. One difference, according to inside sources, was religious: those who belonged to the new union tended to be more secular in outlook and thus leaned toward organized labour rather than church organizations for support. Meanwhile, the trek organizers' uncompromising stance made unanimity impossible since those whose principal desire was to find work quickly dissociated themselves from the "labour [sic] Temple group" fearing that the leaders of the trek, and especially Leslie, "who inclined to Socialism," could harm them by saying too much.⁶²

Despite the apparent divisions, organizers expected more than 60 people to march. However, only 46 appeared at dawn on 15 March, dressed in great coats and carrying bundles on their backs. They shuffled about nervously until reporters appeared. Then they unfurled their banner specially created for the occasion which bore the legend 'Stranded British Harvesters Starving in Land of Plenty' between a sheaf of wheat in one corner and a woman bent over, "presumably ... suffering from hunger," in the other.⁶³ Then Leslie and Low stressed the need for orderly behaviour because their objective was to garner sympathy and not provoke hostility. Finally they were divided into groups of ten with Law in the lead and a Captain Graham in the rear and, in "semi-military" formation, marched east towards West Hill 14 miles away. Meanwhile, Fred Fleming and Leslie went ahead to make arrangements for food and lodging.⁶⁴

Government authorities, who until this time had chosen to observe the activities of the harvesters from a distance, suddenly decided that the march on Ottawa was no trifling matter now that it was under way. If the marchers achieved even some of their objectives they could contribute appreciably to the political harm already done to Canada's imperial immigration and settlement policies. As a consequence, various agencies instituted a coordinated damage-control strategy on several fronts the day the march began in order to minimize its effectiveness. First, the RCMP, with their new secret-service mandate to collect information with which authorities could predict problems and "permit arrangements being made to offset any intended disturbance" were instructed by the justice minister to keep "in touch

⁶²*Ibid.*, Woods to Deputy Minister, Department of Immigration and Colonization, 3 March 1924, Chamberlain to Egan, 17 March 1924, McCheyne to Fraser, 29 March 1924; *Globe*, 15 March 1924.

⁶³NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Mitchell to Fraser, 17 March 1924. The banner was professional enough in appearance to attract a job offer for its creator from a tombstone engraver, but the artist had to refuse the offer until the march was over. McCheyne to Fraser, 29 March 1924.

⁶⁴*The Kingston Whig* (hereafter *Whig*), 24 March 1924.



with the situation."⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the immigration department contacted the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) and local police forces with the request that they watch the marchers carefully and prosecute any violations of the law they saw.⁶⁶ In the same vein, immigration officers were instructed to approach municipal officials along the planned route to use "a little diplomacy" to find out what they could about the men involved, and particularly when they had come to Canada.⁶⁷

While the immigration department sought to gather information by secret means, some of its men were told to remain very visible to the marchers. Immigration Minister James Robb gave precise instructions that his department "arrange that these men are offered jobs at every town, where they stop en route."⁶⁸ Towards this end Robert McCheyne, an investigating officer with the Eastern Division headquartered in Ottawa, along with E.L. Braithwaite of the Soldiers' Settlement Board, were told to follow the march in full view of the harvesters, armed with lists of farm and industrial jobs supplied by Ontario agricultural officials and the Employment Service from places along the entire route to Ottawa. Whenever possible they were to offer work to the men and to invite applications "individually and collectively" for the positions. If their efforts proved successful the railways had agreed to transport applicants to their new jobs for a one-cent-a-mile fare. Once placed on the job the men could get a refund from their employers.⁶⁹

Even with discussions to discuss local jobs with the fellow travellers, the marchers made good time and by noon of the second day they had passing Pickering, and they spent the night in Oshawa where they found the public reception gratifying. City council offered bed and board and the Salvation Army Juvenile Band provided musical entertainment.⁷⁰

After Oshawa, the adventure began to lose its lustre as monotony, improper footwear, and poor conditioning took their toll. The military precision suffered and delays became more frequent as the men sought ways to ease their discomfort. Some of the trekkers even had to take the train for short distances to get some relief while others accepted rides from passing motorists because fatigue was common,

⁶⁵Horrall, *op. cit.*, 174; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Memo from Minister of Justice and marginal notation from Robb, n.d. See also Gregory S. Kealey, "The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Public Archives of Canada, and the Access to Information: A Curious Tale," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 199-226 for one historian's experiences with trying to find hard information resulting from police undercover activities.

