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Organizing a Wartime Shipyard

The Union Struggle for a Closed Shop at West Coast Shipbuilders Limited 1941–44

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

During World War II thousands of workers entered the employ of wartime shipyards in British Columbia. Most Vancouver-area shipyards, following general practice in the United States along the Pacific Coast, operated on the basis of a closed shop, whereby membership was required in recognized labour unions holding agreements with the companies. Management at one shipyard, West Coast Shipbuilders Company Limited, however, bucked this trend and maintained an open shop in the face of growing pressure by the unions, in particular the marine boilermakers, to have a closed one. William McLaren, the main antagonist, reflected enduring older values among some employers in antithesis to labour-management cooperation prevalent in the United States and Canada in support of war production. Though the matter went to conciliation, the drawbacks of a legal approach were readily apparent when a board turned down labour's request, and negotiations assisted by a judge resulted in adoption of a lesser maintenance of membership clause instead of the closed shop. Worker militancy and aggressive organizing, in the end, could not deliver the closed shop at West Coast Shipbuilders before war contracts concluded and shipbuilding contracted in the province. Taking a local, regional, and industry-specific perspective, this study argues that the union struggle for recognition and accommodation from employers in wartime Canada faltered in the case of obtaining a closed shop at this British Columbia wartime shipyard.

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ARTICLE

Organizing a Wartime Shipyard: The Union Struggle for a Closed Shop at West Coast Shipbuilders Limited 1941–44

Chris Madsen

British Columbia, and specifically Vancouver, became a major centre for emergency shipbuilding during World War II, constructing more than two-thirds of the merchant vessels and warships that Canada produced for domestic and British use. What makes the achievement even more remarkable, the province had previously built few steel ships, had higher production and labour costs than eastern Canada, and needed to lobby extensively for federal war contracts. Vancouver's shipyards peaked at just over 24,000 workers in 1943, the highest number of any city in Canada, though small in comparison with such massive US shipbuilding centres as Seattle, Vancouver (Washington State), Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles where hundreds of thousands workers, including large numbers of women and African-Americans, found wartime employment.[1] Among Canadian and US war industries, only aircraft

1. Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Annual Industry Report: The Shipbuilding Industry 1943* (Ottawa 1944); Carole Paula Thornton, "Women of the Victoria Shipyards 1942–1945: An Oral History," MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1998; Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics, *Wage Chronology: Pacific Coast Shipbuilding 1941–67* (Washington, DC 1968); Roger W. Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910–1961: From Warfare to Welfare* (Urbana 2002); Gerald D. Nash, *World War* II *and the West: Reshaping the Economy* (Lincoln 1995); Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington 1985); Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver during World War* II *and Reconversion* (Albany 1990); Marilyn Susan Johnson, "The Western Front: World War II and the Transformation of West Coast Urban Life," PhD diss., New York University, 1990; Deborah Scott Hirshfield, "Women Shipyard Workers in the Second World War: A Note," *International History Review*, 11 (1989), 478–485; Sheila Tropp Lichtman, "Women at Work, 1941–1945: Wartime Employment in the San Francisco Bay Area," PhD diss., University of California Davis,

Chris Madsen, "Organizing a Wartime Shipyard: The Union Struggle for a Closed Shop at West Coast Shipbuilders Limited 1941–44," *Labour/Le Travail,* 65 (Spring 2010), 75–108.

manufacturing employed more persons or generated more work. The war years became a defining, albeit short-lived, work experience for many people entering the shipyards and subjected for the first time to the industrial process of mass-production alongside the skilled tradesmen of the established organized labour movement.[2] Shipbuilding presented both opportunities and challenges for the creation of working-class consciousness and real gains for labour under wartime conditions in Vancouver-area industrial enterprises.

This labouring experience happened within local Lower Mainland, provincial British Columbia, national Canada, and coast-wide North America contexts that have been addressed to some extent in the current labour historiography. Debate over the radical nature and exceptionalism of British Columbia's industrial labour scene leading up to the 1919 general strike and other industry specific militancy has engaged labour and regional historians inclined to see conflictual relations of class antagonism separating workers and employers.[3] Availability of employment in shipyards was tied to cyclical business trends in a resource-based provincial economy, where the impact of government work undertaken for public purposes was also significant. In a time of national crisis, such as World War II, this regional and sectoral employment market became particularly pressured, and the resulting instabilities plagued employers and workers, governments and trade unions. The feast and famine character of West Coast shipbuilding aggravated typical patterns of industrial

1981; Robin Dearmon Jenkins, "Rivets and Rights: African-American Workers and Shipbuilding in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1890–1948," PhD diss., Carnegie Mellon University, 2004; Josh Sides, "Battle on the Home Front: African American Shipyard Workers in World War II Los Angeles," *California History*, 75 (1996), 250–263; William H. Harris, "Federal Intervention in Union Discrimination: FEPC and West Coast Shipyards during World War II," *Labor History*, 22 (1981), 325–347; Frank Godinez, "Labor's War: Los Angeles CIO Unions in the Turbulent 40s," MA thesis, California State University Fullerton, 2002.

2. The classic study of this social experience is Katherine Archibald, *Wartime Shipyard: A Study in Social Disunity* (Berkeley 1947).

3. Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto 2007), 322–323; Mark Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class and the Writing of BC History," *BC Studies*, 111 (1996), 61–75; Allen Seager and David Roth, "British Columbia and the Mining West," in Craig Heron and Myer Siemiatycki, eds., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925* (Toronto 1998), 231–267; Robert A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status and Social Boundaries, 1863–1913* (Vancouver 1996); Robert A. McDonald, "Working Class Vancouver 1886–1914: Urbanism and Class in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, 69–70 (1986), 33–69; Mark Leier, *Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990); James R. Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt: The Case of Vancouver, 1900–1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (1989), 9–37; James Robert Conley, "Class Conflict and Collective Action in the Working Class of Vancouver, British Columbia, 1900–1919," PhD diss., Carleton University, 1986; Allen Seager, "Workers, Class and Industrial Conflict in New Westminster, 1900–1930," in Rennie Warburton and David Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers* (Vancouver 1988), 117–140; Carlos A. Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885–1917* (Seattle 1979).

relations, if they could even be said to exist across industries and trades so different in scope. Certainly, entrenchment of a bureaucratic approach on the part of unions, described by Leier in his groundbreaking study of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, was one response as labour leaderships adapted to various circumstances and their relations with employers and rank-and-file unionists developed in particular ways.[4] Though shipyard employment was mostly temporary and intermittent, the unions involved established some measure of accommodation with those owners and companies willing to make concessions for the sake of stability and peace with organized labour. Mid-size yards run by the North Vancouver Wallace family probably subscribed to the type of welfare capitalism Parnaby argues faced another related unionized group of maritime workers in Vancouver, the longshoremen.[5] The degree of continuity or change brought on by the onset of World War II, the dramatic rise in employment for war production, and the effect in British Columbia still awaits serious study by labour historians.

General surveys and more specialized studies focus predominantly on Central Canada and put emphasis on industrial and political action centred around the use of strikes and gaining the right of collective bargaining during the war.[6] It is hard to extrapolate pertinent conclusions on a truly national basis because wartime shipbuilding was so varied, and its exact details have attracted little scholarly attention. That shipyard workers in Quebec, for example, were willing to strike on a larger scale in 1943 is not indicative of any such propensity on behalf of all shipyard workers to do so across Canada. On the contrary, the frequency of shipyard strikes in British Columbia was relatively subdued by comparison.[7] Unions and workers considered the tactic very much a last resort after other remedies had been used to no effect. Typically,

4. Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto 1995); Sanford M. Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in American Industry, 1900–1945* (New York 1985).

5. Francis Mansbridge, *Launching History: The Saga of Burrard Dry Dock* (Madeira Park 2002), 66; Andrew Parnaby, *Citizen Docker: Making a New Deal on the Vancouver Waterfront 1919–1939* (Toronto 2008); for a contrasting Pacific Coast perspective, see Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets: The Making of Radical Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley 1988).

6. Desmond Morton, *Working People* (Montreal and Kingston 1998), 165–186; Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston 1995); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour 1800–1991* (Toronto 1992), 236–237; Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Brief History* (Toronto 1996), 59–75; Laurel Sefton MacDowell, *Remember Kirkland Lake: The Gold Miners' Strike of 1941–42* (Toronto 2001); Craig Heron and Robert Storey, "Work and Struggle in the Canadian Steel Industry, 1900–1950," in Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal 1986), 230–231.

