

## Searching for Workers' Solidarity: The One Big Union and the Victoria General Strike of 1919

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Article abstract

On 23 June 1919, 5000 workers affiliated with Victoria's Metal Trades Council downed tools in sympathy with Winnipeg workers and as a protest against what they called 'Star Chamber' methods of repression against the working class leadership. While much has been written on the Winnipeg General Strike and 1919 Canadian labour revolt, the Victoria General Strike is revealing as a contested expression of working-class solidarity, an illustration of the unresolved tension between craft and industrial unionism and different labour leaderships in the west-coast city. Much of British Columbia labour had embraced the One Big Union and its socialist leadership by the spring of 1919, but Victoria's organized workers wavered on the question of striking in sympathy with Winnipeg's working class. While the shipyards were a locus of militancy, influential groups of workers, afl rather than obu in orientation, opposed a general strike and undermined the mood of solidarity. Local conditions in different economic sectors shaped the working-class response to the Winnipeg General Strike. This tension provides fresh insight into the development of class consciousness and industrial militancy at the end World War I, breaking new ground in the historiography of Canada's postwar labour revolt.

## ARTICLE

# Searching for Workers' Solidarity: The One Big Union and the Victoria General Strike of 1919

**Benjamin Isitt**

### Introduction

"ONE BIG UNION IS THE IDEAL to be aimed at, the final aim being the workers as a class arrayed against the common enemy," Victoria Trades and Labor Council (VTLC) delegates unanimously declared in February 1919.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by sympathetic strikes in Seattle and Vancouver, and angered by unemployment and employers' refusal to pay wages commensurate with the rising cost of living, Victoria workers turned to militant industrial unionism. Among the city's 5000 shipyard workers, this militancy was particularly pronounced. "The workers as a class were never feeling their class position more," VTLC president Eugene Woodward told the Mathers Commission on Industrial Relations when hearings opened in Victoria.<sup>2</sup> However by June 1919, with cities across Canada paralyzed by sympathetic strikes, Victoria's response was muted. Supporters of the breakaway One Big Union (OBU) were unable to wrest control from labour leaders loyal to American Federation of Labor (AFL)-affiliated international unions. Victoria workers wavered in response to the Winnipeg General Strike. When the Metal Trades Council finally initi-

1. University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections (hereafter UVASC), Victoria Labour Council fonds (hereafter VLC fonds), accession 80-59, series IV, box 3, "Minutes and Minute Books," Minutes, 19 February 1919.

2. Royal Commission on Industrial Relations (hereafter Mathers Commission), Evidence, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 181, Library and Archives of Canada (hereafter LAC), reel M1980. Appointed by Borden's Union government in March 1919, and chaired by Thomas Graham Mathers, Chief Justice of Manitoba, the commission conducted hearings in 28 towns and cities between April and June 1919, gathering testimony from 486 witnesses. Tom Moore, president of the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, served as labour's representative on the commission.

ated a walkout on 23 June 1919, the strike paralysed local shipyards, machine shops, and the waterfront, but lacked the participation of influential groups of workers: streetcar workers, postal workers, electrical workers, civic employees, and retail clerks. This study explores the OBU and 1919 Canadian labour revolt from the standpoint of Victoria's working class, illuminating a contested example of industrial solidarity.

Historians have assessed the character of the Winnipeg General Strike and debated the rise and fall of the OBU.<sup>3</sup> They have examined local sympathetic strikes and regional, national, and international contours of labour revolt.<sup>4</sup> No study, however, has focused on the experience of Victoria workers during and after the war, with only Phillips, Turner, Kealey, and Seager and Roth mentioning the Victoria General Strike.<sup>5</sup> Fragmentation is often viewed

3. Winnipeg Defence Committee, *Saving the World From Democracy: The Winnipeg General Sympathetic Strike, May–June, 1919* (Winnipeg 1920); D.C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto 1950); Kenneth McNaught and David J. Bercuson, *The Winnipeg Strike: 1919* (Don Mills, ON 1974); Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal 1974); Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Radicals and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1897–1919* (Toronto 1977).

4. Gerald Friesen, "Yours in Revolt: Regionalism, Socialism, and the Western Canadian Labour Movement," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 141–57; Elaine Bernard, "Last Back: Folklore and the Telephone Operators in the 1919 Vancouver General Strike," in Barbara K. Lantham and Roberta J. Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria 1984), 279–86; David Bright, *The Limits of Labour: Class Formation and the Labour Movement in Calgary, 1883–1929* (Vancouver 1998), 145–61; James Naylor, *The New Democracy: Challenging the Social Order in Industrial Ontario, 1914–25* (Toronto 1991), 42–71; Geoffrey Ewen, "Québec: Class and Ethnicity," in Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada: 1917–1925* (Toronto 1998); Nolan Reilly, "The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919," *Acadiensis*, 9 (Spring 1980), 56–77; Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 11–44; Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900–1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 41–66.

5. Paul A. Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1967), 81; Arthur J. Turner, *Somewhere – A Perfect Place* (Vancouver 1981), 23–24; Gregory S. Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," 33; Allen Seager and David Roth, "British Columbia and the Mining West: A Ghost of a Chance," in Heron, *Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 256–8. The historiography of Victoria labour is sparse and parochial. For insight into the prewar period, see George Hardy, *Those Stormy Years: Memories of the Fight for Freedom on Five Continents* (London 1956), 27–55; and Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990), 35, 73–4. The only survey, commissioned by the Victoria Labour Council, lacks a unifying theme and analytical breadth, concluding that while Winnipeg and Vancouver experienced general strikes, "there wasn't enough support for another in Victoria." Bruce Lowther, *A Better Life: The First Century of the Victoria Labour Council* (Victoria 1989), 25–26. Christian Sivertz's biography displays similar weaknesses, stating simply: "The 1919 general strike in Winnipeg was a major event in ... the history of Canada. It is too big to go into this story and in any case Christian had to do with it only peripherally." See Bent Gestur Sivertz, *The Sivertz Family, Book 1: Christian Sivertz of Victoria and of Canada's Early Labor Movement* (Parksville, BC 1984), 68.

in regional, ethnic, and gender terms, rather than as a local manifestation, but as Heron points out: "the radicals' success depended on the strength of the local unions in their respective industries and on the established power of the international craft union leadership in the local labour movement."<sup>6</sup> Locating these local sources of solidarity requires reaching beyond what Hak called "the small band of articulate socialist theorists in Vancouver" – suggesting a more nuanced regional historiography.<sup>7</sup> Enduring racism and sexism among Anglo-Saxon workers impeded efforts toward genuine working-class unity; even in the radical OBU, which claimed to "not make either age, sex, color, race or creed a barrier to membership," a masculinist conception of social class persisted.<sup>8</sup> Socialism and militant trade-unionism are integral to BC's labour tradition, but much can be learned from contested expressions of working-class activism, where divisions within workers' ranks inhibited wider expressions of solidarity.

In Victoria, contested leadership defined the local response to the Winnipeg General Strike. Against the backdrop of the OBU's rapid growth and sympathetic strikes from Vancouver to Amherst, Victoria workers voiced sympathy with Winnipeg labour while questioning whether to strike. The product was a general strike that was not general in character, a large-scale walkout by the city's industrial workforce that lacked the sanction of Victoria's central labour council. Revealing the impact of local conditions on working-class militancy,

6. Craig Heron, "National Contours: Solidarity and Fragmentation," in Heron, ed., *Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 292 and 281–5; also Heron, "Introduction," *Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 6–7; James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis, and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900–1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 1–37.

7. Gordon Hak, "The Socialist and Labourist Impulse in Small-Town British Columbia: Port Alberni and Prince George, 1911–33," *Canadian Historical Review*, 70:4 (December 1989), 519. Examples of nuanced works include Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Robert A. J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status and Social Boundaries, 1863–1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996); Andrew Parnaby, "'The Best Men that Ever Worked the Lumber': Aboriginal Longshoremen on Burrard Inlet, BC, 1863–1939," *Canadian Historical Review*, 87:1 (March 2006), 53–78; Richard Rajala, "Pulling Lumber: Indo-Canadians in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1900–1998," *British Columbia Historical News*, 36 (Winter 2002/2003), 1–13; and John Douglas Belshaw, *Colonization and Community: The Vancouver Island Coalfield and the Making of the British Columbian Working Class* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

8. *One Big Union – Bulletin No. 8* (Vancouver c.1920), LAC, CIHM 85767; Todd McCallum, "'Not a Sex Question'? The One Big Union and the Politics of Radical Manhood," *Labour/Le Travail*, 42 (Fall 1998), 15–54; McCallum, "'A Modern Weapon for Modern Man': Marxist Masculinity and the Social Practices of the One Big Union, 1919–1924," MA thesis, SFU, 1995; Gillian Creese, "Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the 'Oriental Problem,'" *BC Studies*, 80 (Winter 1988–89), 24–51. The role of women in the postwar labour revolt is explored in Linda Kealey, "'No Special Protection – No Sympathy': Women's Activism in the Canadian Labour Revolt of 1919," in Deian Hopkin and G.S. Kealey, eds., *Class, Community and the Labour Movement in Wales and Canada, 1850–1930* (Aberystwyth 1989), 134–59.

the unresolved tension between the OBU's industrial unionism and a more conservative craft unionism translated into the limited extent of the strike.

## The Postwar Moment

In 1919 Victoria was a city in transition. The staid outpost of British imperialism grappled with the pressures of industrialism and instability unleashed by a world war. Vancouver had long surpassed Victoria as the provincial centre of commerce, industry, and population, and the capital's secondary manufacturing sector continued a long decline.<sup>9</sup> A pre-war construction boom had provided a measure of prosperity for the city's 35,000 inhabitants, but as carpenter J.B. MacDonald told the Mathers Commission, "there has been no building in the city" for four years.<sup>10</sup> Shipbuilding surged during the European conflict. Twenty wooden ships were under construction for the French government, employing thousands in Victoria's seven shipyards. All but one yard, the Harbor Marine Company, recognized the closed shop and dealt with stewards and business agents chosen by the workers. However, contracts were signed between individual workers and employers. At the Foundation Company, the city's largest employer with 3200 workers – indirectly supporting 59 per cent of the local population – the French contract stipulated that wages could "not exceed the wage paid in any other shipyard in this Province."<sup>11</sup> The employment officer at Harbor Marine offered a cogent warning that reflected the mood in the shipyards: "I believe we are sitting on the edge of a volcano, and some action should be taken in the immediate future to provide work."<sup>12</sup>

A buoyant wartime economy slowed as soldiers returned from the Western Front, triggering fierce competition for jobs and fears of poverty. Eleven hundred ex-soldiers were jobless in the spring of 1919, out of a total of 2500 unemployed. "These men are absolutely on the verge of poverty," carpenters' representative Robert Donnachie told the Mathers Commission.<sup>13</sup> Emily Sutton, a retail clerk and VTLC officer, said "quite a number of girls [were] thrown out" when

9. Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto 1996); and John Sutton Lutz, "Structural Changes in the Manufacturing Economy of British Columbia 1860–1915," MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1988.

10. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 194, J.B. MacDonald testimony.

11. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 91, 153, 185–193, and 203–205, Paul Thompson, Charles Wylie, Major Bullock-Webster, and James Dakers testimony; "Sympathetic Strike Now May Mean Extinction of Shipbuilding Industry," *Daily Times* (Victoria) (hereafter *Times*), 31 May 1919; "Foundation Co. Secures Contract," *British Columbia Federationist* (Vancouver) (hereafter *Federationist*), 6 September 1918. The economic impact of the Foundation Company is cited by Dakers.

12. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 193, Major Bullock-Webster testimony.

13. Mathers Commission, 26 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 3, 7–8, and 17, Robert Donnachie and Anger Berry testimony.

local munitions plants closed.<sup>14</sup> Another labour official, Charles Wylie of the 2300-strong Shipyard Laborers, Fasteners and Riggers, accused the Dominion government of setting a bad example for private employers: "take the Navy Yard, for example – they are laying off men instead of putting them on."<sup>15</sup> Local lumber operators, headed by J. O. Cameron, refused any moves toward collective bargaining, and inflamed Anglo-Saxon workers by retaining low-paid Chinese workers in three-quarters of the jobs in their mills.<sup>16</sup> Rising prices fueled discontent with the high cost of living; butter soared to 75 cents per pound in June 1919, a tenth of a skilled shipyard workers' daily wage.<sup>17</sup> Soldiers' wives struggled to support themselves and their children on a state allowance of less than \$40 per month.<sup>18</sup> Working women, such as retail clerks, were discriminated against by employers unwilling to pay a \$12.50 minimum weekly wage.<sup>19</sup> This situation was aggravated by the Spanish Flu, the world-wide influenza epidemic that left 100 Victorians dead and 2,700 ill.<sup>20</sup> As one witness told the Mathers Commission, prohibition laws had removed a traditional vent for working-class unrest: "they are not allowed to get a glass of beer now."<sup>21</sup>

Like elsewhere, war polarized relations between the classes. Inflation, profiteering in foodstuffs, conscription, censorship, and repression of working-class organizations and leaders created a tense political climate.<sup>22</sup> The deployment

14. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 214, Emily Sutton testimony.

15. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 158, Charles Wylie testimony.

16. Mathers Commission, 26 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 3–4 and 65–90, Donnachie and Cameron testimony.

17. Food prices are listed in "Green Vegetables in Large Numbers," *Times*, 17 June 1919. For the wage scale adopted by the Victoria Boilermakers in March 1919, see UVASC, Victoria Shipyard Workers Federated Union Local #238 (Boilermakers) fonds, Accession 89–3, box 1.2, "Minute Books," 14 March 1919. The VTLC discussed the cost of living frequently. See UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 6 December 1916.

18. The struggle of soldiers' wives for adequate compensation is illuminated in a letter by Mrs. F.A. Haines, "Dependents' Allowances," *Daily Colonist* (Victoria) (hereafter *Colonist*), 9 October 1918.

19. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 212–213, Emily Sutton testimony. The Minimum Wage Act came into force in February 1919. See Betty Griffin and Susan Lockhart, *Their Own History: Women's Contribution to the Labour Movement in British Columbia* (Vancouver 2002), 49–50.

20. Victoria, *Annual Reports: Corporation of the City of Victoria, 1918* (Victoria 1918), 89.

21. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 184, C.T. Cross testimony. See also Craig Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto 2003); Jan Noel, *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation* (Toronto 1995).

22. In July 1918, the VTLC-backed newspaper, *The Week*, was suppressed by government order and its editor jailed for publishing the terms of the Allies' secret treaties. In September, the VTLC's secretary-treasurer was instructed to inquire "of the Food Control Board if it was a fact that 5,000 cases of Butter weighing 56 lbs each were lying at Swift Co. against Food Control or-

of the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force from Victoria's Willows Camp to Vladivostok, Russia in December 1918 sparked protest meetings and a mutiny.<sup>23</sup> J.S. Woodsworth, recently resigned from the Methodist church, told a Victoria labour meeting that "the crisis was leading us to join forces to get what was due to us.... The Federated Labor Party was one manifestation, the Labor unions another, the Bolsheviki another."<sup>24</sup> A growing number of workers turned to collective action and a socialist critique of capitalism, inspired by the social changes that were unfolding in Russia. In February 1919, a veteran of the Western Front, in full uniform, hobbled into a labour hall on crutches and demanded that the red flag replace the Union Jack on the speaker's pedestal.<sup>25</sup> VTLC delegates voted 17 to 2 to endorse "the aims of the Russian revolution," empowering their executive to call a general strike to force the withdrawal of Allied troops from Russia.<sup>26</sup>

This radical mood coincided with a wave of militant working-class agency that enveloped North America and the world, revealing growing dissatisfaction with the structure and policies of the AFL-affiliated international craft unions. BC's resource-extraction economy had always tended toward industrial, rather than craft, organization, and tension between radicals and conservatives intensified during the war.<sup>27</sup> Victoria workers like John L. Martin, a labourer, and

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ders." That month, the Dominion government banned 14 political organizations, including the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and outlawed various radical publications. See PC 2384 and "Consolidated Orders Respecting Censorship," Canada, *Canada Gazette*, (Ottawa 1918), 1278, 1294–1296, 1379, 1391, 1525, and 1626; UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 7 August 1919, 18 September 1918, and 8 January 1919; "Intervention in Russia," *The Week* (Victoria), 20 July 1918; "Here We Are Again!" *The Week*, 1 May 1920; Gregory S. Kealey, "State Repression of Labour and the Left in Canada, 1914–20: The Impact of the First World War," *Canadian Historical Review*, 73 (September 1991), 281–314; S. W. Horall, "The Royal North West Mounted Police and Labour Unrest in Western Canada, 1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 61 (June 1980), 169–90; Jeff Keshen, "All the News That Was Fit to Print: Ernest J. Chambers and Information Control in Canada, 1914–19," *Canadian Historical Review*, 73 (September 1992), 315–343.

23. Benjamin Isitt, "Mutiny from Victoria to Vladivostok, December 1918," *Canadian Historical Review*, 87 (June 2006), 223–264; "Censorship Comes In For Criticism," *Times*, 13 January 1919; "Victoria Workers Hold Protest Meeting," *Federationist*, 17 January 1919.

24. "Victoria Labor Party Meeting," *Federationist*, 10 January 1919.

25. "Chairman Refuses to Allow Red Flag to be Brought Out," *Times*, 3 February 1919.

26. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 24 February 1919. The relationship between war and radicalism is explored in Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, "The Great War, the State, and Working-Class Canada," in Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada*, 11–42.

27. The Western Federation of Miners sunk roots in BC in the closing years of the 19th century, establishing a militant tradition among miners, loggers, and fishers, and spawning a general strike in support of railworkers in 1903. The Industrial Workers of the World built upon this tradition, organizing itinerant workers and developing branches in Vancouver, Nelson, and Victoria. The Victoria IWW spearheaded a split from the AFL-affiliated Teamsters prior to the war, and mobilized 'free speech' fights and support for imprisoned Vancouver Island coal miners; Mother Jones addressed a VTLC-sponsored meeting in 1914, after attempts by border



Joseph Taylor, a longshoreman, were staunchly anti-militarist and belonged to the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC).<sup>28</sup> But the VTLC's secretary-treasurer, postal worker Christian Sivertz, served as a mail censor and member of the government-appointed Exemptions Board that heard appeals under the Military Service Act. Sivertz "made no secret of his conviction that this World War called for total mobilization"; in 1918, Sivertz circulated a speech by AFL president Samuel Gompers to VTLC delegates.<sup>29</sup>

Sivertz's patriotism fit uneasily with the growing radicalism among BC's unionized workers, who had voted 76 per cent for a general strike against conscription.<sup>30</sup> These workers elected SPC militants to the BC Federation of Labor (BCFL) executive and waged an August 1918 protest strike against the killing of draft resister Albert 'Ginger' Goodwin, a labour leader.<sup>31</sup> Victoria, however, abstained from striking. Only weeks earlier, the VTLC had considered a sympathy strike for letter carriers and postal clerks – members of Sivertz's

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officials to deny Jones entry into Canada were defeated by the labour councils of Vancouver and Victoria. But the spread of industrial unionism was opposed by influential labour leaders, such as VTLC president John Day, a local boss of the ruling Conservative party, which had unleashed the militia against striking coal miners. The Victoria IWW dissolved in May 1914 and the VTLC filed unread a request for funds from the Edmonton IWW. According to Leier, local IWW leaders left Victoria in search of work. See William Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia* (Vancouver 1935), 60–4; Hardy, *Those Stormy Years*, 27–55; Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 35, 45, and 73–4; Jack Kavanagh, *The Vancouver Island Strike* (Vancouver 1913); UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 21 January 1914, 4 February 1914, 3 June 1914, 12 August 1914, and 19 August 1914; Linda Atkinson, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York 1978).

28. On 4 August 1914, Martin organized a protest meeting against the summons to the militia. A VTLC official said labour would not "permit some irresponsible person to pass resolutions under the roof of the Labor hall deprecating men doing their duty at this time." See "Ends in Fiasco," *Times*, 5 August 1914; UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 5 August 1914.

29. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 3 July 1918; Sivertz, *The Sivertz Family*, 41–58; also BC Archives and Records Service, Christian Sivertz Collection. According to Sivertz's biographer-son, he "had a deep feeling for the young, then emerging nation of Canada, and he took seriously the war against the German Kaiser." Moreover, Sivertz "believed that exemption should be granted only on the very strongest grounds." Sivertz, *The Sivertz Family*, 58.

30. The 1917 BCFL referendum asked affiliated members: "Are you prepared to place in the hands of the executive of the British Columbia Federation of Labor the power to call a general strike in the event of conscription?" Of 2417 ballots cast, 1841 favoured a general strike with only 576 opposed. See "BC Federation of Labor Issues Referendum," *Federationist*, 8 June 1917; "Action of Delegate Montreal Endorsed – Capital City Labor Men Are Opposed to Scheme of Conscription," *Federationist*, 22 June 1917; "First Unwilling Conscript To Be Signal For 'Down Tools,'" *Federationist*, 7 September 1917; also Martin Robin, "Registration, Conscription, and Independent Labour Politics, 1916–17," in A. M. Willms *et al.*, eds., *Conscription 1917* (Toronto 1969); Phillips, *No Power Greater*, 67.

31. "Albert Goodwin Shot and Killed by Police Officer Near Comox Lake" and "Trades and Labor Council Endorse 24-Hr. Protest," *Federationist*, 2 August 1918; "Labor Temple Scene of Trouble and Rioting" and "Goodwin Buried At Cumberland," *Federationist*, 9 August 1918; Susan Mayse, *Ginger: The Life and Death of Albert Goodwin* (Madeira Park 1990); and Roger Stonebanks, *Fighting for Dignity: The Ginger Goodwin Story* (St. John's 2004).



union. Joe Taylor, VTLC organization committee chairman, proposed a strike vote and central advisory committee with representation from every union. However a quick settlement to the postal strike precluded sympathetic action, and no similar moves accompanied Goodwin's death. In August, the Steam and Operating Engineers sent a resolution to the VTLC regretting "the recent strike in Vancouver, in connection with the killing of A. Goodwin, and which resulted in certain disturbances in that City."<sup>32</sup>

Spurred by Taylor's organizing efforts and the wartime labour shortage, new organizations emerged among Victoria telephone operators, retail clerks, firefighters, police officers, sawmill workers, garment workers, cereal and flour mill workers, teamsters, and laundry workers. The heavily organized shipyards remained the locus of militancy, accounting for three-quarters of Victoria's 7000 union members; a May 1918 walkout of 200 machinists had won the Saturday half-holiday for all shipyard workers.<sup>33</sup> However this militancy only partially extended to the broader labour movement, which consisted of 41 union locals by 1919. Victoria's largest union, the 2300-strong Shipyard Laborers, Riggers and Fasteners, an affiliate of Taylor's militant International Longshoremens Association (ILA), was not affiliated with the VTLC.<sup>34</sup> Growing labour unrest, such as Vancouver laundry and shipyard strikes, bolstered calls for sympathetic action, demonstrating the distance between SPC militants and moderate AFL leaders. The VTLC entertained the idea of AFL dues "being held in Canada instead of being sent over the Line."<sup>35</sup> At the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada (TLC) annual convention, held in Québec City in September, Victorian James C. Watters, a socialist and Congress president since 1911, was defeated by Tom Moore of Niagara Falls, a Conservative and staunch craft unionist. A VTLC proposal for a transportation fund to subsidize travel to Congress meetings was defeated, along with resolutions advocating the repeal of the Military Service Act, release of conscientious objectors, and withdrawal of Allied troops from Russia.<sup>36</sup> When dissident convention del-

32. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 7 August 1918; also 29 July 1918.

33. "Machinists Strike In Victoria Yards," *Federationist*, 3 May 1918; "Shipyard Workers Get Half Holiday," *Federationist*, 10 May 1918; "Will Not Accept A Week of 48 Hours," *Federationist*, 10 May 1918; also "Strike By Shipyard Workers Is Deferred for the Present," *Federationist*, 1 March 1918; "Shipyard Inquiry Opens At Victoria," *Federationist*, 15 March 1918; "Big Walk-Out Started in City To-Day When Boilermakers Struck," *Times*, 21 June 1919.

34. Public Archives of Manitoba (hereafter PAM), OBU papers, MG10, A3, "Correspondence," Taylor to Midgley, 18 April 1919. For organizational gains in various industries, see UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, June to August 1918; *Federationist*, June to August 1918; "Strike Vote Returns Will Not Be Issued Until After Meeting," *Times*, 2 June 1919.

35. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 18 September 1918.

36. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 2 October 1918 and 7 August 1918; also "Delegates to Trade Congress Make Report to Central Body" and "Congress Delegate Reports to Island Council," *Federationist*, 4 October 1918; "Some Impressions of the Congress," *Federationist*, 11 October 1918; and Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, *Report of Proceedings*, 1918.

legates agreed to hold a Western Labor Conference the following spring, the *Federationist* insisted this did not represent "a secessional or separatist movement."<sup>37</sup> However events were leading in that direction.

Industrial union sentiments in Canada were invigorated by developments in Australia, where labour responded to a ban on the rww by forming a One Big Union movement.<sup>38</sup> Efforts by employers and the state to suppress militant industrial unionism in Australia, the United States, and Canada only spawned new organizational forms.<sup>39</sup> Joe Naylor, a Cumberland coal miner, socialist, and BCFL past-president who was acquitted on charges of aiding Ginger Goodwin, wrote in the *Federationist*: "It seems the spirit of unionism is growing everywhere on Vancouver Island." Dangerous working conditions in Island coal mines could be prevented, Naylor concluded, "if the men themselves would only join together into a progressive organization, with the principle imbued within themselves that an injury to one is an injury to all."<sup>40</sup>

In January 1919, Joe Taylor was narrowly defeated for the VTLC presidency, losing by one vote to Eugene Woodward, business agent of the Retail Clerks association and editor of labour's *Semi-Weekly Tribune*.<sup>41</sup> Woodward favoured international unionism and told the Mathers Commission he opposed "the so-called One Big Union, because it is not being advocated within the International."<sup>42</sup> The outcome of this election shaped Victoria's response to the OBU and labour unrest in Winnipeg.

37. "Delegates to Trade Congress Make Report to Central Body," *Federationist*, 4 October 1918.

38. The Workers Industrial Union of Australia was initiated by the New South Wales Trades and Labor Council, and endorsed at a Sydney convention in August 1918, winning the support of state labour federations and workers in 600 unions. Its constitutional preamble borrowed heavily from the rww: "There can be no peace as long as want and hunger are found among millions of working people, and the few who constitute the employing class have all the good things of life." See "Australia to Have One Big Union for All," *Federationist*, 27 September 1918; "Red Flag Banned in Australia," *Federationist*, 6 December 1918; "One-Big-Union Wins New Victory," *Red Flag* (Vancouver), 28 December 1918; "Shop Steward's Movement," *Red Flag*, 1 March 1919; Industrial Workers of the World, *The Founding Convention of the rww: Proceedings* (1905; New York 1969), 247.

39. PC 2384, Canada, *Canada Gazette* (Ottawa 1918), 1278; "The rww Trials in Australia," *Federationist*, 29 November 1918; "rww Members Given Long Terms," *Federationist*, 6 September 1918.

40. "The Organization and Its Value to Workers," *Federationist*, 18 October 1918; "Naylor Is Found Not Guilty At Nanaimo" *Federationist*, 11 October 1918.

41. Woodward received 15 votes to Taylor's 14. As an expression of good will, Taylor moved that the vote be made unanimous. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 15 January 1919.

42. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 174–180, Woodward testimony; also University of British Columbia Special Collections (hereafter UBCSC), Eugene S. Woodward papers; Andrew Neufeld, *Union Store: The History of the Retail Clerks Union in British Columbia, 1899–1999* (Vancouver 1999), 37–43. Woodward differed from radicals in his interpretation of the class struggle. "I think the only class war is between the workers – under which I include

## Labour Revolt

In February 1919, Seattle workers wielded the general strike tactic, with 30,000 workers in 130 unions walking out for 5 days in sympathy with 38,000 shipyard workers. The city's mayor, Ole Hanson, described the strike as an "attempted revolution," but the chairman of the Seattle Central Labor Council's strike committee, Ben Nauman, was more modest: "We did something in this strike which has never been done before by the A.F. of L. We pulled off a general strike with craft unions, with iron-clad contracts, which had to be broken, and with a constitution which had to be ignored."<sup>43</sup>

Victoria labour's response to the Seattle strike reflected local conditions, but also networks of association nurtured within the BCFL, founded in 1910, and international unions along the Pacific Coast, such as Taylor's ILA. The Victoria Boilermakers sent their business agent to Seattle to gather information, contributed \$100 to the shipyard workers' Strike Fund, and voted to "follow the instructions of the International Organizer in regards to work coming from Seattle or Puget Sound during the strike."<sup>44</sup> Victoria shipyard workers refused to repair the ship *Admiral Watson*, forcing its departure and leading the *Times* to ponder: "when Seattle begins to wield its influence over Victoria's industry we ask: What next?"<sup>45</sup>

Weeks later, 178 Victoria school teachers waged a strike of historic proportions, demanding higher wages and indexation to inflation – the first teachers' strike in the British Empire.<sup>46</sup> The *Semi-Weekly Tribune* anticipated "an early bridging of the gulf" with other trade unionists, and expressed hope that "Victoria teachers will shortly apply for affiliation" to the VTLC.<sup>47</sup> However

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the average employers – and the monopolist, that is the owner of the natural resources." However he claimed to support an overthrow of the capitalist system: "Although I am not myself a socialist, I am prepared to work with them for the overthrow of the present system so that human life may receive the maximum consideration and property rights very little."

43. "Ole Talks," *Semi-Weekly Tribune* (Victoria) (hereafter *Tribune*), 13 February 1919; "Would Make rww's in States Outlaws," *Times*, 21 February 1919; "Seattle Is Tied Up In General Strike," *Federationist*, 7 February 1919; "Seattle General Strike Called Off," *Federationist*, 14 February 1919; "Seattle Asks For General Strike," *Tribune*, 30 January 1919; "Attempt Fails," *Tribune*, 6 February 1919; "Breaking the Backbone," *Tribune*, 10 February 1919; Robert L. Friedheim, *The Seattle General Strike* (Seattle 1964).

44. UVASC, Boilermakers fonds, "Minute Books," 28 January 1919 and 25 February 1919.

45. "Will Seattle Be Loyal?" *Times*, 11 March 1919.

46. This claim is made in F. Henry Johnson, *A History of Public Education in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1964), 240–2, quoting from H. Charlesworth, *Teachers Institutes*, manuscript in possession of BC Teachers' Federation, 4; Rennie Warburton, "The Class Relations of Public Schoolteachers in British Columbia," in Warburton and David Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver 1988), 250.

47. "The School Teachers," *Tribune*, 13 February 1919; also "'Scab' Teachers," *Tribune*, 13 February 1919; "The Teachers' Strike," *Tribune*, 17 February 1919; also "Now Teachers Present Ultimatum," *Colonist*, 3 October 1918; also Alison Prentice, ed., *Women Who Taught:*

support for the teachers, who struck for two days before accepting a mediated settlement, was not uniform; a Tribune correspondent quipped that teachers and others in the "educated classes" had "made very little progress" addressing economic problems until their own self-interest was threatened.<sup>48</sup> Similar divisions were apparent when the VTLC debated a sympathy strike for Brotherhood of Railway Employees 'Dominion Express' workers, but referred the question to affiliated locals.<sup>49</sup> The role of women in the teachers' strike reflected changes in the composition and attitude of Victoria's organized working class. Only five years earlier, the VTLC had rejected a proposal to form a women's auxiliary.<sup>50</sup> However in June 1918 a Miss Proctor was seated as a VTLC delegate from the newly organized Garment Workers, and in January 1919 retail clerks' delegate Emily Sutton was elected to the VTLC executive.<sup>51</sup> As Sutton told the Mathers Commission, "until an employer can realize that the worker is a human being and not a piece of machinery" no genuine relationship could exist.<sup>52</sup>

Some Victoria unionists sought to accommodate demands for industrial unionism within the framework of the AFL, drafting a *Workers' Bill of Rights* that recommended amendments to AFL charters to permit "political activity and the consolidated grouping of the various crafts."<sup>53</sup> This document represented a "compromise between the extremes in the labor movement," which Victoria printer Phil R. Smith described succinctly:

It is not an organized town.... In our reconstruction committee we find that the small unions were the most conservative; the large unions the most aggressive and manly; they had obtained concessions through fighting, and they believed in fighting ... They are in the fighting spirit now.<sup>54</sup>

This fighting spirit – concentrated among Victoria's 5000 shipyard workers – was pushing events beyond the control of the AFL-internationals.

In February, Victoria machinists adopted a motion for "One Big Union abolishing Craft Unions." This prompted VTLC delegates to unanimously endorse industrial organization – at a meeting where Woodward and Sivertz were notably absent:

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*Perspectives on the History of Women and Teaching* (Toronto 1991); Seager and Roth, "British Columbia and the Mining West," 252.

48. 'Lights in the World,' *Tribune*, 20 February 1919.

49. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 5 February 1919.

50. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 1 April 1914.

51. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 19 June 1918 and 15 January 1919.

52. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 215, Emily Sutton testimony.

53. "Issue Their First Report," *Tribune*, 13 February 1919. This mirrored efforts by James Duncan of Seattle to reform the AFL along industrial lines. "Seattle's Plan vs. Canada's OBU," *Federationist*, 16 May 1919.

54. Mathers Commission, 28 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 226–228, Phil R. Smith testimony.

We are of the opinion that the strength of organized Labor is largely negated by the innumerable divisions and factions among workers by their representation in sectional Trades, and current events the world over are teaching us that 'One Big Union' is the ideal to be aimed at, the final aim being the 'Workers' as a class arrayed against the common enemy.<sup>55</sup>

Victoria delegates traveled to Calgary in March for the BCFL convention,<sup>56</sup> which Joe Taylor chaired, and the Western Labor Conference, where the OBU idea was given organizational cohesion. Jack Kavanagh, BCFL president-elect and a Vancouver longshoreman, summed up the rationale behind the new organization:

A greater solidarity should be in existence than was here before ... If we get action to such a scale that we can close down the entire industries of a particular point, they starve too, don't you forget that, and they feel their starvation quicker than we do because we are used to it and they are not. The question is that the old organization does not serve the purpose now, a new form is needed.<sup>57</sup>

Amidst "ringing cheers," Western Labor Conference delegates unanimously approved a referendum to sever "the present affiliation with the International Organizations." They adopted the name One Big Union, along with resolutions demanding the release of political prisoners, the six-hour work day, five-day week, withdrawal of Allied troops from Russia, and a general strike beginning 1 June to enforce these demands. Delegates approved "the principle of 'Proletariat Dictatorship,'" called for "the abolition of the present system of production for profit," and sent fraternal greetings to Russia's Soviet government and the German Spartacists. A central committee was elected, consisting of five SPC members, three from BC.<sup>58</sup>

What began as a bold but narrow endorsement of industrial over craft unionism broadened into a scathing indictment of Canada's political and economic system, and an embrace of the principles and economic model of Russian

55. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 19 February 1919; "Labor's Local Parliament," *Tribune*, 20 February 1919.

56. The BCFL had polled affiliates on the question of moving the convention to coincide with the Western Labor Conference. See UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 4 December 1918 and 8 January 1919.

57. "BC Federation of Labor Proceedings," *Federationist*, 4 April 1919.

58. "The Origin of the OBU," *One Big Union Bulletin* (Winnipeg) (hereafter *OBU Bulletin*), 24 March 1927; Winnipeg Defence Committee, *Saving the World from Democracy*, 26–30. Vancouver's W.A. Pritchard topped the polls with 210 votes, followed by Dick Johns of Winnipeg with 201, Joe Knight of Edmonton with 176, Victor Midgley of Vancouver with 161, and Cumberland's Joe Naylor with 118. The convention declared, "without a dissenting vote," its "open conviction that the system of Industrial Soviet Control by selecting of representatives from industries is more efficient and of greater political value than the present form of Government." For a discussion of ideology within the OBU, see Friesen, "Yours in Revolt," 139–40; Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt," 37; Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows*, 119; Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour: 1880–1930* (Kingston 1968), 178–98; Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 125–8; and McCormack, *Reformers, Radicals and Revolutionaries*, 143–9 and 156–64.