⁶⁶NAC, RG 76, Vol 672, file 907095, Mitchell to Fraser, 19 March 1924.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, Mitchell to McCheyne, 25 March 1924. One wonders how effective RCMP surveillance had been to this point if the immigration department had to resort to such measures to obtain information.

⁶⁸Marginal note, n.d. in memo cited in Note 58.

⁶⁹NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Johnston to Chairman, SSB, 18 March 1924.

⁷⁰*Globe*, 18 March 1924.

as even the march leaders admitted.⁷¹ It soon became apparent that their message was more important than the march, so, to save themselves for the miles still ahead the harvesters introduced an interesting ploy. By delaying their departure from a community in the morning they would arrive at another one short of their destination. Citizens there, who were not prepared for their visit, gladly carried them to the outskirts of their planned destination in cars and trucks where they would disembark and walk the remaining distance "with banner waving."⁷²

Ever hopeful, the government's shadows interpreted the harvesters' use of local conveyances as a sign of waning resolve. Their regular reports deemphasized public support in the communities along the way. In fact, while some local editorial writers were critical of the trekkers' repeated refusal to accept work, reporters assigned to cover the march often told a different story. A surprisingly apt description came from a writer with a knowledge of working-class history who [likened the] called the group a "miniature Coxey's army," referring to the celebrated group of unemployed who marched on Washington to seek relief from Congress in 1894.⁷³ Most reporters simply described what they saw: that the marchers were imperial ex-servicemen with a legitimate complaint about the way they had been treated.⁷⁴

By the time the Harvesters' and Immigrants' Union reached Belleville, 90 miles from Toronto, the daily routine had been established and the trek from there through Napanee and Kingston was typical of most of the trip both in terms of organization and response. The rank-and-file trekkers did little else but march, eat, and sleep while Braithwaite and McCheyne proceeded ahead to solicit jobs. There was little interaction between them as trek leaders did most of the talking. Only in Belleville did tempers flare momentarily when one marcher turned on Braithwaite with a tirade that "he didn't see any use of our acting as spies on their movements

⁷¹NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Braithwaite to Johnston, 20 March 1924.

⁷²*Ibid.*, Memo, Director of Publicity to James, 3 April 1924.

⁷³*Leader*, 3 April 1924. Anyone wishing to test the comparison can consult the official history of the organization which spawned Coxey's Army. See Henry Vincent, *The Story of the Commonweal* (New York 1969) and Donald L. McMurtry, *Coxey's Army: A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (Seattle and London 1968). Carlos A. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln 1985) is both the most recent and the most animated treatment. While the two treks differed in the numbers involved, the distance covered, and the extraordinary means to render Coxey's Army ineffective, the nature of the protest, the orderly behaviour displaced by both groups, the press coverage, and the public sympathy they garnered is remarkably similar. In addition, the harvesters' trek had no obvious involvement from the women's working-class movement as was evident in the US. In this connection see Schwantes, "Western Women in Coxey's Army in 1894," *Arizona and the West*, 26 (1), 1984, 5-20.

⁷⁴*The Recorder and Times* (Brockville), 27 March 1924; *Citizen*, 31 March 1924; *Globe*, 25 March 1924.

any longer! He was fed up with seeing us at every turn."⁷⁵ No doubt the report of a case of scarlet fever from within their ranks helped contribute to the stress.

Kingston, the planned site of a major rally, offered some relief from the growing tension as the men picked up forwarded mail and relaxed. Local citizens who had concluded that the trekkers were a "good, honest, clean-looking and an obedient and well-behaved lot" responded with numerous gifts of cash, clothing, tobacco, and entertainment. Later two hundred showed up for the rally where more money and clothing were proffered and gratefully accepted.⁷⁶ As usual, Braithwaite and McCheyne came up virtually empty-handed due to the depressed state of the local economy.⁷⁷

The trekkers returned to the same boring daily routine once they turned north. Public reaction continued to be positive although the men were worried for a while when the mayor of Prescott initially refused to let the men stop in his town because some marchers some years earlier had caused considerable damage there. However, he eventually relented.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the shadows continued to ferret out jobs to offer the men, mostly on farms nearby, despite the futility of their efforts.