7. Jan Drent, "Labour and Unions in a Wartime Essential Industry: Shipyard Workers in BC, 1939–1945," *The Northern Mariner*, 6 (1996), 57–58; Patricia E. Roy, *Vancouver: An Illustrated History* (Toronto 1980), 13–135; Patricia Roy and John Herd Thompson, *British Columbia: Land of Promises* (Toronto 2005), 137–139.

Vancouver shipyard workers looked toward arrangements between government officials, private enterprise, and organized labour across the border in the United States as much as those in Canada, as a basis for cooperation in setting common goals and production quotas.[8] American labour, in all its varied forms, actively participated in the so-called good war and received tangible benefits in return. "The most important effect of the war on the working class," according to Zieger, "was to integrate it more fully into the nation's dominant system of values and its politico-administrative structure."[9] The extent to which this North America phenomenon affected shipyard workers at the local level in British Columbia deserves greater scrutiny. Most established enterprises and newer, temporary shipyards proved amenable to union demands and achieved early accommodation and harmony. Other hold-out companies, however, blocked the aspirations of organized labour for the closed shop.

The longstanding issue of the closed versus open shop vexed unions in the American and Canadian labour movements, as historians beginning to understand better the complexity of trade unions' relations with evolving labour law have recently suggested. The closed shop was essentially a legal issue, a negotiated contractual arrangement between employers and workers, in which all of those working in a particular place covered by "the contract" of the collective agreement were required to belong to a particular union. Historically, labour unions pressing for the closed shop frequently met resistance and concerted anti-union campaigns from employers favouring the opposite: an open shop in which workers were free to either belong to no union or to any union with which they chose to affiliate.[10] The degree of control over labour and its membership on worksites, whether it belonged to the respective union or employer,

8. Christopher Tassava, "Launching a Thousand Ships: Entrepreneurs, War Workers, and the State in American Shipbuilding, 1940–1945," PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2003; Paul A.C. Koistinen, *Arsenal of World War* II*: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1940–1945* (Lawrence, KS 2004); Michael Hennessy, "The Rise and Fall of a Canadian Maritime Policy, 1939–1965: A Study of Industry, Navalism and the State," PhD diss., University of New Brunswick, 1995; G.W. Taylor, *Shipyards in British Columbia: The Principal Companies* (Victoria 1986), 115–116.

9. Robert H. Zieger and Gilbert J. Gall, *American Workers, American Unions: The Twentieth Century* (Baltimore 2002), 118; on a similar theme, see Philip Yale Nicholson, *Labor's Story in the United States* (Philadelphia 2004), Nelson Litchtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton 2001), and Melvyn Dubofsky, *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History* (Urbana and Chicago, 2000), 161.

10. Chad Pearson, "'Organize and Fight': Communities, Employers, and Open-Shop Movements, 1890–1920," PhD diss., State University of New York, Albany, 2008; Howell John Harris, *Bloodless Victories: The Rise and Fall of the Open Shop in the Philadelphia Metal Trades 1890–1940* (New York 2000); Jeffrey Haydu, *Making American Industry Safe for Democracy: Comparative Perspectives on the State and Employee Representation in the Era of World War I* (Urbana 1997); Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana 1987); for British Columbia specifically, see James Conley, "'Open Shop' means 'Closed to Union Men': Carpenters and the 1911 Vancouver Building Trades General Strike," *BC Studies* 91–92 (1991–92), 127–151.

was the central feature. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act), the key labour legislation of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies, arrested the enthusiasm for the open shop and created an environment conducive to grudging acceptance of organized labour as partner instead of opponent.[11] With emergence of the new CIO industrial unions closely aligned with the Democratic Party, labour came to organize and press its demands within an institutionalized system of arbitration and law. In effect, labour leaders acted in a corporatist manner in exchange for recognition. During World War II, union security and similar matters touching upon the closed shop came before national and regional bodies set up to adjudicate differences between unions and employers.[12] These proceedings took time, and the resulting decisions were not always beneficial to unions.

Arrangements dealing with industrial relations were less comprehensive and no more sophisticated in Canada than the United States. Webber and MacDowell show the proclivity of the wartime federal government to use the mechanisms of outdated conciliation legislation and rely upon orders-in-council in the absence of any Canadian equivalent to the American Wagner Act.[13] Still, it did so reluctantly and hesitatingly, on a case-by-case base. Unions were no different. Prevailing interpretations that stress worker militancy, aggressive organizing, strike action, and picket line pressure provide only a partial view of the class relations of the period. Many was the time that unions did not strike despite significant provocation from individual employers; workers sensed that the war effort demanded restraint. Patriotic citizens as well as members of a vastly enlarged industrial proletariat facing new opportunities as well as novel challenges, workers, and the organizations that represented them were often asked to make sacrifices or defer demands within prescribed limits.[14] The war years gave a new sense of urgency and formality

11. Rhonda F. Levine, *Class Struggle and the New Deal: Industrial Labor, Industrial Capital, and the State* (Lawrence, KS 1988); Stanley Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy and the American Industrial Economy* (Chapel Hill 1987).

12. James B. Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War* II (Urbana and Chicago 1998), 105–108; Christopher Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations Law and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880–1960* (New York 1985), 247–251; Andrew Kersten, *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War* II (New York 2006), 46–48; Nelson Litchtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The* CIO *in World War* II (Cambridge 1982); Timothy Alan Willard, "Labor and the National War Labor Board, 1942–1945: An Experiment in Corporatist Wage Stabilization," PhD diss., University of Toledo, 1984.

13. Jeremy Webber, "The Malaise of Compulsory Conciliation: Strike Prevention in Canada during World War II," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 57–88; Laurel Sefton MacDowell, "The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations System during World War Two", *Labour/Le Travail*, 3 (1978), 175–196.

14. Wendy Elizabeth Cuthbertson, "Labour goes to War: The CIO, the People's War, and the Construction of a 'New Social Order'," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2007; Mark H. Leff, "The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," *Journal of American*

to encouraging continued production without interruption, conditions ripe for the closed shop or at least some alternate form of accommodation. Fudge and Tucker document the transition from industrial volunteerism to industrial pluralism, resulting in a compulsory collective bargaining structure underpinned by a legal regime binding to employers and labour.[15] A new era seemingly dawned for industrial labour relations in Canada in the final stage of the war and looking forward to the future. State intervention and decisiveness in contrast to earlier confusion over manpower allocation and industrial development relied upon labour consent for the new-found industrial legality and participation in the production and labour process with promise for the rather imprecise post-war settlement.[16]

How policy reached this point started at the local level, forged out of relations between individual workers, unions, and employers. The closed shop, before the backlash of the 1947 Taft-Hartley amendments in the United States and the 1948 Industrial Relations and Disputes Investigation Act in Canada, remains an interesting corrective for the measure of actual cooperation and conflict amongst organized labour and employers in wartime British Columbia and its Vancouver shipyards.[17] The experience at West Coast Shipbuilders Limited may stand out as exceptional in many regards, though arguably it was also representative of older entrenched attitudes toward the very idea of a closed shop and the fair hearing labour expected to receive under the law in the face of employer hostility and intransigence.

West Coast Shipbuilders Limited, which operated on False Creek lands inside Vancouver, adopted a confrontational approach to labour and stubbornly resisted any closed shop for certain unions. This loyalty to the open shop, or to one able to hire, control, and dismiss workers pretty much at whim, bucked trends along the Pacific coast in the US and Canada. Why,

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History, 77 (1991), 1300–1304.

15. Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900–1948* (Toronto 2001).

16. Peter S. McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943–1950* (Toronto 2002); Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa (hereafter LAC), Percy R. Bengough fonds, MG 30, A47, vol. 1, file "Addresses, Articles, Broadcasts, 1934–54," "Victory What Then? Address to 48th Convention, American Academy of Political and Social Science, Benjamin Franklin Hotel, Philadelphia, P.A., April 15th, 1944, by Percy R. Bengough, President, Trades and Labour Congress of Canada"; Michael D. Stevenson, *Canada's Greatest Wartime Muddle: National Selective Service and the Mobilization of Human Resources during World War* II (Kingston and Montreal 2001); Douglas John Hart, "State Economic Management in Wartime: A Study of the 'Regimentation' of Industry in the Canadian Industrial Mobilization, 1939–1945," PhD diss., York University, 1982.