Bolshevism. Victoria's *Times* described the OBU's birth as "one of the most momentous things to have happened in the annals of the labor movement in Canada." But amid the visionary statements and vigorous applause, Victoria's Joe Taylor, elected BCFL vice-president, provided a sober voice of reason:

I have not got very much respect for the A.F. of L. and all it stands for, yet I would be foolish to forget for a moment that they have a powerful organization, and have powerful machinery, and that machinery would be liable to be used against us....<sup>59</sup>

## OBU

As Victoria delegates helped forge the OBU at Calgary, the *Times* declared that "any fertile soil selected by the Bolshevik in which to plant his anarchist seed would be effectively policed by his most determined enemy – the reasonable workingman."<sup>60</sup> This argument was amplified as Victoria's working class moved closer to the general strike. Its function was clear: divide and demobilize labour by appealing to, and legitimizing, 'safe and sane' elements while marginalizing and vilifying radicals. The *Colonist* quoted two unnamed delegates from Winnipeg who retreated from the unanimous vote on the OBU and spoke out against the proposed industrial organization. Canada's minister of labour, Gideon Robertson, warned of "new and radical policies, some of which seem unconstitutional and revolutionary," and declared his intention of "co-operating with the labor organizations which are promoting constructive policies."<sup>61</sup>

Conflict between the OBU and AFL reflected earlier tensions, but also a notable rift between VTLC leaders and a majority of delegates. When delegate Laundry reported on the Calgary proceedings, the VTLC voted 26–5 to approve the aims of the BCFL convention and Western Labor Conference. President Woodward, however, asked to be recorded as voting against the motion.<sup>62</sup> The Calgary conference had called for a boycott of the Mathers Commission, as a protest against class-collaborationist policies, a position the VTLC endorsed after a heated debate. Woodward, however, appeared at the Victoria hearings, saying the VTLC had "no faith in the government," while conceding VTLC delegates were motivated by a "clear vision that the economic system is bound to change."<sup>63</sup> TLC president Tom Moore, in Victoria as labour's representative on

59. "BC Federation of Labor Proceedings," *Federationist*, 4 April 1919; "'One Big Union' in Western Canada," *Times*, 14 March 1919.

60. "Labor's New Magna Charta," *Times*, 12 March 1919.

61. "Minister Bars 'One Big Union,'" *Colonist*, 5 April 1919; "Look Askance at One Big Union," *Colonist*, 16 March 1919.

62. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 19 March 1919.

63. Mathers Commission, 26 April 1919, Victoria, BC, 168–79, Woodward testimony. Woodward called for the nationalization of basic industries and the CPR. On 25 April, a special meeting had convened to decide the VTLC's policy on the Mathers Commission. See UVASC,



the Mathers Commission, urged a meeting of Shipwrights to reject the OBU.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout April, workers across Canada voted on whether to join the OBU and participate in the 1 June general strike to enforce the six-hour day. Taylor led a five-person committee to propagate the OBU idea locally, and forwarded \$70.48 per-capita dues to the central committee.<sup>65</sup> A mass meeting took place at the Pantages Theatre on 13 April, which Taylor described as “a marked success,” despite attempts by the theatre’s management to cancel the event.<sup>66</sup> Even the *Colonist* reported that “the sentiment in favour of the One Big Union was practically unanimous.”<sup>67</sup> The Victoria Labor Band entertained the crowd and 245 copies of the pamphlet ‘Bolsheviks and Soviets’ were sold at ten cents a piece.<sup>68</sup> Kavanagh, the keynote speaker, said that if the 40 crafts represented at the VTLC “cut loose of the International,” the workers would have better opportunities. “There shall be no bloodshed in this country if we can prevent it. We don’t want them to riot for food but to have the change brought about as peacefully as possible. The trouble is, the employing class are so blind they cannot see the outcome of their actions.”<sup>69</sup> While Kavanagh sought to prevent bloodshed, his organization was on a trajectory toward confrontation with the Canadian state.

Royal North-West Mounted Police (RNWMP) comptroller A.A. McLean wrote the deputy minister of militia, Ottawa, warning that “arms, ammunition, and explosives” in the Victoria Military District “are insufficiently guarded.”<sup>70</sup> Sir Thomas White, acting-Prime Minister of Canada, warned of a “projected revolution movement about June first” and described the situation in BC as “most serious.”<sup>71</sup> The RNWMP’s jurisdiction had been extended into BC in December 1918, with detachments opened at Esquimalt and Vancouver and

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VLC fonds, Minutes, 25 April 1919.

64. “Tom Moore and the One Big Union,” *Federationist*, 2 May 1919.

65. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 19 March 1919 and 2 April 1919. Taylor forwarded two cents for every affiliated member. The 2300-strong Shipyard Laborers paid per-capita directly to the OBU Central Committee, since it was not a VTLC affiliate. See PAM, OBU papers, MG10, A3, “Correspondence,” Taylor to Midgley, 18 April 1919. The Boilermakers passed a vote of confidence in the OBU’s provisional central committee at the end of March. See UVASC, Boilermakers fonds, “Minute Books,” 25 March 1919.

66. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 13 April 1919; also 9 April 1919. The VTLC convened a special meeting to pressure the Pantages into renting the hall.

67. “Speakers Tell of One Big Union Scheme,” *Colonist*, 15 April 1919.

68. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 13 April 1919.

69. “Mass Meeting in Victoria,” *Federationist*, 18 April 1919.

70. LAC, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) collection, RG18, A-2, vol. 878, “Labour Organizations and Communism,” McLean to Deputy Minister of Militia, 7 March 1919.

71. LAC, MG 26, Borden papers, H(1)a, vol. 103, Reel 4340, White to Borden, 28 April 1919.

the force doubled to 2500 officers, a move opposed by the VTLC.<sup>72</sup> Revealing apprehension in ruling circles, BC's lieutenant governor Sir Frank S. Barnard requested British warships in Victoria, "to quell, if necessary, any rising upon the part of the IWW.... In the event of labor strikes, with demonstrations leading to riots, a serious situation would arise if the soldiers were in sympathy with the strikers."<sup>73</sup> These fears reflected developments on the ground. The VTLC and Metal Trades Council had formed a standing committee with representatives of the Great War Veterans Association and Comrades of the Great War, a move unanimously approved at a mass meeting of soldiers and sailors.<sup>74</sup> This Soldier-Labor Council represented a powerful combination of forces – particularly in the wake of ex-soldier Francis Giolma's 1918 by-election victory – alarming BC's political and economic élite.<sup>75</sup>

OBU support was strong in Victoria, but union members were divided on tactics, particularly the proposed 1 June general strike. On 27 April the Boilermakers counted referendum ballots: 124 favoured the OBU, with 39 opposed and 4 abstentions.<sup>76</sup> On the general strike question, however, boilermakers voted 93–54, with 21 abstentions. Workers were more inclined to accept the OBU than the general strike tactic it embraced. A similar result occurred in the Blacksmiths' union, whose members overwhelmingly endorsed the OBU, 64–6, but split 35–33 on the strike question.<sup>77</sup> Results from Machinists Local 456 confirmed this incongruity: 105–56 for the OBU but 49–101 against the general strike. Lack of unity on the critical question of tactics proved decisive when the need for action arose. A total of 13 Victoria unions embraced the new organization – including the powerful Shipyard Laborers by the decisive margin of 2230 to 60 – but several important unions refused to leave the AFL

72. LAC, RCMP collection, RG18, vol. 1930, "Certified Copy of a Report of the Committee of the Privy Council," 12 December 1918; also "Monthly Report," F.J. Horrigan to The Commissioner, 13 March 1919; UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 8 January 1919.

73. LAC, MG 26, Borden papers, H(1)a, vol. 103, Reel 4340, Barnard to Borden, 4 December 1918. Borden refused this request, claiming that "as far back as 1885 we have attended to our own rebellions." See LAC, Borden papers, H(1)a, vol. 112, Borden to White, 29 April 1919; also White to Borden, 16 April 1919; Borden to White, 18 April 1919; White to Borden, 22 April 1919; White to Borden, 28 April 1919.

74. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 4 December 1918; "Returned Soldiers Agree to Co-operate With Labor Unions to Insure Future," *Colonist*, 9 December 1918.

75. Giolma handily defeated his nearest opponent, Liberal William Langley, with 3,642 votes to 1,359; Conservative Richard Perry received 1,001 votes, while Independent Socialist candidate John McDonald received a scant 71 votes. All three defeated candidates lost their deposits. Giolma was endorsed by the Great War Veterans Association, Army and Navy Veterans of Canada, Campaigners of the Great War, and British Campaigners Association. See British Columbia, *Statement of Votes* (1918); "Ex-Private Giolma Went Over the Top," *Times*, 29 June 1918; "Returned Men's Candidate Wins," *Colonist*, 29 June 1918.

76. UVASC, Boilermakers fonds, "Minute Books," 27 April 1919.

77. "The Blacksmiths and the OBU," *Federationist*, 9 May 1919.

(see Table 1). These included the Street & Electric Railway Employees, by a margin of 50–146, and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners, 153–250.<sup>78</sup> Several other unions, including Sivertz's Postal Clerks and Woodward's Retail Clerks, refused to put the question to a vote. This outcome foreshadowed Victoria's contested response to the Winnipeg General Strike.

In localities where OBU supporters dominated the labour scene, such as Vancouver, strong sympathetic strikes paralysed production in June 1919. In cities where AFL supporters retained strength and influence, like Victoria, action was of a limited scale and duration. According to Allen Seager and David Roth, "the OBU was theoretically capable of mobilizing a majority of British Columbia unionists."<sup>79</sup> Across Canada, 188 unions representing 41,365 workers participated in the OBU referendum; 24,239 ballots were cast in favour with 5,975 opposed.<sup>80</sup> Central committee secretary Victor Midgley called a founding convention for Calgary's Labor Temple on 4 June, but confided to a colleague that "we should first solidify the new organization before we can embark upon any strikes of any size such as would be necessary to enforce the Six-Hour Day."<sup>81</sup> Due to a typographical error, the proposed 1 June strike was pushed back to 1 July; concurrently, American workers considered a general strike beginning 4 July to force the release or retrial of alleged terrorists Tom Mooney and Warren Billings.<sup>82</sup> Midgley, Pritchard, and Kavanagh traveled to Washington State on behalf of the OBU executive, prompting a referendum vote by the state labour federation and the decision of the ILA's Pacific Coast District to join the OBU.<sup>83</sup> Seattle Central Labor Council president James

78. UBCSC, One Big Union Collection, "Appendix A," 1. The Shipyard Laborers approved the general strike with 1902 in favour and 222 opposed.

79. Seager and Roth, "A Ghost of a Chance," 251.

80. "Big Majority for the OBU," *Federationist*, 30 May 1919. The referendum results were influenced by the decision at Calgary to adopt the "BC Method" of ballot counting, which required locals to record abstentions as 'yes' votes. See Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel*, 48.

81. "Sec'y V.R. Midgley Issues Call for Conference," *Federationist*, 23 May 1919; PAM, OBU papers, "Correspondence," Midgley to Berg, 2 May 1919; also Midgley to J.R. Knight, 31 March 1919.

82. PAM, OBU papers, "Correspondence," Midgley to Berg, 2 May 1919; Nolan to Midgley, 23 April 1919. Referendum results are cited in "Mooney Defence League Planning Strike in States," *Times*, 7 June 1919.

83. PAM, OBU papers, "Correspondence," Midgley to Russell, 21 April 1919; "One Big Union at Seattle," *Federationist*, 25 April 1919; "Longshoremen in Convention," *Federationist*, 9 May 1919; "Convention Favors One Big Union Idea," *Colonist*, 22 June 1919. Pritchard offered a warning in a Victoria speech: "If we move, even though it be in accord with working class principles, unless we move in relation to a thoroughly proletarian movement below the line, such movement will be premature and doomed to failure. If the working class movement below the line is not solidified, we could easily be swamped in Canada by the dispatch of militia from any single state." See "Mr. Pritchard's Advice," *Tribune*, 10 April 1919.

**TABLE 1: OBU REFERENDUM RESULTS, VICTORIA**

	OBU		June 1st Strike		Members in Good Standing
	For	Against	For	Against	
Machinists #456	105	56	49	101	275
Plumbers & Steamfitters	35	34	22	39	75
Barbers #372	8	18	8	18	33
Blacksmiths #312	64	6	35	33	113
Molders #144	4	13	2	13	27
Shipyard Labourers #38A	2230	60	1902	222	2290
Carpenters & Joiners	153	250	114	285	749
Railway Carmen #50	16	–	8	6	19
Fasteners & Beatlers	57	18	45	28	255
Painters	58	12	50	8	102
Bookbinders	26	9	26	9	40
Steam & Operating Engineers	108	23	71	54	245
Street & Electric Railway Employees	50	146	55	138	230
Carpenters # 2651	208	84	180	106	381
Patternmakers	13	3	3	13	16
Sailors' Union	46	2	37	2	60
Longshoremen's Union	35	27	21	41	68

Source: UBC Special Collections, One Big Union Collection, "Appendix A"

Duncan responded with a plan for a re-organized and amalgamated AFL.<sup>84</sup> As the OBU marshaled its forces on both sides of the international boundary, events in Winnipeg catapulted the BC-led breakaway movement into the international spotlight, forever altering its fortunes.