At Manotick, 15 miles from Ottawa, the advance men entered the capital to line up food, lodging and contact-people willing either to support their cause publicly (like representatives of local organized labour and politicians such as J.S. Woodsworth of the Labour Group), or at least listen to their concerns.⁷⁹

The trekkers' propaganda was working. As the distance to Ottawa diminished the level of interest from public agencies increased even more. The OPP, for example, made every effort to appear cooperative, even offering transportation between Gananoque and Brockville. Meanwhile, officials of the immigration department, the Soldiers' Settlement Board, and the Employment Service stepped up their job searches. Also, those responsible for public relations braced themselves to disprove the accusations made by the harvesters on their home turf. At the same time members of the cabinet affected appeared visibly shaken by the possible political consequences of the trek, especially since the confrontational nature of some of the leaders was well known. Immigration Minister Robb, for example, wanted to avoid a meeting altogether, but he instructed his senior officials that if he was cornered he would entertain only a small delegation. In a similar vein, his

⁷⁵NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, (B(?) to Johnston, 24 March 1924.

⁷⁶*Whig*, 24 March 1924.

⁷⁷NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Braithwaite to Johnston, 24 March 1924.

⁷⁸McCheyne was moved to comment to Fraser that "if more of the same treatment had been given them at their other stopping places it might have affected their morale to such an extent as to have completely discouraged them in continuing their Hike." NAC, RG76, Vol. 672, file 907095, McCheyne to Fraser, 27 March 1924.

⁷⁹*Globe*, 29 March 1924.

deputy minister, W.J. Egan, said he would talk to the men only if Leslie was not in attendance "owing to Leslie [*sic*] past record."⁸⁰

The Ottawa people, familiar with marches and demonstrations and perhaps hesitant to bite the hands that fed them, were noticeably cooler toward the harvester trekkers. There was no welcoming committee to greet the men, now down to 31, as they trudged into the city with their banner on the last day of March. The mayor and city controller merely directed a request for help to Parliament which they saw as the real source of the men's difficulties. A desperate search finally resulted in supper at a hotel courtesy of the Salvation Army and a roof for the night at the Union Mission.⁸¹ The next day was little better as only two small donations trickled in to defray expenses.⁸²

While rank-and-file marchers were thus preoccupied with survival, trek leaders met with Woodsworth on 1 April to arrange for their interview with the Prime Minister and selected cabinet members. The feared confrontation between the harvesters' five-man delegation (Law, Fleming, Gallagher, A. Constable and Alexander Milne) and Prime Minister King, J.A. Robb, and Labour Minister James Murdock did not materialize as the meeting was surprisingly cordial. In his introductory remarks the wily King first complimented the men on their pluck in undertaking the march. But, unable to resist an opportunity to throw a barb at the imperial authority, he pointed out that a similar meeting would have been impossible to arrange in the Old Country where government was far less accessible to the governed.

In their turn, the trekkers repeated the arguments they had made ever since leaving Toronto: that they had come to Canada for the 1923 harvest because they believed the railway recruiting agents who told them they could get work at their respective urban trades after it was over, earn enough to send money home, and eventually bring their families to Canada. The farm work at \$15.00 a month offered was grossly inadequate. Moreover, such a wage was even hazardous to accept for some of them since, under Scottish law, they could be convicted and jailed for desertion and non-support if, on returning to the United Kingdom, officials found that they had worked in Canada but had not sent money home. Hence, they wanted decent work at a living wage or outright government assistance.⁸³

King's reply tried to shift responsibility elsewhere: since Canada lacked an unemployment scheme like that which operated in Britain, assistance was out of the question. As for the alleged misrepresentation of Canadian conditions, these had occurred overseas and he suggested that the marchers seek redress from that source. Meanwhile, they should visit the local office of the Employment Service

⁸⁰NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Memo, Director of Publicity to James, 3 April 1924; memo, Robb to Cullen, n.d.; McCheyne to Fraser, 12 April 1924.

⁸¹*Citizen*, 1 April 1924.

⁸²*Citizen*, 2 April 1924.