17. Peter Jon Warrian, "'Labour is not a Commodity': A Study of the Rights of Labour in the Canadian Postwar Economy, 1944–48," PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 1986; MacInnis, 170–172. Bartholomew H. Sparrow, *From the Outside In: World War* II *and the American State* (Princeton 1996), 80.

in particular, was the management of West Coast Shipbuilders so obstinate when other Vancouver-area shipyards embraced the closed shop to seemingly good results for production and labour relations? The approach suggests the durability of older convictions amongst some employers and conditional endorsement of the collective bargaining model embodied in the US Wagner Act and inconsistently applied in Canada through overlapping federal and provincial statute. The constraints of the legalistic method were entirely disadvantageous to workers and their chosen representatives. The private firm effectively countered union drives to push the closed shop, as well as formal approaches via arbitration and conciliation, which just stiffened its resolve. When strike action threatened, the federal government brought in a judge who had worked with a previous federal royal commission on BC shipbuilding, and he coaxed out grudging concessions by both sides. In March 1944 the company allowed votes on unionization under new collective agreements after a three-year delay and just as diminishing war contracts and falling production made large layoffs likely. It cannot be called a success for the unions because the closed shop proved elusive as management checkmated labour leaders into accepting a lesser form of union security for the purpose of securing lucrative government work in the shipyard until war's end. The struggle over the closed shop in West Coast Shipbuilders provides an interesting case for elucidating the relative effectiveness of worker militancy and aggressive organizing in the manufacturing industries of wartime Canada.

The Closed Shop in Pacific Coast Shipyards

Shipbuilding was virtually moribund on the North American Pacific coast between the wars. Late in World War I companies in Seattle and Vancouver had built steel ships for wartime procurement bodies such as the (US) Fleet Emergency Corporation and the Imperial Munitions Board.[18] Thousands of local workers found wartime employment in the temporary shipyards and related manufacturing industries geared toward war production; it was also a high point for organizing in the industry as unions flush with increased numbers and dues gained enough confidence to make demands. During 1918 shipyard workers in Vancouver struck for higher wages and better working conditions, which resulted in a federal royal commission, while orders for

18. Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (Lanham, MD 2000); Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labour Relations, 1912–1921* (Chapel Hill 1997); William J. Breen, "Administrative Politics and Labor Policy in the First World War: The US Employment Service and the Seattle Labor Market Experiment," *Business History Review*, 61 (1987), 582–605; William Courtney Mattox, *Building the Emergency Fleet: A Historical Narrative of the Problems and Achievements of the United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation* (Cleveland 1920); Peter Edward Rider, "The Imperial Munitions Board and its Relationship to Government, Business, and Labour, 1914–1920," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1974.

war purposes and the post-war Canadian Government Merchant Marine kept some people busy.[19] Termination of war contracts and lack of follow-on business brought unemployment in the shipyards. Union membership declined as workers looked instead to primary industries such as forestry and mining and war-time union locals barely survived or closed. In 1920 fire gutted a bridge-building and steel-making company, J. Coughlan & Sons, which had operated Vancouver's largest wartime shipyard on the south side of False Creek and built freighters. A major employer was thereby lost, and the unions retrenched to find jobs for the workers thrown out of work. The 1922 Washington Naval Treaty imposed a building holiday on capital ships and fixed limits on other warship classes among the leading navies with detrimental effects on American shipbuilding in general.[20] In the intervening decade, smallish orders for naval vessels such as destroyers and cruisers were placed in government navy yards south of the border and few steel commercial ships of large proportions were built along the entire West Coast. Despite the lobbying efforts of shipbuilding companies, shipyard employment reached miserably low levels during the Great Depression.[21] The staple business of ship repair sustained the struggling industry until naval rearmament and creation of the United States Maritime Commission brightened prospects for renewed orders and employment in 1937. During the interwar period, owners and managers in private shipyards encouraged a corporate, familial relationship with long-time employees and held the line on wages in agreements with any unions strong enough to push.[22]

19. *The Coughlan Shipyard Dispute: Final Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Differences*, 24 July 1919; Conley, "Class Conflict and Collective Action," 374–400; S.C. Heal, *Conceived in War, Born in Peace: Canada's Deep Sea Merchant Marine* (Vancouver 1992), 36–37; availability of labour was a major consideration in the decision to build steel ships in preference to wooden ships in BC; British Columbia Archives, Victoria (hereafter BCA), GR 1508, box 1, file 5, "Memorandum for Ship-Building," 21 July 1915.

20. John T. Kuehn, *Agents of Innovation: The General Board and the Design of the Fleet That Defeated the Japanese Navy* (Annapolis, MD 2008), 28; Thomas C. Hone, "The Effectiveness of the "Washington Treaty" Navy," *Naval War College Review*, 32 (1979), 38; Thomas C. Hone and Trent Hone, *Battle Line: The United States Navy 1919–1939* (Annapolis, MD 2006); James W. Hammond, *The Treaty Navy: The Story of the US Naval Service Between the World Wars* (Victoria 2001).

21. North Vancouver Museum and Archives, North Vancouver (hereafter NVMA), Matthew T. Davie fonds 105, file 1C, Burrard Dry Dock Company "The Shipbuilding and Ship Repairing Industry in Canada and its Relation to Unemployment"; Roland H. Webb, "Burrard Dry Dock Co. Ltd.: The Rise and Demise of Vancouver's Biggest Shipyard," *The Northern Mariner*, 6 (1996), 5; Canada did not follow the lead of the United States in subsidizing shipbuilding under the 1936 Merchant Marine Act; Andrew Gibson and Arthur Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean: A History of United States Maritime Policy* (Columbia, SC 2000), 136.

22. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park MD (hereafter NARA), RG 178, entry 28, FRC box 159, James Reed, "Pacific Coast Survey of Ship Building Facilities and Labor Supply for US Maritime Commission," 25 September 1937; additional material can be found in RG 178, entry 33A, box 4, binder "Shipbuilding Facilities on the West Coast," James Reed, "Survey: Pacific Coast Shipbuilding – Labor and Facilities," 1937; LAC, W. Harold Milne

Most workers were grateful for regular, paying jobs and usually went along with company terms. Co-operative unions, however, requested and secured closed shops in existing shipyards as a means to solidify relations.

Major fractures within the North American labour movement were played out in microcosm within the shipbuilding industry. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was dominant in Pacific shipyards, especially in the United States, and favoured closed shops. As a traditionalist labour association in North America, the AFL provided an umbrella organization for locals of international craft unions in shipbuilding and related manufacturing. Its metal trades department had its headquarters in Washington, D.C., under seasoned trade unionist John Frey, as well as metal trades councils in regions and larger cities. Many American trade unionists were hostile to Communists and so-called radicals gaining influence among workers during the hard times of the depression. Frey had helped denounce and expel industrial unions from the AFL and attack the new, rival Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).[23] The CIO was active in the Midwest organizing mass producers such as General Motors Corporation and achieving the Little Steel settlement in 1937. Terms of employment and wages in American shipbuilding were eventually pegged to those pertaining in the steel industry from that time. In turn, the CIO organized several major shipyards on the eastern seaboard and Gulf Coast, where the AFL had less influence but made small inroads on the Pacific coast.[24] Competition within the labour movement was fierce and the stakes were high. The closed shop, once private companies granted it, allowed either central labour organization to shut out the other, because only those unions belonging to the AFL or CIO were allowed to represent workers. In BC shipyards, AFL craft unions coexisted with unions and locals of the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL), which had connections to the CIO.[25] The formal split and expulsion of industrial unions from the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada came later in 1939.

At the local BC level, shipyards thus had a history of being a mélange of stratified trades and competing unions, loosely tied by allegiance to larger, centralized labour umbrella groups, international as well as national. Skilled

papers, MG 30, B121, vol. 1, file 1–3, W.H. Milne "Shipbuilding in Canada," 31 May 1939.

23. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC (hereafter LC), John P. Frey papers, container 5, folder 67, John Frey to AFL executive council, 13 July 1936; Robert H. Zieger, *The* CIO*, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill 1995).