84. PAM, OBU papers, "Correspondence," Pritchard to Midgley, 18 April 1919; "Seattle's Plan vs. Canada's OBU," *Federationist*, 16 May 1919.

## Winnipeg

In May 1919 a dispute over the collective bargaining rights of Winnipeg building-trades and metal-trades workers spiraled into a general strike of 26,000 workers.<sup>85</sup> "We pulled a strike on Thursday morning, which tied up the entire City," strike committee member Bob Russell informed Midgley. "Everything has come to a complete stand-still."<sup>86</sup> The OBU central committee was bombarded with demands for coordinated action.<sup>87</sup> In Victoria, the *Times* was quick to assign blame:

It looks as if Winnipeg's troubles were about to begin today with a general strike, and it might not be very surprising to find that Bolshevik pedagogues were at the back of the whole business ... It appears to be another case where the majority, loyal at heart to the sound principles of Trade Unionism, have been stampeded into action by a very small number of silver-tongued irresponsibles.<sup>88</sup>

Victoria's organized workers wavered between sympathy with Winnipeg strikers and skepticism over the general strike tactic. Debate raged within and among the city's unions, revealing the rift between OBU supporters and the 'safe and sane' leadership exemplified by Woodward and Sivertz. On 21 May, at a meeting attended by OBU central committee member Joe Knight, the VTLC received a telegram from Calgary announcing a mass meeting "to arrange for a strike vote of all locals on Winnipeg situation, requesting this council to take action." The OBU's opponents attempted to file this request without action, but supporters successfully moved an amendment "endorsing the Winnipeg strike," directing the secretary to "communicate with Vancouver asking what action, if any, that body is taking," and authorizing the executive to call a special meeting if necessary.<sup>89</sup> Victoria's expression of contested solidarity had begun. Rhetorical sympathy concealed deep divisions.

A personnel change at the 21 May meeting undermined Victoria's response to the Winnipeg General Strike. Joe Taylor, an avowed industrial unionist

85. "26,000 Winnipeg Workers Ceased Work on Thursday," *Federationist*, 16 May 1919; Winnipeg Defence Committee, *Saving the World from Democracy*, 32-47; Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*; Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike*.

86. PAM, OBU papers, "Correspondence," Russell to Midgley, 19 May 1919.

87. C. Peacock, on behalf of Lethbridge miners, advised "OBU EXECUTIVE TO CALL GENERAL STRIKE IN WEST" if martial law was declared in Winnipeg, a request echoed by P.M. Christophers from Calgary. OBU organizer Dick Johns wired Midgley from Montréal: "THINK WESTERN MOVEMENT OUGHT TO LINE UP WITH WINNIPEG BOYS IF THAT FIGHT IS WON THE PROPAGANDA FOR THE OBU HERE WILL BE EASY." PAM, OBU papers, "Correspondence," Peacock to Midgley, 19 May 1919; Christophers to Midgley, 19 May 1919; Johns to Midgley, 19 May 1919.

88. "Winnipeg in Trouble," *Times*, 15 May 1919.

89. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 21 May 1919. The meeting also selected delegate Stevenson to represent the VTLC at the OBU's founding convention in Calgary. A second telegram was received announcing a strike of Toronto metal-trades workers for the eight-hour day, requesting Dominion-wide action.

and OBU proponent, resigned as VTLC vice-president, to serve as president of the ILA's Pacific Coast District with headquarters in Seattle.<sup>90</sup> Taylor's move relinquished the VTLC executive to the OBU's opponents, who tended toward collaboration rather than confrontation with employers and the state. In the week following Taylor's departure, however, agitation for a strike intensified; a Central Strike Committee was formed, with delegates elected from 30 unions, as locals began polling workers on a sympathy strike.<sup>91</sup> Conflicting views are evident from correspondence in the local press. One writer, 'Godfrey,' argued that in his 20 years as a union member in BC, "in no case has a sympathetic strike been justified and not one of them successful." Unionists should donate money to Winnipeg if they desired, Godfrey argued, but insisted that "to call out all the union men in Western Canada is detrimental to unionism," urging workers to vote against striking in sympathy "with unions in a city fifteen hundred miles distant, and for a cause which is purely local."<sup>92</sup> Another writer, identifying herself as 'A wife and mother,' urged women to "use their influence on their husbands and sons to vote against a strike."<sup>93</sup> However a 'Fellow-worker' appealed for solidarity: "In a time like this, when labor is having to contest very hard against the high cost of living and many other things, it is the duty of every worker to stand shoulder to shoulder, even though we may not see eye to eye."<sup>94</sup>

Divisions were apparent as Victoria workers debated their response to the Winnipeg strike. Two hundred members of the Civic Employees' Protective Association expressed their "entire sympathy with the just aims of organized labor in the city of Winnipeg," but cautioned against "too precipitate action," maintaining they were "prepared to take whatever action may be necessary to protect the interests of labor."<sup>95</sup> The Victoria Typographical Union lent "moral support" to Winnipeg labour but went no further.<sup>96</sup> The skilled trades in the Boilermakers, Moulders, and Iron Shipbuilders voted 65–47 to take sympathetic strike action "to help out the Winnipeg strikers if the necessity arose."<sup>97</sup> The resolution was still cautious, strongly worded but vague enough to avoid strike action. By 30 May, however, the *Times* ran the headline "Anticipates General Sympathetic Strike to Begin Here Next Week." Woodward predicted

90. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 21 May 1919.

91. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 5 June 1919; "General Strike Still Pending," *Times*, 5 June 1919.

92. "The Sympathetic Strike," *Times*, 28 May 1919.

93. "Vote 'No,'" *Times*, 3 June 1919.

94. "Favors the General Strike," *Times*, 30 May 1919.

95. "Civic Employees Support Winnipeg Strikers," *Tribune*, 2 June 1919.

96. "Endorses Winnipeg Strike," *Tribune*, 26 May 1919.

97. UVASC, Boilermakers fonds, "Minute Books," 30 May 1919. Three boilermakers voted against holding a strike vote and there were two abstentions.



a general strike was likely, and said results of the strike vote would be known by 1 June. "No one regrets more than I do that there should be a general strike in this city," Woodward said, comparing such action to Britain's declaration of war on Germany in 1914: "She had to do it." Acknowledging that some workers were uneasy about striking against companies that had treated them fairly, Woodward said "they feel that it is the general principle, the very existence of unionism that is involved.... The whole future of unionism in Canada is involved in the Winnipeg strike." The Metal Trades Council endorsed the VTLC's decision to call a strike vote, as the Teamsters and Chauffeurs prepared to vote and two emissaries from Winnipeg arrived in Victoria.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, workers in Brandon, Amherst, Calgary, Edmonton, Toronto, Port Arthur, and Medicine Hat voted to strike.<sup>99</sup> James Dakers, president of the Metal Trades Council, declared that "the men will support the Winnipeg strikers. They feel the whole principle of unionism is involved and that the right of collective bargaining is at stake."<sup>100</sup>

Vested interests were alarmed by the growing mood of solidarity. "What is at stake in the Winnipeg situation is the future of the 'One Big Union' and its rww aspirations," the *Times* alleged. "There is a great future for organized labor.... But that future is not on the path of the sympathetic strike and class war."<sup>101</sup> BC premier John Oliver told a Board of Trade banquet in New Westminster that "Bolsheviks are behind all this turmoil."<sup>102</sup> Another editorial raised the spectre of revolution:

General strikes are never successful. Labor loses in them much more than it gains ... This is what is happening in Winnipeg and what will happen in Toronto and elsewhere ... It is in its essential elements an insipient revolution which, if it succeeded, would subvert the established institutions of Government.<sup>103</sup>

The *Times* offered a thinly veiled appeal for vigilantism: "The Government should realize that the Canadian people have no intention of permitting any soviet picnic in this Dominion, and that if it does not deal with the apostles of the Lenine and Trotsky cult they will create various organizations that will."<sup>104</sup>

98. "Anticipates General Sympathetic Strike to Begin Here Next Week," *Times*, 30 May 1919; "Loyalty League is Created to Suppress Lawless Acts Here," *Times*, 31 May 1919.

99. "General Strikes Are Started in the Cities of Edmonton and Calgary to Aid Winnipeg Strike," 26 May 1919; Kealey, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt"; Heron, ed., *Workers Revolt in Canada*.

100. "Strike Vote Returns Will Not Be Issued Until After Meeting," *Times*, 2 June 1919.

101. "Why?" *Times*, 31 May 1919.

102. "Premier Oliver Says Hope of Agitators is to Make a Dictatorship in Canada," *Times*, 10 June 1919.

103. "Where Labor Loses," *Times*, 30 May 1919.

104. "Out With Them," *Times*, 26 May 1919. The spelling 'Lenine' was common in the press at the time.

At the end of May, a Loyalty League was formed, with the ill-defined mandate to "uphold all constituted authority, to maintain law and order, and to suppress lawlessness in Victoria." Its secretary, H.J. Young, denied that the League was "about strike breaking" and invited labour to name a representative to the executive. Young said the League would remain a permanent organization in Victoria, even after the present crisis passed.<sup>105</sup> President Dakers of the Metal Trades Council, however, ruled out any cooperation: "They have protested on many occasions that they are not out to break strikes, yet at their first business meeting yesterday they offered a guarantee that they will perform the work of strike breakers and unload meat in the event of a strike ... Some of the members I believe, are sincere, but others, I believe, have nothing in mind but absolutely to down the unions."<sup>106</sup> In anticipation of a strike, Victorians stocked up on food and other provisions.<sup>107</sup>

By 2 June, nearly 30 of the city's 41 unions had taken strike votes, with mixed results.<sup>108</sup> Predictably, the strongest support was in the shipyards, where the Shipyard Laborers voted four-to-one in favour of striking, as did Machinists, Painters, and Riggers. In contrast, Telephone Operators, Police Officers, Firefighters, Retail Clerks, Postal Workers, and Street-Railway Workers refused to vote.<sup>109</sup> Woodward remained vague: "I maintain that Victoria labor is behind the Winnipeg strikers. The forecast I made before still holds. In my opinion there will be a strike here unless the Winnipeg trouble is settled in the meantime." That night, Woodward's colleagues in the Retail Clerks union passed a vote of full confidence in his leadership – while hedging on the strike

105. "Loyalty League is Created to Suppress Lawless Acts Here," *Times*, 31 May 1919; "Strike Vote Returns Will Not Be Issued Until After Meeting," *Times*, 2 June 1919; "Loyalty League Explains Objects," *Times*, 6 June 1919; "Loyalty League Anxious to Meet Labor Delegates," *Times*, 7 June 1919; "Loyalty League to Be Permanent Body," *Times*, 9 June 1919; also UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 4 June 1919. The League was headed by a provisional committee of prominent local citizens, including mill-owner J.O. Cameron. Citizens were invited to take the following pledge: "We hereby join the Loyalty League of Victoria and we solemnly pledge ourselves to do all in our power to uphold all constituted authority, to maintain law and order, and to suppress lawlessness in Victoria and the surrounding districts." Veteran groups including the Army and Navy Veterans and Comrades of the Great War affiliated to the League. See "Comrades Are Solid for Loyalty League," *Times*, 7 June 1919.

106. "Cannot Agree With the Loyalty League," *Times*, 10 June 1919; also "No Hope In Sight for Co-operation," *Times*, 24 June 1919.

107. "Loyalty League is Created to Suppress Lawless Acts Here," *Times*, 31 May 1919; "Spectre of Strike Results in 'Rush' on Grocery Stores," *Times*, 12 June 1919.

108. "Strike Vote Returns Will Not Be Issued Until After Meeting," *Times*, 2 June 1919. In August, Sivertz provided a list of 31 unions affiliated to the VTLC. See UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 6 August 1919.