⁸³*Citizen*, 2 April 1924.

of Canada where preparations had been made to process their work applications them. Although "far from satisfied," the organizers decided to cooperate in hopes of having more fruitful discussions with the government later.⁸⁴

While the delegation waited upon King's cabinet, the organizing committee had to deal with the more pressing problem of where the men could spend the second night. A return to the Union Mission was out of the question after its operators insulted the men by having the place fumigated following their departure that morning. However, requests for alternate accommodation directed at various Ottawa clergymen produced no results. The Prime Minister had earlier offered to take two or three into his personal care if they were destitute but for the remainder who awaited word in Union Station the only prospect appeared to be a night in a jail cell. Finally, however, the labour minister relented and announced that his department would put up the men for a single night at local hotels, the result being a frantic bed-hunt by Law, Woodsworth and two reporters which eventually turned up sufficient rooms in three Lower-Town hotels to house the men for the night.⁸⁵

Since this was the first night in a long time in a real bed, some of the hikers slept so soundly that they missed Wednesday's breakfast, also supplied by Immigration, and had to scramble to join their colleagues at the employment office where they were met by C.S. Ford, Superintendent of the Employment Service of Canada, as well as McCheyne and Braithwaite. There they learned that although the employment situation in the Ottawa area was abysmal with hundreds of registrants already on the books, there were the usual openings on local farms and if they were interested they could get reduced fares and wage advances to get them started. While farm work held the same attraction as before they all dutifully took lists of openings and registration cards and promised to return them promptly.

While the rank-and-file marchers continued the charade with employment officials, their leaders planned another high-level meeting, this time concerning the misrepresentation of Canadian conditions and the false information given to immigrants by Immigration and railway agents. The meeting, however, almost came to nought because the Immigration Minister objected to Leslie's presence and demanded that the man "remove himself to the corridors owing to [his] past record"⁸⁶ before discussions could continue. Since resistance would accomplish nothing Leslie withdrew and the meeting proceeded. The results of the discussion were not revealed; the press conference which followed indicated only that a meeting had taken place. The delegation then told the men of what had transpired and they returned to Welcome Zion's church hall where they had spent the day.

Once Thursday's breakfast, bought from public donations, was over the harvesters marched to the Ontario Employment Office with their banner to submit

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 1 and 2 April 1924; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, McCheyne to Fraser, 12 April 1924.

⁸⁵*Citizen*, 2 April 1924.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, McCheyne to Fraser, 12 April 1924.

their registration forms while their delegates returned to Parliament Hill to arrange with Labour MPs for further meetings with the cabinet. With their political capital exhausted by this time, however, only Egan agreed to meet with them. The discussions, while private, probably involved the early and orderly removal of the remainder of the Harvesters' and Immigrants' Union from Ottawa.⁸⁷

On Friday there were more short meetings with Ford, Woodsworth, and then Egan⁸⁸ and in the evening the harvesters boarded a special government-supplied colonist car attached to the regular train to Toronto accompanied by McCheyne, Braithwaite, and an RCMP escort and departed Ottawa near midnight. On Saturday morning, the immigration department gave them a final breakfast in Toronto and then the shadows informed them that they again had, like a fortnight earlier, "the same status as any other unemployed men in Canada,"⁸⁹ faceless figures awaiting spring and better prospects for work. Meanwhile, their job finished, four of the trek leaders, including Law and Leslie, contacted the immigration department seeking assistance or deportation, but the department ordered that "the men in question should be left to work out their own salvation."⁹⁰

...

SHORTLY AFTER THE HARVESTER/HIKERS' "bum's rush" from Ottawa, Robert McCheyne met Fred Fleming on a Toronto street and the trek leader confessed that "they were a lot of fools as they had not accomplished anything." If this discouraged Londoner sincerely believed that participating in the march and attending the numerous meetings with politicians and bureaucrats would prevent underemployment on an Ontario farm he was in a naive minority. The political objectives of the two-week demonstration is confirmed by the fact that several marchers who applied at the Ottawa Employment Service office to work as master mechanics refused to disclose their qualifications, while several more sought jobs in the area as experienced miners.⁹¹ Meanwhile, those who had marched simply as a way to get deported were also disappointed because by walking 300 miles they demonstrated that they were physically capable of taking the farm jobs offered by governments afraid to set an expensive precedent. Besides, as Leslie discovered, the Canadian government had no intention of giving the marchers the satisfaction of a free trip home especially since the problem of winter unemployment soon would disappear with the dirty spring snow.

⁸⁷ NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, McCheyne to Fraser, 12 April 1924.

⁸⁸ *Citizen*, 4 April 1924.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 5 April 1924; NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Division Commissioner to Reece, 4 April 1924, Fraser to Mitchell, 4 April 1924, McCheyne to Fraser, 12 April 1924. The Department paid \$224.75 to the CNR for the use of the car. Morisset to CNR, 27 May 1924.