24. David Palmer, *Organizing the Shipyards: Union Strategy in Three Northeast Ports, 1933–1945* (Ithaca 1998); Jonathan Rees, *Managing the Mills: Labor Policy in the American Steel Industry during the Nonunion Era* (New York 2004), 264–265; large steel companies in the United States were also major shipbuilders with multiple yards across the country; Kenneth Warren, *Bethlehem Steel: Builder and Arsenal of America* (Pittsburgh 2008), 144–147.

25. John Roberts, *Putting Foreign Policy to Work: The Role of Organized Labor in American Foreign Relations, 1932–1941* (New York 1995), 130–131; Don Taylor and Bradley Dow, *The Rise of Industrial Unionism in Canada: A History of the* CIO (Kingston 1988), 14–15.

workers, the products of long apprenticeships and years of service on the same task, identified with the work they performed and those people of similar skill around them. Occupational lines were clearly delineated within established shipyards by status, pay, and membership. The marine boilermakers, who had broken away from the AFL international union in 1928 and organized themselves locally, represented the majority of workers in Vancouver's shipyards.[26] Given uneven organization and representation, shop stewards came to exercise increasing influence within the union, taking on leadership roles. For all intents and purposes, the marine boilermakers acted like an independent union. They were defiant of CCL attempts to impose control over them from Ottawa, and they were not averse to local communists exercising leadership roles among them. [27] Communists were certainly well-represented among the shop stewards, but it would be unfair to conclude that there was a deliberate attempt to infiltrate and take over the marine boilermakers. They merely filled a leadership vacuum and offered something more appealing to the rank and file than those who took industrial unions for granted.[28] On the other side were the traditional trade unionists. AFL machinists, plumbers, painters, sheet metal workers, stationary engineers, and electricians – union trades outside the boilermakers – were fewer but tended to have better organization and discipline because of their strong association with counterpart American locals and metal trades councils. The boilermakers' president wrote Ottawa: "We also at present time have a battle on our hands with the A.F. of L. who are trying their hardest to get into the Shipyards since this War Work has been spoke of."[29] For the AFL unions, the north-south orientation was just as important

26. LAC, Trades and Labour Congress of Canada fonds, MG 28, I103, vol. 91, file 39, L.C. Campbell to N.A. Dowd, 16 March 1940. Kersten, 71–74; the union local, which stood at 200 members in January 1940, increased to over 13,000 by December 1942 engaged in shipbuilding.

27. Jack Scott, Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985* (St. John's, Nfld. 1988), 115–116; in this regard, the BC marine boilermakers actually shared many similarities with the character and working class radicalism of maritime shipping unions on the Pacific Coast seeking improved working conditions and the closed shop, which were rebuffed by ship owners out to break the unions; Charles P. Larrowe, "The Great Maritime Strike of '34," *Labor History*, 11 (1970), pp. 403–451; Donald Willett, "The 1939 Tanker Strike," *International Journal of Maritime History* 2 (1990), 155–173.

28. LAC, TLCC, MG 28, I103, vol. 92, file 1, "Memorandum regarding conditions in the shipyard industry in British Columbia," November 1942; LAC, TLCC, MG 28, I103, vol. 55, file 1, A. McAuslane to P. Conroy, 5 April 1943; Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlan, *Left Out: Reds and America's Industrial Unions* (New York 2003); Tim Buck, *Thirty Years: The Story of the Communist Movement in Canada, 1922–1952* (Toronto 1975); in the United States, the Communist Party accused Roosevelt of not taking labour's side in the steel strikes of 1937 but later went on record in support of the president and the war effort once hostilities came, largely because the Soviet Union was an ally and partner against the Axis powers; Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War* II (New Brunswick 1991), 201.

29. LAC, TLCC, MG 28, I103, vol. 91, file 39, L.C. Campbell to N.S. Dowd, 8 January 1940.

as any east-west ties across Canada. In labour organization, British Columbia was still ahead of shipyards in eastern Canada, where business conditions, depressed wages, and labour practices lagged behind those in US west coast settings.[30] No doubt knowledgeable Canadian workers were aware of the New Deal-era Wagner Act and a national leader like Franklin D. Roosevelt, who seemed to defend industry and labour alike. They may even have wondered why Canada's Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, a published labour expert earlier in his life, was so aloof. Organized labour waited, and waited some more, for positive policy from the Canadian government and its department officials on matters of collective bargaining and enforcement of the closed shop.

Once the war started, Vancouver-based union locals, AFL and otherwise, co-operated with companies trying to expand production and closely followed US shipbuilding developments. The first contracts for BC shipyards involved warships for the British Admiralty, and C.D. Howe, playing the political opportunities of the time, wrote to Ian Mackenzie, the provincial representative in the federal Cabinet, that it was desirable to have the announcements of the work orders "made by the shipbuilding companies."[31] This new endeavor required more workers, mostly from the unions already active in the shipyards. In May 1940, a board of conciliation ruling affecting Burrard Dry Dock Company in North Vancouver and certain unions established basic wage rates, which soon became standard on all government war contracts in BC shipyards.[32] Hourly pay was typically higher there than in comparable eastern Canadian shipyards and about ten cents per hour lower than standard rates in Washington State, Oregon, and California. The Americans, not even in the war, acted quickly to consult with and organize the shipbuilding sector. From the outset, labour unions were involved. Roosevelt set up a Shipbuilding Stabilization Committee with representatives from the Navy Department,

30. Drent, "Labour and Unions in a Wartime Essential Industry," 52.

31. LAC, Clarence Decatur Howe papers, MG 27, IIIB20, vol. 52, file S-14-2, C.D. Howe to Ian Mackenzie, 23 February 1940; Directorate of History and Heritage, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa (hereafter DHH), 81/520/8200, box 247, file 7, J. Farrow to J. O'B. LeBlanc "Early History of Shipbuilding Programme," 20 April 1940; Archives of Ontario, Toronto, RG 7-12-0-710.7, "Department of Munitions and Supply Quarterly Summary January 1 to March 31, 1940".

32. NVMA, Versatile Pacific Shipyard fonds 27, series 109, box 554, file "Union Information 1939–1949," Department of Labour Canada "Copy of Report of Board of Conciliation and Investigation established under the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, 1907 in a matter of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, and in the matter of a dispute between the Burrard Dry Dock Company, Limited and the following classes of its employees: machinists, fitters, specialists and helpers, members of Vancouver Lodge No. 692, International Association of Machinists; pipe-fitters, plumbers, helpers, members of Local Union No. 170, United Association of Journeymen Plumbers and Steam Fitters of the United States and Canada; sheet metal workers, members of Local No. 280, Sheet Metal Workers' International Association, " 9 May 1940.

the Maritime Commission, private companies, and the AFL and CIO. Its main task was to lay out uniform pay scales for the different classes of shipyard workers and to deal with labour matters uniformly in various US regions or designated zones. A zonal master agreement covering the entire Pacific coast, which emerged from conferences and meetings between January and April 1941, set a uniform hourly wage of $1.12 for skilled shipyard workers, overtime for hours above a standard forty-hour week, and generous shift premiums.[33] The closed shop formed part of the master agreement in the US. It was a top down approach anchored in lengthy discussion and negotiation by the parties most directly involved, which stood in stark contrast to the lack of meaningful consultation with shipyard labour in Canada by government officials and agencies. Canadian shipbuilding was still seen as a temporary wartime expedient affecting only small numbers of workers, and there was a lack of vision looking to a future when there might well be expansion into merchant shipbuilding in a big way.

Under zone-wide wage stability, companies and unions negotiated closed shop clauses. The AFL metal trades department pledged no strikes to Roosevelt and rigorously enforced the policy.[34] The CIO, however, did not formally renounce the use of collective action if judged to be warranted in disputes with employers and in line with its organizing strategy. More importantly, the industrial unions wanted into the AFL-dominated Pacific coast shipyards and were willing to fight. Even so, the no-strike promise proved hard to keep amongst AFL-unions inclined toward industrial unionism. When AFL machinists joined CIO locals in strikes at shipyards in San Francisco, John Frey personally escorted 15,000 replacement workers through picket lines in US Navy trucks to keep production going.[35] Canadian counterpart unions expected the same sort of government involvement, higher wage rates, and action by key labour leaders. Unfortunately, Ottawa interested itself in shipbuilding only later and never matched serious, US-style consultation with organized labour. Instead it tended to tell the unions what to do and relied on heavy-handed

33. NARA, RG 254, entry 1, box 32, file SHPB 05/4236:41 Feb 3, Lubin to Emmerich, 15 April 1941. LC, JPF, container 14, folder 199, "Informal Joint Memorandum of Government Observers Covering Pacific Coast Shipbuilding Stabilization Conference – Whitcomb Hotel, San Francisco California – 3 February to 13 February 1941," 17 February 1941.