109. "Firemen and Police to Remain on Duty," *Times*, 3 June 1919; "Strike Vote Returns Will Not be Issued Until After Meeting," *Times*, 2 June 1919.

question.<sup>110</sup> As Victoria's strike vote proceeded, the outcome appeared to hinge on developments in Vancouver: "We intend to cooperate with Vancouver in every way," Woodward said. "Victoria labor, through its balloting, has declared itself solid behind the Winnipeg strikers and willing to walk out if the Strike Committee so decides."<sup>111</sup>

When the VTLC learned that Vancouver workers had voted 3305 to 2499 to strike – prompting a month-long walkout – delegates referred the question to the Strike Committee. Woodward led a delegation to Vancouver to assess the situation, and explained at a special meeting on 9 June that, considering the returns from Victoria unions, "the committee did not feel justified in calling a strike." After a protracted debate, the council voted 36–3 to hold a mass meeting where another strike vote would be conducted and \$5000 raised for Winnipeg.<sup>112</sup>

The mass meeting bolstered calls for a general strike – as did a strike of Seamen and Firemen on the passenger and freight boats between Victoria, Vancouver, Seattle, and Prince Rupert, who walked out 3 June demanding higher wages and the eight-hour day.<sup>113</sup> On 11 June, 2000 Victoria workers filled the Royal Athletic Park. By a standing vote they passed resolutions "favouring a general strike here in sympathy with Winnipeg," supporting the right of collective bargaining, and condemning the Dominion government for "provoking widespread industrial war in Canada." When opposition was called for, "no one ventured on his feet." This enthusiasm prompted the Strike Committee to initiate a second round of balloting. Woodward told the crowd:

I am not an advocate of the One Big Union, but I am prepared to stand by it in the contention that such an organization or a dozen of them can be organized with or without the approbation of the Government. The financial interests of the country are bound together in one big union, and this union, composed of a few men, dictates the financial policy of the country. Not only that, they say how you and I must live, whether there shall be low wages or high, slums or decent living quarters. Everything is in their hands....

110. "Retail Clerks' Union Do Not Favor Too Precipitate Action," *Times*, 3 June 1919.

111. "Possible Strike Here Depends Largely Upon Action Take by Organized Labor in Vancouver," *Times*, 3 June 1919.

112. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 4 June and 9 June 1919; "Local Labor Committee Visits Vancouver," *Times*, 4 June 1919; "Labor Awaiting Leader's Return," *Times*, 6 June 1919; "Strike Committee 'Sounding' Labor," *Times*, 10 June 1919; "Endeavor to Focus Opinion of Labor," *Times*, 11 June 1919. For the Vancouver strike, see Elaine Bernard, "Last Back: Folklore and the Telephone Operators in the 1919 Vancouver General Strike," 279–86; Irene Howard, *The Struggle for Social Justice in British Columbia: Helena Gutteridge, the Unknown Reformer* (Vancouver 1992), 127–9, 284. Several key Vancouver labour leaders, including Garment Workers' official Helena Gutteridge, opposed the general strike and the OBU.

113. "Seamen's Strike Will Tie-Up Coast Shipping," *Times*, 2 June 1919; "Seamens' Strike is Anticipated," *Times*, 3 June 1919; "Coastwise Seamen Leave Their Ships," *Times*, 3 June 1919; "CPR Will Use Women in Stewards Department to Replace the Strikers," *Times*, 4 June 1919; "Seamen's Strike Nearing An End," *Times*, 25 June 1919; "The Seamen," *Tribune*, 26 June 1919; UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 4 June 1919.

I never before approved of a strike. I regard strikes as the last desperate, hateful expedient. But sometimes conditions become so grave that such action is absolutely necessary. That moment has arrived when it is the duty of workers to join together and tell the government that the issue is vital and to propose to fight to the bitter death.... It doesn't condemn a man to call him a Bolshevik. It is much more important to determine who is responsible for Bolshevism.<sup>114</sup>

The mass meeting reflected strong support for a sympathy strike, but the leadership soon reverted to a 'wait-and-see' approach, as locals repeated the strike vote.<sup>115</sup>

On 15 June, militants received a boost when the 1400-member Carpenters' Union, which had initially voted against a strike, endorsed sympathetic action, as did the Plumbers.<sup>116</sup> Perhaps sensing a shift, the Loyalty League joined forces with Vancouver's Citizens' League and began issuing a four-page publication called *The Victoria Citizen*. The League commissioned the airplane *Pathfinder* to drop hundreds of copies of the *Citizen* onto Victoria from the air.<sup>117</sup> "There has been too much compromise with sedition," the press declared. "Unless the Government does its duty and deports or jails the preachers of red ruin, the public ... will be compelled to take measures for its own protection."<sup>118</sup> On the night of 16/17 June, the Dominion Government acted, authorizing the arrest of ten Winnipeg strike leaders and RNWMP raids of the Labor Hall, Ukrainian Labor Temple, and Winnipeg SPC offices. "Red Societies Are Identical," the *Colonist* proclaimed, linking the OBU to the much-maligned rww.<sup>119</sup> The Winnipeg arrests inflamed Victoria workers, producing two remarkably different outcomes.

On 17 June, the Victoria Strike Committee split eight-eight on the question of a local sympathy strike, influenced by the refusal of BC Electric workers to "pull" Victoria's power and by divisions among other unions.<sup>120</sup> Committee

114. "Mass Meeting Favors Tie-Up," *Colonist*, 12 June 1919.

115. The VTLC's actions are obscured by a peculiar gap in the archival record. The council's otherwise meticulous "Minute Books" contain no records between 9 June and 16 July 1919.

116. "Labor Continues to Watch and Wait," *Times*, 16 June 1919; "Strike Seems Unlikely Now," *Colonist*, 17 June 1919.

117. "Labor Continues to Watch and Wait," *Times*, 16 June 1919; "The Loyalty League," *Times*, 18 June 1919.

118. "Red Ruin Apostles," *Times*, 14 June 1919. An earlier *Colonist* editorial declared: "The propagation of class hatred means the perpetuation of war and the permanence of misery. It is the outgrowth of distorted minds." See "Class Hatred," *Colonist*, 12 June 1919.

119. "Red Societies Are Identical," *Colonist*, 17 June 1919. In Ottawa, the Dominion Government introduced amendments to the Militia Act to double Canada's permanent army from 5,000 to 10,000 troops. "Permanent Force to be Increased," *Colonist*, 17 June 1919.

120. "There Will Not Be General Strike Here," *Colonist*, 18 June 1919; "Individual Unions May Strike, Local Labor Leaders Say," *Times*, 18 June 1919; "Strike Decision Promised To-Night," *Times*, 17 June 1919; "Strike Seems Unlikely Now," *Colonist*, 17 June 1919; "The Strike Vote,"

chairman James Dakers refrained from voting – so he wouldn't have “upon his head the responsibility of the committee's action.” Having reached an impasse, the committee dissolved. “The threat of a general walkout was gone,” the *Colonist* proclaimed, while the *Times* congratulated labour on its refusal to strike, identifying the move as a triumph “of the best elements in the labor movement, of the leaders of the great international organizations who have unsparingly denounced the sympathetic strikes over the Winnipeg dispute.”<sup>121</sup> This anticlimax was countered, however, by radicalization among sections of workers. State repression provided the catalyst that mobilized Victoria labour toward a general strike – solidarity by necessity. The Strike Committee's dissolution ended participation by more conservative unions, ensuring Victoria's strike lacked the strength and unity of other locales. However the Winnipeg arrests motivated, rather than prevented, sympathetic action by militant unions that had embraced the OBU and grown restless with the Strike Committee. Longshoremen, in particular, had favoured a sympathy strike from the outset but were restrained from acting until the committee dissolved.<sup>122</sup> When word reached Victoria that the arrested Winnipeg leaders faced immediate deportation with no civil trial, Woodward wired TLC president Tom Moore to protest “star chamber” methods and called another mass meeting for 22 June at Royal Athletic Park.<sup>123</sup> But other unions had more militant protest tactics in mind.

## The Victoria Strike

On 19 June, Victoria longshoremen refused to unload 500 tons of cargo from the ship *Africa Maru*, because it was bound for strike-riddled Vancouver.<sup>124</sup> They also refused to handle mail from the mainland. Meeting that night, the

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*Tribune*, 19 June 1919. The Strike Committee consisted of 30 delegates, but multiple votes from locals were disallowed, in particular 5 votes from Carpenters' locals. The vote was paired down to 16 delegates and the chairman, which allowed for the split vote. Prior to the meeting, Teamsters had reaffirmed their vote against striking, while Streetcar Workers and Retail Clerks, like Electrical workers, refused to put the question to a vote.

121. “No Strike Here,” *Colonist*, 18 June 1919; “A Sensible Decision,” *Times*, 18 June 1919.

122. “Electricians Object to Strike,” *Colonist*, 22 June 1919.

123. Woodward cancelled the meeting when the Dominion government agreed to a civil trial for the British-born. The Metal Trades Council then called its own meeting, at the same time and venue. “Mass Meeting to Protest ‘Star Chamber Trial’” and “Deportation of Men Seized at Winnipeg is Government's Plan,” *Times*, 19 June 1919; “Now Satisfied With New Stand of Government,” *Times*, 20 June 1919; “Electricians Objects to Strike,” *Colonist*, 22 June 1919; “Money Powers Conspire,” *Tribune*, 19 June 1919.

124. “Longshoremen Shy at Overland Cargo,” *Colonist*, 20 June 1919. As the Longshoremen struck, the last troops from the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force landed at Victoria's Outer Wharves aboard the ship *Monteagle*. Major-General J.H. Elmsley, commander of the Canadians in Siberia, was aboard the ship. See “Canadian Troops Back From Siberia,” *Times*, 19 June 1919.

longshoremen decided to strike in sympathy with coastal seamen and Vancouver longshoremen, to protest the arrest of the Winnipeg leaders, and defend the principle of collective bargaining.<sup>125</sup> On Friday, 20 June, boilermakers held a special meeting where they voted 61–36 to strike in support of Winnipeg, beginning “at noon Saturday at the latest if the different shop committees do not call it before.”<sup>126</sup> Responding to the boilermakers’ action, the Metal Trades Council, representing three-quarters of Victoria’s unionized workforce, mainly in the shipyards, voted to strike at 10 a.m. on Monday, 23 June.<sup>127</sup> “Indignant over the recent arrest of the Winnipeg leaders,” rank-and-file shipyard workers had directed their shop stewards to call a strike. According to council president James Dakers:

The men were beyond control. The boilermakers and caulkers voted tonight at their meetings to strike on their own if the Metal Trades did not take action. We are out until the Winnipeg strike committee says everything is satisfactory there. Yes, the recent action of the Government was the final touch that set things off.<sup>128</sup>

It was midnight when delegates voted to strike. The Metal Trades Council said “that even should no outside unions join in the walkout, the strike will be almost general in character.”<sup>129</sup>

On 21 June 1919 – a day immortalized as ‘Bloody Saturday’ – 300 Victoria boilermakers downed tools at 12 noon in sympathy with Winnipeg strikers, who were being trampled by cavalry charge and besieged with revolver fire as the RNWMP and four regiments of the Canadian militia occupied the city of Winnipeg.<sup>130</sup> Victoria’s strike began at the moment the Winnipeg strike was

125. “Longshoremen Have Declared Walk-Out,” *Times*, 20 June 1919; “Metal Trades Council Calls Strike Monday,” *Colonist*, 21 June 1919. Conflicting reports appeared on the cause of the dispute, with the *Colonist* reporting that the Longshoremen’s secretary denied the strike was in support of the Seamen.

126. UVASC, Boilermakers, “Minute Books,” 20 June 1919.

127. “Big Walk-Out Started in City To-Day When Boilermakers Struck,” *Times*, 21 June 1919. The sentiment to strike “was very greatly intensified by the developments at Winnipeg,” the *Times* reported, and metal-trades workers were incensed over the dissolution of the Victoria Strike Committee.

128. “Metal Trades Council Calls Strike Monday,” *Colonist*, 21 June 1919.

129. “Big Walk-Out Started in City To-Day When Boilermakers Struck,” *Times*, 21 June 1919. It was later reported that Metal Trades Council delegates had voted 20–10 in favour of a strike, but the result was subsequently made unanimous. Prior to the vote, the council heard a presentation from Vancouver delegates Crawford and Wells; A.S. Wells had previously been an active member of the VTLC and served as a BCFL officer throughout the war. See “A Strike Discussion,” *Colonist*, 28 June 1919.