⁹⁰ NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Mitchell to Fraser, 10 April 1924, Fraser to Mitchell, 30 April 1924.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, McCheyne to Fraser, 12 April 1924.

While the personal benefits to the trekkers were few, the political impact of less than three dozen men who had come together through a combination of choice and circumstance in the Harvesters' and Immigrants' Union was considerable. Simply meeting with the members of cabinet responsible for what passed for social policy in 1924 was certainly recognition, not of the Union's prestige, but of the potential harm involved in not listening and not appearing cooperative and accommodating. With deep-seated class hostility still very much in evidence in the Cape Breton coal fields, and with the Communists vying for control of the coal fields in Drumheller, Alberta, worker discontent appeared widespread. What is more, this particular protest was special because it struck at the vitals of Canada's immigration activities in the postwar years. The British harvester movement of the previous fall involved the western harvest, the Imperial cornucopia, the source of food for the world and work for those willing to contribute to the transatlantic unity of the British people. The anticipated triumph for imperial solidarity, however, became a public relations embarrassment as the political damage accumulated week after week.

From the moment that the 1923 harvester movement was announced its participants were in the public spotlight. Unfortunately, the carriers, with their own agenda for this massive migration, used their influence in the corridors of power to disregard warnings by Immigration and to proceed with impunity to recruit unsuspecting British workers by misrepresenting wages and working conditions.

The luckiest, the hardest, the most resilient, and the docile made the best of the situation until the harvest was over and then quietly slipped into the Canadian community the best way they could, endured and hoped for their condition to improve. Consequently, the public and private agencies responsible could proudly point to the experiment as a resounding success in statistical terms. The vast majority remained in Western Canada while only about 1000 had to be deported.⁹² The statistics do not mention the men who paid their own way back to Britain; nor can they reflect the misery associated with dashed hopes and disappointment, as one displaced British urban dweller, attracted to Western Canada by another railway-sponsored scheme, summed up the frustration with the confession to the author that "I cried for a year."

Disappointed, bewildered, and angry, a small but aggressive minority of the 1923 British harvesters balked at the circumstances which confronted them in Canada. Since they left home in a hurry they lacked the traditional support from kinship groups available to other British migrants so they turned to organized dissidents, first in Winnipeg and later in other cities, for assistance in mounting a campaign to get what they felt was their due. Nearly 100 of them took up residence

⁹²The Immigration Branch assessment made five years later admitted parenthetically that it took a year or more to get rid of the "failures and derelicts of the 1923 movement." NAC, RG 76, Vol. 612, file 907095, pt. 2, Blair memo, "British Harvester Movement 1928," 14 September 1928.

in the Immigration Hall and refused to budge until they were offered satisfactory work or were deported.⁹³ Meanwhile, for others the campaign involved extensive letter-writing to British and Canadian newspapers to broadcast their plight to the world.

Western Canadian reaction was, as one would expect, rather intolerant of ungrateful protesters. As the *Regina Leader* commented in assessing the entire affair:

This country has no room for loafers or grousters, who, when they cannot get cake, will not accept bread Canada is not so hard up for Immigrants that it need accept any class that does not exhibit a willingness to take up and cheerfully carry its share of the burden of its adopted country. The slacker should be dealt with like a noxious weed.⁹⁴

Farmers knew that noxious weeds had to be controlled and since all British immigrants of urban origin were now suspected of being simply redundant, dole-weakened "factory fodder" the entire Canadian campaign to attract British workers was seriously damaged. Opinions expressed during a similar harvester movement five years later confirmed that the bias was pervasive and would not be soon forgotten.⁹⁵

By comparison the letter-writing campaign was even more damaging to Canada's reputation abroad. While some hyperbole and even outright misinformation was involved,⁹⁶ the general tenor of the reports dwelt on the lower-than-expected wages, unscrupulous employers, and difficult working conditions.⁹⁷ When the stories caused questions to be raised at Westminster and in Ottawa the damage escalated. The demonstrations, meetings, and rallies organized by labour and protest organizations in Winnipeg and later in Toronto were also very effective because they continued to draw attention to the British harvesters, even though their numbers diminished rapidly after the harvest was over. The two-week march involving fewer than 50 at the start, and just over half that number at the finish, was the culmination of a prolonged cat-and-mouse game of negative publicity from one direction and damage control from the other.