34. NARA, RG 254, entry 1, box 19, file SHPB 02/88:40, clipping, "Metal Workers Open Bargaining Drive with 'No Strike' Bid," 6 January 1941; Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, American Federation of Labor fonds, US MSS 117A, series 11B, box 9, folder "World War II Policy – National War Labor Board," "Report of President Green to the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor on the Conference of Labor and Industry called by President Roosevelt."

35. LC, JPF, container 14, folder 200, Pacific Coast Metal Trades Council, "Shipyards Strike – The Facts"; Richard Boyden, "The San Francisco Machinists from Depression to Cold War, 1930–1950," PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 1988; Roger Lotchin, "The Triumphant Partnership: California Cities and the Winning of World War II," *Southern California Quarterly* 88 (2006), 71–95.

orders-in-council to obtain what it and firms wanted. Notwithstanding, the closed shop soon became widespread in BC shipyards.

The closed shop easily allowed wartime shipbuilders to control workers and limit extended negotiation with numerous parties, as long as unions remained agreeable and compliant. It was far easier for a firm to deal with one labour grouping or a select number of unions than with a complicated combination of stratified trades. The unions virtually hand-picked workers and members; in return, owners and management relied on union leaders to fulfill labour requirements to meet or exceed production quotas. Henry Kaiser, a self-promoting capitalist, already a major builder of public works and big dam projects, who operated several major wartime shipyards in Oregon and California to truly impressive results, was a convert to the closed shop and accommodation with the AFL unions – in the words of Admiral Emory Land, chair of the Maritime Commission, "to the point of getting religion."[36] Kaiser's shipyards encountered fewer strikes and slowdowns because of good wages and conditions, thanks to union representatives who worked closely with management and suppressed dissent. In fact, the AFL unions recommended employees to Kaiser and his companies, while the circling CIO sought entry into these yards. The relationship built upon earlier good relations between Kaiser's corporate organization and organized labour, proving mutually beneficial for the goal of maximizing wartime production.[37] If Kaiser was still a relative newcomer to the field, the results achieved in terms of turning the Pacific Coast into a shipbuilding powerhouse owed much to the beneficial effects of the closed shop environment.

Several Vancouver-area firms shared Kaiser's views and early on adopted the closed shop in collective agreements with the unions. Both the Burrard Dry Dock and the wartime North Van Ship Repairs yards in North Vancouver ran closed shops.[38] Clarence Wallace at the former company and Donald Service and Arthur Burdick representing the latter reasoned that it made sense to co-operate with unions and seek partnership so as to maximize production. Burrard Dry Dock's wartime south yard, at Coal Harbour on the Vancouver side of Burrard Inlet, also closed its shop and consistently led the province

36. LC, Admiral Emory Scott Land papers, box 20, file "General Correspondence 1950–1952," E.S. Land to President Roosevelt, "Shipbuilding Program," 13 March 1942; NARA, RG 178, entry 27, box 16, file "Kaiser, Henry J. and companies," corporate booklet, *Facts in brief about Henry J. Kaiser*, 19 September 1946; Stephen B. Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington: The Rise of a Government Entrepreneur* (Chapel Hill 1997); Mark S. Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser: Builder in the Modern American West* (Austin, TX 1989).

37. Ric Anthony Dias, "'Together we build': The Rise and Fall of the Kaiser Steel Corporation in the New Deal West," PhD diss., University of California Riverside, 1995; Susanne Teepe Gaskins, "'The dam that would not stay put': Henry J. Kaiser and Shipbuilding on the Home Front," MA thesis, California State University Fullerton, 1987.

38. LAC, RG 24, series D-1-c, vol. 8117, file 1280-325, D.B. Carswell to K.S. Maclachlan, "Brief Summary of Shipbuilding Facilities in Canada," 25 November 1940.

in ship construction and production numbers. The closed shop and co-partnership with unions achieved the companies' and the government's goal: avoidance of interruptions and high production.[39] Despite widespread acceptance of the closed shop amongst major shipyards along the Pacific Coast and in British Columbia, the wartime shipyard operating under the name West Coast Shipbuilders bucked the trend, insisted on maintenance of an open shop, and kept the unions out of its yard as long as possible.

Labour and Production at West Coast Shipbuilders

Though a novice to shipbuilding like Kaiser and others, wartime West Coast Shipbuilders almost reflected a throw-back to the naked capitalism and traditional views of an another era, emboldened by boom times fuelled on lucrative government contracts for war purposes. The limited company arose in 1941 from Canada's sudden entry into shipbuilding and attempts by business interests in Vancouver to cash in on resulting opportunities. In early 1941, C.D. Howe, minister of the federal Department of Munitions and Supply, returned from Britain with the idea of building merchant ships in Canada in addition to the warship orders already placed or pending.[40] The British were planning to use US Lend-Lease funds to construct 60 cargo ships in the United States and 26 in Canada using a North Sands design from British shipbuilder J.L. Thompson & Sons. After considerable pressure from Vancouver-area politicians and civic officials, Ottawa gave a contract for eight of these vessels to Burrard Dry Dock as "a hand out of small dimensions to avoid criticism of ignoring [the] West Coast."[41] True, Eastern shipyards in Montreal were better positioned to compete on price and proximity to steel and engine producers, but British Columbia possessed a climate conducive to year-round construction without freeze-up and a labour supply still underutilized for war purposes. However, since the province possessed only a limited number of available berths capable of building ships the size of the proposed cargo freighters, quick expansion of existing shipyards and their work forces was imperative.

39. NARA, RG 254, entry 1, box 83, file 08/8, "Statement by Donald M. Nelson, Chairman, War Production Board, before the House Naval Affairs Committee, Tuesday morning, March 24, 1942, at 10 o'clock."

40. John de Navarre Kennedy, *History of the Department of Munitions and Supply*, vol. 1 (Ottawa 1950), 490; on the way to Britain, the ship carrying Canadian officials was torpedoed and sunk, and Howe given up for lost until rescued in an open lifeboat. This first-hand experience with the Battle of the Atlantic against Nazi U-boats likely reinforced in the minister of munitions and supply the need for adequate shipping and partly explains Canada's quick interest in major steel shipbuilding on a North America basis; Robert Bothwell and William Kilbourn, *C.D. Howe* (Toronto 1979), 128–129.

41. City of Vancouver Archives, Vancouver (hereafter CVA), Halford David Wilson papers, Add. MSS. 362, vol. 42, file 8, "Report of the Sub-Committee of the Special Committee re War Contracts," 30 January 1941.

Accordingly, a crown corporation, Wartime Merchant Shipbuilding Limited, with headquarters in Montreal and a local office in Vancouver, under former BC forester and businessman Harold R. MacMillan, was set up to co-ordinate efforts and deal directly with private companies.[42] MacMillan, closely tied by acquaintance and connection into Vancouver business circles, made sure British Columbia shipbuilders, existing and prospective, would be adequately looked after. Some local businessmen eagerly traded on this inside knowledge.

Believing that further contracts were only a matter of time, George Alexander Walkem, owner and patriarch of steel fabrication and maritime salvage interests on Vancouver's False Creek, quietly leased the next door shipyard land of Coughlan & Sons from the city and incorporated a new enterprise, taking the title of president. His son Knox Walkem was installed as managing director, while former shipbuilder and maritime consultant, the Scot William McLaren, was hired as general manager. Both these men held decided views on how they wanted to run the new yard and recruit workers. Meeting with MacMillan and his American counterpart Howard Vickery from the US Maritime Commission in May 1941,Walkem and McLaren interpreted MacMillan's reference to the "matter of [the] 'closed shop' and concern of C.D. Howe on Union action" as an unstated directive to maintain an open shop.[43] Such sentiments from government procurement authorities were reassuring to businessmen imbued with utter disdain for the New Deal-type shipyard policies imported into British Columbia from the United States. In other words, they heard exactly what they wanted to hear and were eager to please for the sake of getting orders from officials. Clearly, neither MacMillan nor Howe would openly object to the absence of a closed shop in the shipyard and may, in fact, have quietly countenanced the choice of policy.