130. “Big Walk-Out Started in City To-Day When Boilermakers Struck,” *Times*, 21 June 1919; Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike*, 107–8; Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg*, 87, 171–4. A *Times* editorial was damaged prior to its transfer to microfilm. Legible portions include the statement: “Confident of their control of the machinery of organized labor in Manitoba’s capital they threw off their mask and exposed themselves as the ‘One Big Union’ movement



broken. The next day, several thousand Victoria workers ignored heavy rain to attend a mass meeting at Royal Athletic Park; they were admitted by union card only. Speakers from the metal trades and other unions discussed the local strike and developments in Winnipeg. A resolution condemning the Metal Trades Council mustered a meagre five votes, while another resolution demanding the resignation of the Dominion government passed unanimously.<sup>131</sup> Joe Taylor, head of Pacific Coast longshoremen, was back in Victoria, and was reportedly "highly in favour of the attitude of the local longshoremen" who were picketing the waterfront "to see that nothing is put over on the strikers."<sup>132</sup> Taylor's return to Victoria helped counteract the influence of local AFL leaders. A layer of Victoria workers was rejecting a narrow craft unionism and embracing job action to avenge the arrests at Winnipeg.

Promptly at 10 a.m. on Monday, 23 June, 5000 workers affiliated with Victoria's Metal Trades Council downed tools: "industrial activity was temporarily brought to a halt."<sup>133</sup> The Foundation Company shipyards, employing 3200 men, ceased work on the contract for 20 wooden steamships to be delivered to the French government by December. "I have too much confidence in the sensible workers to believe that a strike will be possible," company manager Alexander E. Jenkins said three weeks earlier.<sup>134</sup> His employees proved him wrong. A vigorous picket of Seamen convinced workers on the Canadian government lighthouse ship *Estevan* to walk off the job, while the *Canadian Volunteer* lay idle in the Inner Harbour, awaiting a million board feet of lumber that longshoremen refused to touch. The strike extended to every shipyard and machine shop in Victoria, including the non-union Harbor Marine Company, which employed veterans on a government contract for two steel ships. Maintenance workers with the Esquimalt & Nanaimo Railway and Canadian Pacific Steamship service joined the strike. The Loyalty League was surprisingly quiet, with the press reporting that it would meet that night.<sup>135</sup>

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for what they were – Red revolutionaries masquerading as champions of organized labor." See "Would Set Up a Soviet," *Times*, 21 June 1919.

131. "Borden Must Go," *Tribune*, 23 June 1919; "Strike Meeting Is Held Behind Closed Gates," *Times*, 23 June 1919.

132. "Electricians Object to Strike," *Colonist*, 22 June 1919.

133. "Workers Threw Down Tools When Strike Order Went Forth," *Times*, 23 June 1919; "Borden Must Go," *Tribune*, 23 June 1919.

134. "General Strike Still Pending," *Times*, 5 June 1919; also "Sympathetic Strike Now May Mean Extinction of Shipbuilding Industry," *Times*, 31 May 1919.

135. "Workers Threw Down Tools When Strike Order Went Forth," *Times*, 23 June 1919; "Thousands Quit At Strike Hour," *Colonist*, 24 June 1919; "Estevan Men Quit," *Colonist*, 26 June 1919; "Expect to Load in Spite of Strike," *Colonist*, 27 June 1919; "Railroad Rally," *Tribune*, 26 June 1919. The *Times* reported that 50 of 180 Harbor Marine workers downed tools, while the *Colonist* reported that only 8 men quit work. A day later, the *Colonist* reported that 16 men remained at work at Yarrows, while the Victoria Machinery Depot "still has a few" and Ramsay's

While Victoria's sympathetic strike was largely confined to unions affiliated with the Metal Trades Council, these 5000 workers represented over 70 per cent of the 7000 workers in Victoria's 41 unions.<sup>136</sup> The absence of street-car workers, electrical workers, postal workers, and civic employees, with control over crucial public utilities, limited the impact of the dispute, but the term 'general strike' is still valid. At the height of the strike longshoremen, machinists, boilermakers, caulkers, and an array of trades employed at the shipyards struck in solidarity with Winnipeg workers, and teamsters refused to handle goods going into or out of the shops.<sup>137</sup> These workers established a central Strike Committee, as well as committees charged with Law and Order, Exemptions, Transportation, Picketing, and the Press.<sup>138</sup> Some rank-and-file workers took advantage of the unexpected holiday and went fishing, while Foundation Company strikers organized major sporting events including a field day at Royal Athletic Park and aquatic sports on the Gorge Waterway.<sup>139</sup> Arthur Turner, a future CCF MLA, served on the Strike Committee, as vice-president of the Shipbuilders Unit of the OBU.<sup>140</sup>

Two days after the Victoria strike began, the Winnipeg General Strike was called off. In a cruel irony, Samuel Gompers was re-elected AFL president by delegates at Atlantic City, with Seattle's James Duncan casting the lone opposing vote.<sup>141</sup> The defeat at Winnipeg and endorsement of Gompers' narrow craft unionism dealt a double-blow to supporters of industrial unionism. On 26 June, Victoria workers assembled for a third mass meeting at Royal Athletic Park. Longshoremen's secretary Frank Varney, citing the arrest of OBU chairman Bill Pritchard at Calgary, said "it is up to us to stand by our leaders and remain out till the Government releases them." However a speaker named Coulter "saw no reason why Victoria should remain out any longer" since Winnipeg had returned to work. Strikers voted overwhelmingly to return to work the next morning at 8 a.m., with fewer than 100 voting to remain out.<sup>142</sup> After

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Machine Shop was "going full blast." "Strikers Will Resume Shortly," *Colonist*, 25 June 1919.

136. Victoria's union membership is pegged at "approximately 7000" in "Firemen and Police to Remain on Duty," *Times*, 3 June 1919.

137. LAC, Department of Labour Collection, RG 7, vol. 315, Strikes and Lockouts file, John Chrow to F.A. Ackland, 1 August 1919; "Labor Pressing Unions to Strike," *Times*, 24 June 1919.

138. "Workers Threw Down Tools When Strike Order Went Forth," *Times*, 23 June 1919.

139. "Foundation Strikers Arrange Big Sports" and "Thousands Quit At Strike Hour," *Colonist*, 24 June 1919; "Sports Occupy Workmen During Strike Period," *Times*, 24 June 1919.

140. Turner, *Somewhere – A Perfect Place*, 23.

141. "Workers Return to Duties," *Colonist*, 25 June 1919; "Winnipeg General Strike Declared Off," *Times*, 25 June 1919; "Mr. Gompers Is Again President," *Times*, 22 June 1919.

142. LAC, Department of Labour collection, RG 7, vol. 315, Strikes and Lockouts file, Strike 224, June 1919; "Sympathetic – Victoria," RNWMP Report, "Conditions in Victoria Re: Mass Meeting held Athletic Park 26–6–19"; "Strike Ends This Morning at Eight," *Colonist*, 27 June

paralysing the core productive industries of BC's capital city for four days, the Victoria general strike was over. With the exception of two workers, all the strikers were accepted back at work.<sup>143</sup>

## Aftermath

The suppression of the 1919 sympathetic strikes marked the opening volley in the Triple Alliance's war against the OBU, as employers, state, and AFL officials joined forces against the new industrial union.<sup>144</sup> The OBU was stillborn. On 30 June, six plainclothes RNWMP officers raided the Victoria homes of BCFL vice-president Joe Taylor and VTLC president Eugene Woodward, and targeted the local headquarters of the SPC, striking longshoremen's union, and labour's *Semi-Weekly Tribune*, seizing a quantity of paper work. No arrests were made, but Woodward accused police of abusing their powers and considered initiating legal action, declaring that he was "not a Socialist and not a member of the party."<sup>145</sup> The Victoria raids were part of a national dragnet that enveloped labour radicals from Vancouver to Montréal, with the *Federationist* accusing the Dominion government of conspiring, through the RNWMP, "to establish a reign of terror so far as organized labor is concerned."<sup>146</sup> J.S. Woodsworth, released on charges of seditious libel, went further in a speech to an FLP-

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1919. The vote did not affect the Seamen's and Longshoremen's strikes, as they had decided to strike independent of the Metal Trades Council. See "Seamen's Strike Nearing An End," *Times*, 25 June 1919; "Longshoremen Are Still On Strike," *Times*, 27 June 1919.

143. "Industrial Activity Resumed To-Day at Victoria Shipyards," *Times*, 27 June 1919; "Return to Work Without Trouble," *Colonist*, 28 June 1919; "All Strikers To Be Reinstated," *Times*, 28 June 1919.

144. Triple Alliance refers to the coalition of the AFL-internationals, employers, and the state. It derived from the working-class Triple Alliance in Britain, consisting of 800,000 miners, 500,000 rail workers, and 300,000 transport workers, as well as the military alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. See "SPC and Organized Labor," *Red Flag*, 30 August 1919; "A Message From Across the Sea," *Federationist*, 5 September 1919; "War Declared on OBU," *Federationist*, 11 July 1919.

145. "Think Police Acted Beyond Their Power," *Times*, 2 July 1919; "Red-Coats Busy," *Tribune*, 30 June 1919; also "Red Guards Again," *Tribune*, 18 August 1919. Taylor was named in a warrant issued by Alfred E. Andrews, special counsel for Manitoba of the federal Department of Justice and envoy of the Citizens Committee of 1000. The warrant read, in part, that "there is reason to suspect that certain books, papers, letters, documents, [and] writings ... afford ample evidence ... of the indictable offense of seditious conspiracy, are concealed in ... the place of abode, office and premises of J. Taylor."

146. "Mounties Raid Home and Offices of Labor Men," *Federationist*, 4 July 1919; "Vancouver Labor Temple Raided By Police," *Times*, 30 June 1919; "Tons of Bolshevik Papers Seized in Raids Made By 130 Montreal Police" and "Further Raids Made At Winnipeg," *Times*, 2 July 1919. The national dimensions of labour radicalism were illuminated months later with the release of a list of police targets, a virtual who's who of BC's socialist movement. "Andrews' List of Undesirable Citizens," *Federationist*, 30 January 1920.

meeting in Esquimalt, anticipating "a lot of unemployment and unrest this winter and because of this the government were rushing in Royal North West Mounted Police.... They must be coming over the mountains to shoot down the workers of this country."<sup>147</sup> The *Tribune*, however, expressed little sympathy. "It ill becomes workers who engage in strikes to squeal at the consequences of defeat ... Before engaging in industrial war the workers must consider not only the chances of victory but the chances of defeat."<sup>148</sup>

On 13 July, OBU chairman Bill Pritchard, released on bail from Stony Mountain penitentiary, advocated for the OBU at a rally in Victoria's Royal Athletic Park:

Economic forces compel movements: the master class today is irresistibly driven into large mergers ... we have or have had the One Big Union of the Allied Forces, the One Big Union of Oil Interests, the One Big Union of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association. Now we have *the* One Big Union quite a lusty infant in spite of prenatal influences and premature delivery! Parliament has shown itself, as ever, as the Executive of the Master-Class.<sup>149</sup>

The *Tribune* agreed with Pritchard on the benefits of industrial unionism, but doubted

the wisdom of wrecking the trades union movement in Western Canada by the formation of One Little Union of Industrial Workers. The idea will grow. It is destined to survive. Given time and patience it will be adopted by the Internationals without division, or secession, or internecine strife.

The paper urged "workers to keep the ranks solid and to keep their guns trained on the foe," questioning "the necessity for splitting the workers into two warring factions."<sup>150</sup>

Conflict between the OBU and AFL came to a head in Victoria on 16 July. Former TLC president James Watters, now a delegate from the Carpenters' union, moved that the VTLC endorse the OBU constitution. Woodward ruled the motion out of order as it lacked unanimous consent. "The discussion waxed warm," with OBU supporters and opponents trading barbs. When Watters and longshoremen's delegate Varney moved that "this meeting pass a vote of want of confidence in the chair," Woodward consulted the by-laws and put the question to delegates, who sustained Woodward's ruling by a vote of 15 to 12. Sensing the strength of the anti-OBU faction, Watters offered a substitute resolution to refer the OBU constitution to "affiliated locals to register their views ... as early as convenient." The resolution carried 21–4.<sup>151</sup> By a narrow

147. Gregory S. Kealey and Reg Whitaker, *R.C.M.P. Security Bulletins: The Early Years, 1919–1929* (St. John's 1994), 679.