That immigration department officials, the railway companies, the Soldiers' Settlement Board, the federal and provincial offices of the Employment Service, and various police forces were forced to coordinate efforts to minimize the

⁹³ NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Telegram, Gelley to Blair, 10 February 1924.

⁹⁴ *Leader*, 3 April 1924.

⁹⁵ Cherwinski, "'Misfits,' 'Malingers'."

⁹⁶ NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, telegram, Fraser to Barnsted, 27 February 1924 and reply, 28 February 1924 concerned an allegation which appeared in a British paper that 21 unfit British harvesters in Immigration facilities in Halifax were "imprisoned in cells and deprived of fresh air and exercise." The matter came to the attention of Canadian officials when it was raised in the British House of Commons.

⁹⁷ *London Times*, 29 August, 17, 18, 19 September, 8 October 1923, 17 January 1924.

effectiveness of less than three dozen people clearly indicates that the Harvesters' and Immigrants' Union, with its behind-the-scenes support, had been very successful in striking a sensitive nerve. However, efforts to shield the government and themselves from political danger began immediately after the harvesters had stepped off the train in Winnipeg the previous August. When the immigration department's efforts to admonish the transportation companies failed, its officials reached deep into their bag of tools to control the bad publicity they knew was inevitable.

While they could have been deported *en masse*, this solution was not politically wise because these men were not "Galicians" from Central and Eastern Europe whose morality and loyalty were questionable.⁹⁸ They were ex-servicemen and defenders of the Empire highly desirable to develop the country with the right kind of values. Consequently, only those harvesters deemed physically unfit were sent home. For the remainder, officials resorted to a campaign designed to focus blame on the troublemakers among them as the cause of this anomalous situation. Meanwhile, civil servants who dealt with the men at a personal level were told to find out as much as they could about the malcontents and to prepare detailed reports as to their activities and intentions.⁹⁹

As the negative publicity in the press and the various representative assemblies directed at the shortcomings of the harvester movement increased,¹⁰⁰ the immigration department began a counteroffensive. Not only was each accusation of maltreatment and destitution repudiated at all levels¹⁰¹ but those responsible to the department's publicity director, Robert Stead, worked long hours to stop the further haemorrhaging of Canada's reputation abroad. First they tried to ferret out every possible case where a British harvester had found satisfactory work, and had sent money home to help his family move to Canada permanently.¹⁰² The best of these

⁹⁸See Barbara Roberts, *From Whence They Came: Deportation from Canada 1900-1935* (Ottawa 1988), for an up-to-date discussion of the use of deportation by the Canadian government to control those newcomers deemed undesirable.

⁹⁹NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, Memo, Gyles to Gelley, 10 March 1924. The Immigration Branch also kept detailed records of how many former harvesters had refused work at various places and the kind of work they turned down. For example, three men had lived by gambling in Windsor, Ontario before "effecting entry to the United States." Memo re British Harvesters, n.d.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, Memo, Gelley to Egan, 21 January 1924.

¹⁰¹See the lengthy letter from Obed Smith, the Superintendent for Emigration stationed in London, to T.C. Magnaghton, Vice-Chairman, Overseas Settlement Board explaining the situation in great detail and stressing that despite the fact that there were 13,885 unemployed in Canada in November 1923, the only harvesters out of work were those who refused the jobs that were offered to them. *Ibid.*, 21 February 1924.

¹⁰²See *Ibid.*, several letters throughout the file. In an article on immigration in the 1923 *Canadian Annual Review*, Stead conceded that "grievances were widely aired in the British Press" but that the "effect of this publicity was to some extent offset by reports of British

were submitted to the papers to be used as the editors pleased.¹⁰³ They also examined every paper available for editorial comments praising department efforts particularly with regard to the harvesters. Finally, the department used its London office to distribute numerous copies in the United Kingdom of a lengthy article entitled "The British Harvesters in Canada" by Lloyd Roberts, son of novelist Charles G.D. Roberts, which stressed that "in the vast majority of cases, the experiment was a successful one."¹⁰⁴

The response of government officials in respect to the on-to-Ottawa trek in March 1924 simply marked an intensification of the campaign to salvage its reputation and to shield the cabinet from further criticism. The tenacious manner with which the government shadows stuck with the marchers, the extraordinarily expensive effort to find jobs and to offer them at every opportunity, the conversations with municipal officials and the local press to present Ottawa's side of the story, and the inquiries into the backgrounds and motives of the Union members clearly show that the organization was being taken very seriously.¹⁰⁵