A sure vote of confidence came with the awarding of the first contracts. Even though no actual work had started on building shipyard berths along False Creek, MacMillan ordered merchant ships from West Coast Shipbuilders to irritate and spur existing competitors – Burrard Dry Dock and North Van Ship Repairs both yards operating with closed shops. The US Maritime Commission had similarly favoured Henry Kaiser when traditional shipbuilders rejected the commission's schedules as unattainable and novices such as Kaiser constructed vessels faster than anyone expected.[44] West Coast Shipbuilders was certainly much smaller than Kaiser's organization and had much less experience in big capital projects, but MacMillan thought that choosing it might encourage BC shipbuilding along. MacMillan's talks with the Maritime Commission in Washington, D.C. in early June 1941 led the commission to order from him for the British sixty-three 10,000-ton and ten

42. Ken Drushka, *H.R.: A Biography of H.R. MacMillan* (Madeira Park 1995).

43. Privately-held, W.D. McLaren diary, 18 May 1941.

44. NARA, RG 178, entry 27, box 16, file "Kaiser, Henry J. and Companies," commissioner John Carmody to congressman Jerry Voorhis, 7 February 1942.

4,700-ton merchant ships in 1942, a request that taxed the productive capacity of shipyards in British Columbia and Quebec to the absolute limit.[45] West Coast Shipbuilders now worked to obtain some share of these contracts.

Thus a brand new private company, still working out finances with its banks, possessing virtually no facilities and no skilled workers, started building cargo ships with a markedly different labour policy than that in other Vancouver and Pacific Coast shipyards. When the Canadian Federation of Labour suggested that it could provide most trades people and labourers for the shipyard, McLaren was adamant:

> the other Unions in Vancouver are the Canadian Congress of Labour which is related to [the] C.I.O., and the American Federation of Labor … I insisted that we must be an "open shop." We could consider workers only on their merits as workers. If one Union would work harmoniously with another that would suit us, but we can't pick from one Union to the exclusion of the other.[46]

It might be easy to characterize McLaren's stance as anachronistic and hard-line anti-union. In reality, he was at heart a traditional shipbuilder holding older values learned abroad outside the country. McLaren had worked in shipbuilding two decades earlier and mostly in Scotland. The British shipbuilding industry was in gradual decline, beset by technological backwardness, declining shipping customers, and too many workers for too little work.[47] McLaren, a product and proponent of the long-established apprentice system, chose to leave this situation in Scotland behind. He had been a consulting engineer since arriving in Vancouver in 1927 and may well have been out of touch with contemporary labour conditions in North American yards.[48] With no experience building ships, Walkem customarily deferred to McLaren on the practical side of running the shipyard day-to-day.

The size and composition of the work force at West Coast shipbuilders was entirely tied to the availability of war orders and willingness of workers to accept prevailing wage rates. The total number of workers employed in the shipyard went from a standing start in 1941 up to over 5,000 in 1943 and then progressively declined as the need for ships eased and war industries

45. UBC, HRM, box 90, file 13, notes talk to 70th general meeting Canadian Manufacturer's Association, 10 June 1941.

46. McLaren diary, 2 June 1941.

47. National Archives of the United Kigndom, Kew (TNA), CAB 102/407, P. Inman, "Labour Requirements & Supply: Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering 1935–45"; Lewis Johnman and Hugh Murphy, *British Shipbuilding and the State since 1918: A Political Economy of Decline* (Exeter 2002); Hugh B. Pebbles, *Warship Building on the Clyde: Naval Orders and the Prosperity of the Clyde Shipbuilding Industry, 1889–1939* (Edinburgh 2000); Michael Lindberg and Daniel Todd, *Anglo-American Shipbuilding in World War* II*: A Geographical Perspective* (Westport, CT 2004), 68–85; Tony Milligan, "Trotskyist Politics and Industrial Work in Scotland 1939–1945," *Scottish Labour History*, 30 (1995), 104–120.

48. T.A. McLaren and Vickie Jensen, *Ships of Steel: A British Columbia Shipbuilder's Story* (Madeira Park 2000), 33.

contracted before and after war's end. On a company basis, the wartime bump in British Columbia shipbuilding was clearly short and intense in duration. Most of these workers were predominantly male, particularly in the skilled trades. Although women entered the shipyard in July 1943, no more than five per cent of the work force was female at any one time thereafter (Burrard Dry Dock and North Van Ship Repairs hired proportionately larger numbers of women than West Coast Shipbuilders and much earlier).[49] They found employment in the pipe shop, newer trades such as welding and spray painting, as well as clerical office work involving administration, purchase orders, and design. West Coast Shipbuilders initially offered ninety cents per hour plus four cents for cost of living to skilled workers (less than Burrard Dry Dock and North Van Ship Repairs paid) for a forty-four-hour week.[50] Unskilled labourers and women received less according to set pay scales based on task and experience. Government labour officials prohibited poaching of employees from other yards, which became a problem only when West Coast Shipbuilders started offering comparable pay rates to skilled trades under basic agreements at Burrard Dry Dock. Experienced and skilled workers generally gravitated to companies that paid better, particularly at times of growing labour shortage in some shipbuilding trades. Consequently, retention of trained workers was a constant nuisance in the shipyards.

The management at West Coast Shipbuilders was cognizant of this situation, but remained adamant on the closed shop issue when raised by union representatives and workers. McLaren declined unions' repeated representations, telling one AFL metal trades delegation "of our impartiality to all Unions, and our determination not to be dominated by anyone."[51]

In other words, the company could pay whatever it pleased – well below going rates – and dismiss workers at its discretion, powers supervisors and foremen wielded constantly. Indeed, its senior management wanted the government to set aside the existing Burrard standard facilitating the closed shop in Vancouver and Victoria shipyards and oblige all workers to come under wartime order-in-council, P.C. 7440.[52] McLaren merely acted as if the unions

49. McLaren diary, 14 July 1943; recruitment of women into the shipyards met resistance from some traditional unions; Kersten, 106–107; in the United States, at the peak of wartime shipbuilding in December 1943, women comprised 11.5 per cent of the work force nationally, though in certain Pacific Coast emergency shipyards, more than a third of new hires were female; Hirshfield, 480–481.

50. NVMA, VPS, fonds 27, series 111, file 82.3, Burrard Dry Dock Company "Labour Agreements," 28 September 1942.

51. McLaren diary, 26 August 1941.

52. LAC, RG 27, Reel T-10092, vol. 88, file 423.2:10 pt. 1, Knox Walkem to A.W. Crawford, 17 September 1941; the unions condemned the application of P.C. 7440 and reminded other shipyards of the federal minister of labour's assurances that existing agreements should stay in effect for the duration of the war; LAC, TLCC, MG 28, I103, vol. 92, file 1, W. Bray to D.M. Service, 9 June 1941.

did not exist and believed that every employee was free to negotiate with the enterprise on equal terms. Growing discontent among the firm's workers found expression in numerous complaints to unions and government officials.

McLaren's antipathy to unions and a closed shop might have made some sense in a busy place, but the yard definitely was not that. Of 50 merchant ships that Ottawa contracted for during 1942, the company received at first a mere two – and after all the other shipyards. McLaren and Knox pressed either for additional contracts or for transfer of orders from other companies, such as Yarrows in Victoria, which had little available labour and concentrated on building warships. Yet West Coast Shipbuilders was an unproven quantity, delivered its first ships at a pedestrian pace, and was experiencing obvious labour disquiet.[53] These signs should have alarmed procurement authorities. When the federal minister of labour wrote to inquire about the firm's union agreements, McLaren replied that it had none. McLaren proudly told MacMillan during a site visit that "we are continuing as an open shop, and had plenty of applications from unskilled men."[54] MacMillan's procurement officials wanted to introduce a system of piecework payments in lieu of hourly pay and move towards round-the-clock production. The unions generally opposed such moves. They also rejected McLaren's proposal for a nine-hour work day and no overtime pay for weekends, especially in the absence of union recognition and collective bargaining. McLaren, apparently under MacMillan's influence, sought to dictate a work environment with little or no consultation. How the policy affected production remains hard to determine, especially as shipbuilding took up all available berths, including those at newcomer West Coast Shipbuilders.