148. "No Squeeling," *Tribune*, 10 July 1919.

149. "Pritchard's Points and Punches," *Tribune*, 14 July 1919.

150. "W.A. Pritchard's Speech," *Tribune*, 14 July 1919.

151. UVASC, VLC, Minutes, 16 July 1919; "Labor's Local Parliament," *Tribune*, 17 July 1919; "Constitution of The One Big Union," *Tribune*, 16 June 1919.

margin, Victoria's labour council remained under the effective control of the AFL-internationals, escaping the pattern in Vancouver, Winnipeg, and other points where the central body went OBU, spurring the formation of rival AFL councils.<sup>152</sup>

The OBU lacked the numerical strength to take over the VTLC. At the semi-annual executive elections on 2 July, "there was an unusual reluctance on the part of the Socialists to accept office," possibly influenced by the RNWMP raids.<sup>153</sup> Teamsters, Bookbinders, Steam & Operating Engineers, and Printing Pressmen declared against the OBU, while the Civic Employees rejected affiliation 59–9, with 6 spoiled ballots. On 27 August the VTLC executive met with AFL envoy Alf Farmilo, "with a view to ascertaining the situation in this City respecting secession from the Int. Craft union movement or affiliation with the One Big Union."<sup>154</sup> Farmilo inquired specifically regarding the status of the Amalgamated Postal Workers. Despite earlier support for secession, the AFL withstood the OBU challenge in Victoria, but the VTLC was severely weakened. Garment Workers and Painters severed affiliation, the latter joining the OBU, and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners attacked Woodward and the council leadership, as did Plumbers and Steam Fitters.<sup>155</sup> These unions took issue with the conduct of executive elections and Woodward's attendance at the controversial National Industrial Conference in Ottawa, a government-sponsored affair that OBU advocates dismissed as treasonous collaboration with the enemy.<sup>156</sup> The OBU-controlled Vancouver TLC had called for a boycott of the Ottawa conference pending the release of the Winnipeg strike leaders.<sup>157</sup>

At the 1919 TLC convention, held in Hamilton in September, AFL leaders

152. "Trades Council Is To Lose Its Charter," *Federationist*, 1 August 1919; Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 133–55.

153. "Trades and Labor Council," *Tribune*, 3 July 1919.

154. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 6 August, 20 August, and 3 September 1919; "International Officers," *Tribune*, 28 August 1919. Farmilo and William Varley of Toronto were paid \$42.00 per week to defeat the OBU, funded by a \$50,000 grant from the United Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, administered by TLC secretary P.M. Draper. In July 1919, Farmilo set up a parallel Vancouver Trades and Labor Council to rival the OBU-controlled council. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 121–2; Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour*, 186.

155. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 6 and 20 August, 3 September, 1 October, 5 November, and 3 December 1919. In October 1919, the Painters informed the VTLC they had withdrawn their affiliation to the Council. A month later, a spokesperson for the Organization Committee said the Painters "local has joined the One Big Union group." However by December, Sivertz reported "that the Painters union were in good standing, having paid their per capita tax to the end of 1919."

156. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 20 August 1919; also UBCSC, Eugene S. Woodward papers, box 1, file 2, "National Industrial Conference ... Official Report of Proceedings," 168–75.

157. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 6 and 20 August 1919.

roundly condemned the OBU and ushered through changes to the Congress constitution empowering the executive to discipline renegade affiliates. The executive warned of "too wide a use of the strike weapon" and assailed OBU leaders for "gambling their whole future on the success of sympathetic and national strikes." Woodward, representing the VTLC, counseled "a vein of tolerance" in discussions on the OBU, conceding that "thousands had been swept off their feet" and that rather than "mere agitators," OBU supporters were motivated by legitimate grievances against international unions in western Canada.<sup>158</sup> Woodward was critical of the Congress proceedings, informing VTLC delegates that the distribution of a 'ticket' prior to executive elections "produced an impression of a 'Machine' being operated ... Every person on the 'ticket' was elected to office." Nonetheless, Woodward approved the constitutional amendments "to discipline chartered organizations," and "pronounced himself as in full accord with the Int. craft union system." The OBU-controlled BCFL, however, was livid over the constitutional amendments and increased executive powers, informing the VTLC that it had "severed its connection with the Congress and returned its charter."<sup>159</sup>

Despite residual unity under the auspices of the BC Defense Fund,<sup>160</sup> which raised funds for the Winnipeg leaders and their families, the OBU and sympathetic strikes drove an irreconcilable wedge into Victoria's labour movement. Two parallel, rival labour movements emerged, foreshadowing the later contours of the AFL-CIO split. In late 1919, the AFL attempted to disband Shipyard Laborers Local 38A, the epicentre of the Victoria strike, bastion of OBU strength, and affiliate of the militant ILA. Coinciding with a general decline on Victoria's waterfront, as shipbuilding entered a postwar slump, the AFL ordered Local 38A's membership divided between the Structural Iron Workers, United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners, and International Hod Carriers, three AFL-internationals. The shipyard workers defied this order and continued meeting as a unified local, sending delegates to the Metal Trades Council, among them John L. Martin, a long-time militant on Victoria's labour scene.

158. Trades and Labor Congress of Canada, *Report of Proceedings, 1919*, 69–70, 166; "Dominion Trades Congress in Session," *Tribune*, 25 September 1919.

159. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 15 October 1919. BCFL secretary A.S. Wells justified this action on the grounds "that no democratic minded man would stand for any such procedure, namely, that of giving Executive Officers of Congress power to remove the officers of Provincial Federations of Labor."

160. In July, VTLC delegates had approved a \$100 donation for the defense of the Winnipeg strike leaders. Other unions locals, both AFL and OBU, donated to the fund, including the Steam Engineers, Teamsters, and Printing Pressmen. In November, the VTLC endorsed proposals from the BC Defense Committee for 'One Day's Pay for Winnipeg' and a 'Workers' Liberty Bond' campaign. As J.S. Woodsworth told a Victoria FLP meeting in February 1920, "no other province had so loyally supported the defense as British Columbia." See "Done Much to Solidify Workers," *Federationist*, 27 February 1920; UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 16 July, 20 August, 3 September, 1 October, 19 November, 3 December 1919.



The dispute escalated into a fight over control of the Metal Trades Council, a situation exacerbated by the council's "precarious" financial situation. As Martin alleged in the *Federationist*:

something was done that did not particularly please the meal ticket artists of the council. The main cause of displeasure was the defeat of James Dakers for president and the election of certain delegates to represent the council on the newly organized Soldier-Labor Council of the city ... The election [was] declared null and void....

Martin insisted that "the One Big Union movement is growing, thanks largely to the inefficiency of the Metal Trades Council," and despite occasional visits "by the paid organizers of the A.F. of L. who, of course, tells us that the OBU is either dying fast, or is dead, buried and cremated. We over here, however, know different." In March 1920, however, the Shipyard Laborers disbanded. Martin accused the Metal Trades Council of "using its resources to crush the union out of existence," lambasting "an aggregation masquerading as Labor leaders, who not only themselves lack the capacity to learn, but throw every obstacle in the way of the progress of the workers."<sup>161</sup>

As the OBU approached its first birthday, AFL leaders dispensed with any pretense of unity, abandoning the cause of the Winnipeg strike leaders and writing off the BCFL. The VTLC filed unread a request from the BC Defense Committee for funds to aid in Bob Russell's appeal to the Privy Council.<sup>162</sup> Demonstrating the depth of division, the VTLC voted against sending delegates to the 1920 BCFL convention, even though the gathering was held in Victoria.<sup>163</sup> The convention opened on 8 March amid much acrimony. John Sidaway of the Vancouver Street Railwaymen's union focused his attack on Farmilo, accusing AFL loyalists of changing "their opinions for a few dollars ... backed by funds, by the government, the Trades and Labor Congress and by employers," a situation that could not be tolerated: "We have got to show Mr. Farmilo and others that they can't get away with this any longer ... these men should be taken by the scruff of the neck, if necessary, and shown where they belonged." J.S. Woodsworth addressed delegates on behalf of the Winnipeg Defense Committee, defending his work for the committee, denying that funds had been used for OBU propaganda, and claiming he had "steered clear of the rival factions." Midgley, however, denounced the OBU's opponents and alleged

161. "Shipyard Laborers Union Demise," *Federationist*, 5 March 1920; "Victoria Metal Trades Council," *Federationist*, 27 February 1920; UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 18 February 1920.

162. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 3 March 1920.

163. The VTLC had earlier voted 20–4 in favour of sending delegates, an action opposed by Woodward, but delegates subsequently reversed this decision. Upon learning that the Vancouver Trades & Labor Council (AFL) had voted to pay its per-capita dues and send two delegates, the VTLC voted 12–9 to take the same action, but later decided against sending dues. A requirement that convention delegates belong to unions affiliated with the BCFL limited the number of eligible nominees from Victoria. Only Longshoremen's delegate Varney was elected, and when the VTLC imposed a number of instructions governing his actions, Varney resigned. See UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 4 February, 3 March, 17 March 1920.

collusion "between some representatives of the Internationals and the secret police." The convention approved, by a 40–5 vote, an executive recommendation to dissolve the Federation. A decade after its inception, the organization was retired, ostensibly deemed redundant by the emergence of One Big Union of all workers, but in reality a casualty of the struggle for control over the Federation's property, including the coveted *Federationist*.<sup>164</sup>

The BCFL's dissolution removed any mechanism for mediating conflict between the OBU and AFL, severing lines of communication and means of reconciliation between the two camps. On 1 May 1920, two events took place in Victoria: a mass meeting organized by the VTLC, and a social organized by the OBU.<sup>165</sup> This moment symbolizes the divided state of Victoria labour in the wake of the 1919 strikes: International Labour Day, the expression of unity of the workers of the world, required two separate events in two separate venues hosted by the fragmented factions of Victoria's working class.

## Conclusion

The Victoria General Strike of 1919 and the tumultuous experience of the One Big Union demonstrate the possibilities and dangers of militant working-class agency. Moments when workers transcend traditional patterns of deference to employers and embrace collective action provide the potential for historic advance; but they also heighten internal contradictions and produce long-lasting wounds. The optimistic spirit of 1919 culminated in a debilitating defeat, leaving workers vulnerable to attack by employers and the state. The OBU idea provided a unifying symbol that helped mobilize workers behind the Winnipeg General Strike. But from its inception in Calgary, the OBU was paradoxically poised as the unifier and divider of Canadian labour. Its strategy of militant industrial unionism seemed a logical response in a political and economic climate increasingly hostile to the working class; AFL-internationals seemed too narrow in orientation and too closely aligned with the state to facilitate forms of mass action necessary to alter basic relationships between workers and employers. The bold changes sweeping the globe could not be applied in the North American context until the "labor fakirs" were replaced by a new, militant centre of working-class organization. However, the OBU's strategy of secession unleashed determined opposition and alienated dedicated labour activists. It destroyed union locals and central bodies nurtured over years of careful compromise.

As the case of Victoria demonstrates, solidarity is a contested concept, an

164. "BC Federation of Labor Dissolved at Victoria Convention," *Federationist*, 12 March 1920; Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 156–7.

165. UVASC, VLC fonds, Minutes, 21 April 1920; "Another OBU Social Success," *Federationist*, 7 May 1920. The VTLC rejected overtures from the OBU to jointly organize a 1 May parade protesting the imprisonment of the Winnipeg strike leaders.

attractive goal whose operation is more ambiguous in practice. Militancy among workers in Victoria's shipyards, machine shops, and waterfront reflected local conditions in those industries, contributing to the OBU's growth and support for a sympathy strike. Local conditions also explain the reluctance to strike among postal workers, retail clerks, civic employees, and other Victoria workers, where AFL loyalists retained influence. Uneven support for the OBU translated into the limited extent of the strike. The walkout that erupted on 23 June 1919 demonstrated the tendency of workers to band together in self-defence, but also revealed contested leadership in working-class ranks. Influential groups of workers refused to follow the example of Vancouver and other cities by striking in sympathy with Winnipeg labour. Divisions, amplified during the war, ossified as OBU proponents moved from the theory to the practice of the general strike. Today, union activists continue to strive for collective forms of agency capable of superseding institutional barriers and a cumbersome legal apparatus. Driven by the same dreams that mobilized a generation behind the OBU, contemporary workers can learn something from the possibilities and pitfalls of 1919.

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