A few editorial writers urged that the harvesters not be accorded special treatment but the balance of sympathy, even from McCheyne and Braithwaite who in their daily reports professed a grudging admiration for the marchers' resolve, appeared to be with the unfortunate hikers. The many donations of money, goods, and services from individual citizens along the way is further proof.¹⁰⁶ In addition, despite the personnel imbalance in favour of the government side in the propaganda battle, the trekkers appeared to garner the most support while the government was criticized for being inept. As the *Ottawa Citizen* concluded,

... if responsible ministers could get together... the absurdity of unemployed harvesters petitioning the Prime Minister... for work, while an intensive campaign to attract immigrants is being carried on abroad, would be less likely to occur again.¹⁰⁷

These shortcomings in Canada's efforts to recruit newcomers were not lost on readers who saw stories of the march on the same newspaper page with government press releases announcing the arrival of still more immigrants seeking opportunities in Canada.

harvesters, who had been well satisfied with their experiences in Canada, and by the sending of a number of Canadian farmers to Great Britain to give first-hand information on the conditions prevailing in Canada," 270-1.

¹⁰³See *Ibid.* for a series of letters to the *Winnipeg Free Press* dated August 1923 to March 1924 outlining cases of harvesters who had succeeded.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, see also Stead to Smith, 29 February 1924.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, Braithwaite to Johnston, 24 March 1924.

¹⁰⁶One especially notable donation consisted of a half bushel of apples from a town councillor in Brighton, Ontario. *Ibid.*, Braithwaite to Johnston, 20 March 1924.

¹⁰⁷*Citizen*, 4 April 1924.

Long after the marchers had left Ottawa and dispersed, criticism of government policy continued. For example, in mid-May, when the employment picture in southern Ontario had improved dramatically, the Toronto Branch No. 4 of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners still had time to condemn the government for the "misleading advertising" directed at potential emigrants in the Old Country. Meanwhile, Toronto and Hamilton city councils passed resolutions urging other similar bodies across the country to "lodge protests with Federal and Provincial Governments against the present policy of immigration" because in winter the unemployment problem was "greatly aggravated by the influx of unskilled workers from the Old Land who could not be absorbed by industry or agriculture, with the result that they became charges of the city."¹⁰⁸

Ironically, dissident organizations, front-line immigration officials, and municipal councillors realized one simple truth about Canada's economy which continued to elude those responsible for formulating policy: that the hasty decisions designed to meet the short-term needs of the prairie region for labour, and the demands of imperialists seeking 'Anglo-Saxon' stock, left other regions to solve the problems resulting from accumulated human misery. Therefore, the 1924 marchers may have been discouraged, as Fleming was, by the absence of immediate results, they had no way of knowing the impact their campaign had had on Immigration thinking. Lloyd Roberts provided the best assessment in his article when he bluntly asserted:

A few pathetic letters in the British papers, a few sympathetic ears in Canada, and the mischief was done. Immigration officials say it will take a lot of 'literature' and fair speaking to remove the distrust aroused in certain sections of the British Isles. The Department's hundreds of letters of satisfaction over conditions found in Canada will weigh not a jot in the balance against the handful of complaints.¹⁰⁹

For this reason, based on the 1923-24 experience, officials tried to discourage further migrations of this kind, but even when another bumper crop in 1928 resulted in another British harvester movement they forced greater care to be taken to improve selection, limit misrepresentation of wages and working conditions, and guarantee greater responsibility from railway companies for winter job placement.¹¹⁰ By 1928, however, many of the problems associated with the recruitment of harvest workers had been solved by the adoption of the combine harvester making farmers less reliant on outside help. Two years later it did not matter since the entire economy was under such strain that even the railways could not argue a need for offshore labour.

The 1923-24 British harvester movement and subsequent march had wider implications for more than just front-line immigration functionaries. Organized

¹⁰⁸ *Globe*, 10 and 16 May 1924.

¹⁰⁹ NAC, RG 76, Vol. 672, file 907095, "The British Harvesters in Canada."