In due course, West Coast Shipbuilders built 53 standardized 10,350 ton vessels (55 keels laid) for war purposes: twenty-two North Sands cargo ships, eighteen Victory cargo ships, seven Victory tankers, three Canadian-type cargo ships, and three maintenance ships.[55]

Burrard Dry Dock constructed roughly double that number and North Van Ship Repairs, splitting its business between refurbishing and warship construction, achieved about the same volume. The height of BC wartime merchant shipbuilding occurred during late 1942 and 1943. Canadian efforts became in effect an offshoot of the US Maritime Commission's massive expansion of North American shipbuilding.[56] Washington ordered vessels for Britain

53. TNA, MT 9/3392, "New Building in Canada: Deliveries October 1942–March 1943," 23 October 1942.

54. McLaren diary, 21 October 1941; MacMillan undoubtedly also saw the large sign that McLaren had put up at the front gate declaring in big letters that the shipyard ran an open shop.

55. DHH, 81/520/8200, box 247, file 6, "Ocean Going Merchant Vessels Constructed in British Columbia Yards during War Years 1939–1945".

56. Frederic C. Lane, *Ships for Victory: A History of Shipbuilding under the US Maritime*

through Lend-Lease, and Canada set up the equivalent Mutual Aid. MacMillan, through cordial relations with US Admirals Emory Land and Howard Vickery, gained additional hull orders and faster provision of American steel and key components such as engines and gears.[57] Because Vancouver could launch vessels year-round and had excess capacity, its yards received most of the contracts placed in Canada for the US-funded merchant ships. The British North Sands design gave way to the Maritime Commission's Liberty and Victory hulls and a Canadian variant, for which West Coast Shipbuilders had four available building berths.[58] Ships departed West Coast Shipbuilding at regular intervals – roughly two per month (time from keel laying to launch was about eight weeks) – not a bad record for a new yard, where most workers trained on the job and materials were in short supply.[59] Kaiser and Wallace's facilities, however, did better and boasted happier workers. Wallace, soon out of favour with MacMillan over implementation of continuous production which Burrard's owner considered unnecessary and disruptive, sided too often with unions and employees for McLaren's liking. West Coast Shipbuilders did not worry about accommodation and blocked a closed shop as long as possible. Labour relations in the shipyard reached a nadir in early 1943.

Union Drives Face Company Rebuffs

At first glance, the impending confrontation between the company and its workers may seem to fit the pattern of militancy and aggressive organizing prevalent elsewhere in Canada that swept across some war industries during that same time period. In Central Canada, workers faced off with obstinate employers for better working conditions and higher wages as well as the right to organize collectively in manufacturing and munitions industries. British Columbia, in this sense, was not immune to occasional strikes among war workers. The movement for a closed shop at West Coast Shipbuilders started when union representatives gradually came to realize that their approaches to management were not working and they needed to persuade workers directly. McLaren bluntly told union spokespeople: "We are determined not

Commission in World War II (Baltimore 1951), 82-83; NARA, RG 178, entry 28, FRC box 158, binder "Canadian Munitions Program charts - prepared by the Joint War Production Committee of Canada and the United States [Admiral H.L. Vickery's copy]," 17 February 1943.

57. NARA, RG 178, entry 28, FRC box 158, file "Joint War Production Committee," H.L. Vickery to J.S. Knowlson, 12 November 1942.

58. NARA, RG 178, entry 27, box 6, file "Canadian EC-2 Contracts," notes "Canadian EC-2 Contracts-Western Pacific Shipbuilders"; NARA, RG 178, entry 35, box 13, file MC 111.1.1., W.E. Spofford, "History of EC-2 Emergency Ship Design."

59. TNA, ADM 1/11684, "Visit of the Director of Merchant Shipbuilding to North America, September 1942," 25 September 1942; approximately 4,500 workers were employed at West Coast Shipbuilders at this time.

to have a 'closed shop' and surrender our rights of management."[60] Custom and common law accorded the owners certain prerogatives to exercise control over who worked in the shipyards and how they were treated. McLaren held out that unions could do nothing for employees that the company had not already done. When many workers walked out because the firm refused to pay double-time over the Easter holiday weekend, MacMillan praised McLaren behind the scenes for his handling of the situation. Further labour unrest and strikes followed after the federal minister of labour tried to impose continuous production in Vancouver-area shipyards.[61] This clumsy attempt to work shipyards on a 24-hour day over seven days per week on a three-shift basis was tried nowhere else in Canada, but was commonplace in the US through supplementary amendment to the Pacific Coast zonal agreement. Since AFL machinists refused to work on a seven-day basis without the same pay and terms governing US shipyards, implementation in Vancouver was troubled and delayed. The marine boilermakers meanwhile agreed to the terms offered by the government pending the outcome of a royal commission and presentation of a formal agreement for signature.

Similar lack of unity within labour ranks impeded effective organizing at West Coast Shipbuilders, wholly to the advantage of management. McLaren contrived to conclude an agreement with the marine boilermakers and iron workers union local no. 1 but balked at the demand for a closed shop, since "we had nothing further to discuss on that matter, and if they wanted to apply for a conciliation board they should do so."[62] The presence of workers belonging to the newer amalgamated welders and burners union, in a trade jurisdiction that the boilermakers claimed, allowed the company to play the unions off against each other and buy time. The welders signed an open shop agreement,

60. McLaren diary, 31 March 1942; however, Arthur Hills, the Canadian National Railways visiting Chief of Personnel sent by the Department of Munitions and Supply to look into BC shipyard conditions, advised McLaren days previously about "the growing strength of the Steel Workers Organization of Canada [a CIO union known for its aggressive tactics] and said it would probably be better to be joined up with the Boilermakers Union than with S.W.O.C." *Ibid*, 26 March 1942; C.H. Millard, *Victory Needs Steel* (Toronto 1943); the United Steel Workers of America actively organized in Canada's wartime manufacturing industries and eastern shipbuilding yards; Mark McColloch, "Consolidating Industrial Citizenship: The USWA at War and Peace, 1939–1946," in Paul F. Clark, Peter Gottlieb, and Donald Kennedy, eds., *Forging a Union of Steel: Philip Murray, SWOC, and the United Steel Workers* (Ithaca 1987), 50; Newberry Library, Special Collections, Chicago, Pullman Company collection, RG 2, series 1, box 25, folder, 652, flyer "Pullman Shop Workers Vote CIO," March 1944; Robert McDonald Adams, "The Development of the United Steel Workers of America in Canada, 1936–1951," MA thesis, Queen's University, 1952; Douglas G. Cruikshank, "Dominion Wartime Labour Policy and the Politics of Unionism, 1939–1945: The Experience of the Canadian Congress of Labour's Eastern Canadian Shipyard Unions," MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984.

61. Chris Madsen, "Continuous Production in British Columbia Shipyards During the Second World War," *The Northern Mariner*, 14 (July 2004), 11–13.

62. McLaren diary, 13 May 1942.

a move which their own brethren from the amalgamated shipwrights, joiners, and caulkers denounced.[63] Although the boilermakers actually signed up more welders, management consistently sided with one or two unions, breaking ranks, and pointed to the welders' open shop agreement as the reason why they could not offer any closed shop. As the boilermakers acted on McLaren's brazen challenge and applied to the minister of labour for a decision on a board of conciliation and investigation under the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, managers used any opening to divide union ranks and block moves toward a closed shop.[64] The management at West Coast Shipbuilders remained as immovable as ever.

McLaren certainly never attempted to conceal his strong views, either privately or in public. George Currie, a local labour relations officer writing to the federal deputy minister of labour, noted that McLaren "has stated on a number of occasions that the company is operating on an open shop basis and will continue to do so" while negotiations with the boilermakers "are at a standstill, both parties having refused to alter their attitude on the closed shop issue," and "he [McLaren] is of the opinion that the government should take action to eliminate closed shop arrangements in war industries."[65] Since other Vancouver yards operated well with the closed shop, this hard-line attitude was exceptional, went beyond what even authorities deemed realistic, and probably reflected more the manager's personal inclinations. McLaren just did not want demanding unions because he saw them as impediments to a company's natural prerogatives and rights as an employer. A British labour delegation, which toured the West Coast Shipbuilders yard with McLaren on 16 January 1943, remarked on the conservative nature of Canadian shipbuilders, many of whom had been trained in the UK, compared to the US shipyards visited.[66] Such sentiments demonstrated the durability of older values that underpinned the principle of the open shop in Canada and the United States.