¹¹⁰ Cherwinski, "'Misfits,' 'Malingers,'" 276-9.

dissidents and the labour movement in general had argued the dangers to Canadian workers and Canadian cities from an open door immigration policy at least since the turn of the century. The pre-war depression and postwar economic dislocation added the dimension of massive winter urban unemployment to the equation providing radicals with a ready-made platform for dissent and a source for further organization among the unwitting victims of capitalism's desire for cheap labour. There is no doubt that Canada's dissidents in the Communist Party and the OBU at least saw in the British harvester movement an opportunity which could not be missed. They knew that to agitate for Canada's unemployed attracted little attention from press and politicians. British workers who were ex-servicemen were another matter because they were newsworthy. Their experience made the conspiracy of the transportation companies, governments, and employers to victimize all workers regardless of origin clear to large numbers of Canadians. In addition, the harvester movement provided an opportunity to contact British radicals, like Leslie, directly and thus strengthen lines of communication. Moreover, the selfless defiance he exhibited even after the trek was over¹¹¹ must have inspired others seeking to confront seemingly invincible authority. The improved networks within Canada and abroad¹¹² resulted in an even more effective campaign during the 1928 British harvester movement launched against the government and the railways by the Communist Party in both Canada and the United Kingdom to expose "the whole harvester migration swindle."¹¹³

Meanwhile, the campaign was waged on other fronts as well. Again the railways were at the root of the problem when in 1924 they pressed the Canadian government for an agreement to facilitate the large-scale movement of farmers and farm workers from continental Europe to further develop the Canadian prairies. The Railway Agreement, as the pact was known, brought 185 thousand to Canada between 1925 and 1930.¹¹⁴ With reduced reliance on farm labour in western

¹¹¹The principal speaker at a Communist meeting on 15 May 1924 in Toronto, Leslie was warned by police he would be arrested if he asked for money. After he finished speaking members of the audience threw 70 cents into the ring they had formed around him. When he picked up the change, he was promptly taken into custody for begging and at a trial the next day he was convicted and sentenced to six months in prison. Before being led away he declared: "Though I am put behind prison bars I will strike when I come out, remember that, and I will be taken out either dead or alive." *Citizen*, 16 May 1924. The arrest and conviction of the "ringleader" of the harvester trekkers was applauded by Conservative M.P. Donald Sutherland in the House of Commons later in the week. *Canada House of Commons Debates*, 20 May 1924, 2348.

¹¹²*Ibid.*, Mitchell to Fraser, 10 April 1924.

¹¹³RG 76, Vol. 276, file 218165, pt. 3, Starnes to Egan, 28 December 1928. See also Cherwinski, "Misfits," "Malingers" for a detailed discussion of the 1928 British Harvester Movement.

¹¹⁴Donald Avery, *"Dangerous Foreigners": European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979), 100-7. One bit of proof of the affinity

Canada, large numbers of these migrants eventually turned up, like the 1923 British harvesters, unemployed in the nation's cities. Lacking local support networks they accepted assistance from groups like the Communist Party, particularly when it promised redress and relief. Numerous marches, rallies, and demonstrations as well as letter-writing campaigns in almost all major Canadian cities ensued, directed at all three levels of government demanding adequate short-term assistance and long-term employment.¹¹⁵ While considerable work needs to be done on this aspect of radical activities in this period, there is no doubt that even with limited resources they were increasingly effective because they were able to gain the trust of the unemployed. The 1923-24 campaign demonstrates this clearly as well as casting light on the links and structures they created which were used to good advantage during the highly publicized campaigns during the next decade.

that existed between the Canadian government and the railways was the appointment of the former Deputy Minister of Immigration and Colonization, Dr. W.J. Black, as Manager of the Department of Colonization and Development with the Canadian National Railways in October 1923.

¹¹⁵To use the Alberta situation, with which the author has worked extensively, as an example the following collections illustrate the degree of radical involvement with the unemployed: PAA, Acc. No. 65.118, files 6 and 12 detail the march of unemployed on the Alberta Legislature on 21 May 1931, while files 205 and 4605 provide detailed reports from undercover police officers who attended rallies of the unemployed in Edmonton. Acc. No. 75.126 attended rallies of the unemployed in Edmonton. Acc. No. 75.126 file 4608 describes the work of the Labour Church among Edmonton's unemployed, file 4609 contains detailed reports of the activities of the Workers' Party of Canada among the jobless in the late 1920s, file 4623 contains material on a march and demonstration by unemployed in Calgary in January 1927, and file 4623 describes the march of Drumheller's unemployed to Edmonton led by Pat Conroy in April 1925. In addition, Acc. No. 83.112 file 41B contains material on the Communist Party in Alberta and its organization work among the unemployed.