McLaren never appreciated that the closed shop was essential for a working partnership in industrial relations on the home front during war conditions: it actively involved organized labour in war production in return for

63. LAC, RG 27, reel T-10093, vol. 89, file 423.2:10 pt. 3, M. Mills to Pat Conroy, 16 June 1943; in Seattle and San Francisco shipyards, the United Welders and Cutters of America also made calls for an open shop and challenged the existing master agreement between companies and the AFL metal trades councils, resulting in some strikes; NARA, RG 254, entry 3, box 1, file "War Production Board Division of Shipbuilding Stabilization January – February – March – April 1942," Donald Nelson to senator William Langer, 16 March 1942.

64. UBC, Marine Workers and Boilermakers Industrial Union Local No. 1 fonds, box 1A, file 1, minutes executive board, 27 May 1943.

65. LAC, RG 27, reel T-10093, vol. 89, file 423.2:10 pt. 4, G.R. Currie to A. MacNamara, 7 July 1942.

66. LAC, WHM, MG 30 B121, vol. 2, file 2-1, "Report Submitted by Members of Government Delegation appointed by the British Ministry of Labour to study the methods of ship construction in United States."

some war-time recognition. McLaren told the royal commission sitting in Vancouver under Justice Stephen Richards from Winnipeg in summer 1942:

> There was no condition [in the first contract] that we were forced to maintain an open shop in our work. We reasoned that we could best do our best in the way I have described by making it possible for all competent men to get employment in our yards. We didn't ask what union they belonged to or suggest they join any union. It has been openly declared above our gate by a printed notice that this is an open shop. The reason we operate on open shop is, we were asked not to take men away from other shipyards … it is my understanding that when a closed shop agreement is signed, you have got to give the gate to the other men if they won't join up with the union with the closed shop agreement. It is not unknown that men have been obliged to give up their life work with a union due to the tyranny of another union forcing them to join it. We have tried to keep tyranny out of our yards.[67]

In other words, McLaren portrayed his enterprise as looking out for the interests of common, hard-working employees, union or non-union. He harkened back to the fanciful "legitimate" type of union leadership in Scotland's Clyde region, which apparently bore no comparison to the foolish irresponsibility that he saw in Canadian shipyard unions.[68] Even mention of Henry Kaiser's praise for the closed shop could not sway him. In due course, the closed shop turned into a rallying point for the unions in dealings with West Coast Shipbuilders.

Union representatives continued to press for a closed shop, although other, more pressing issues pushed the demand into the background. After releasing his final 1942 report, Justice Richards sought to reconcile the various parties, with the goal of achieving continuous production in BC shipyards; supplementary agreements, however, took several more months of hard negotiations and legal clarifications. In the interim, the boilermakers local in Vancouver, the largest union in area yards, struggled internally when members chose a newer leadership under William Stewart and Ottawa's representative in Vancouver, Alex McAuslane, had the local expelled from the CCL.[69] Communist influence steadily increased in the union as Stewart and his small group of politically motivated agitators wrestled power from the traditional trade unionists. The Communists legitimately attained the union's leadership by ballot and defended themselves legally against challenges in the provincial law courts.[70]

67. LAC, RG 27, reel T-10187, vol. 268, file 5, "In the Matter of the 'Inquiries Act' and of a Royal Commission to Examine into and Report as to the Most Effective Means of Securing Maximum Production in the Shipyards in the Province of British Columbia: Proceedings of Inquiry," 1101–05, 6 August 1942.

68. CVA, clipping file M8569, "Heated Debate: Closed Shop Opens Mouths At Enquiry," 10 August 1942.

69. LAC, TLCC, MG 28 I103, vol. 55, file 11, "Report of Commission appointed by the Executive Council of the Canadian Congress of Labour at its Sessions in Ottawa, January 9, 1943"; Marine Workers and Boilermakers Industrial Union Local No. 1 Retirees, *A History of Shipbuilding in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1977), 52–59.

70. UBC, MWBIU, box 9, files 9-11, "Court of Appeal on appeal from the Supreme Court of

Though BC Justice Sidney Smith ruled against the new leadership and upheld the CCL's claims, the injunction was subsequently set aside. Abella notes the juxtaposition: "For the left it was a major tactical victory. The Congress, to supporters and opponents alike, had appeared anti-democratic, rigid, vengeful, and wrong, while the Communists seemed democratic and flexible."[71] Later in November 1943, the marine boilermakers returned to the CCL fold as an affiliated union (without charter), to participate in a broader BC shipyard general workers' federation. The embattled Communists emerged from the internal struggle with a new sense of focus, tacit support from the union membership, and new faith in legal recourse. Stewart, with backing from at least those boilermakers who attended meetings, remained in charge for the time being.

Despite its acknowledged legal legitimacy, the union leadership found it hard to be taken seriously by those in charge of West Coast Shipbuilders. McLaren, speaking to Justice Richards and Stewart at a formal dinner in May 1943, described the "President of the Boilermakers' Union who seems to be an ardent reformer and I would judge only superficially informed on many of the subjects he professes to understand. One of the Labour men got up and wanted me to speak on why I do not care for [a] closed shop. I gave them a short talk on the importance of efficient shipbuilding and left out reference to [the] closed shop."[72] Stewart, however, wanted a closed shop as a tangible result to bolster his leadership. Alex McAuslane, his internal opponent similarly aware of its significance, told government officials that the CCL would not recognize any agreement between Stewart's boilermakers and the company, even if it provided for a closed shop, and would apply for legal injunction.[73] Consequently, much was riding on Stewart's demand for a closed shop at West

British Columbia from the Judgment of the Honourable Mr. Justice Sidney Smith, dated 20th May of March, A.D. 1943, between Stephen et al. and Stewart et al."

71. Irving Martin Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The* CIO*, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour 1935–1956* (Toronto 1973), 85; The Pacific Coast CCL drew a different conclusion at the time: "Taking the short view of the ruling, it might be considered a victory for a local union, but if one looks at it the long way, it might be anything but a victory. Indeed it may well prove to be a boomerang, because it opens up a whole field of serious possibilities: the right of a national or international to govern itself, to enact laws and amend or revise its constitution at national or international conventions, by the democratic rule of trial and error, retaining what is good and discarding what is bad." LAC, TLCC, MG 28 I103, vol. 72, file 17, "The Court Ruling," *Congress News*, 6 November 1943.

72. McLaren, diary, 18 May 1943; Malcolm McLeod, the boilermaker's business agent, told the press: "We want a closed shop so that full union rights can be guaranteed. They [management] are only fostering disharmony by not agreeing to the closed shop...We have a record of no major stoppages since the start of the war in the yards with which we have closed shop agreements because we have harmony in those yards." UBC, MWBIU, box 10, file 18, clipping, "Boilermakers Will Urge 'Closed Shop'," 17 May 1943.

73. LAC, RG 27, reel T-10094, vol. 90, file 423.2:10 pt. 7, F.E. Harrison to M.M. Maclean, 22 May 1943.

Coast Shipbuilders beyond merely greater union recognition and better protections for skilled workers. The Communists required some concession to push their grip over the boilermakers union and the shipyards.

Although some AFL unions had joined the amalgamated welders by accepting open shop agreements with the firm, the boilermakers' local and other unions intensified the campaign for a closed shop. Trucks and boats with loudspeakers began addressing workers from outside the shipyard, and meetings took place to organize nearby Hamilton Bridge as a closed shop. If that sister company became a closed shop, West Coast Shipbuilders might soon have to follow suit. This strong drive gave Stewart a sense of action and solidified his standing among members and the other unions, in defiance of the CCL and MacAuslane. However, a successful result required that West Coast Shipbuilders agree to a closed shop, which outcome McLaren and his staff stubbornly resisted.

In reaction to union pressure, senior managers at West Coast Shipbuilders eventually accepted talks with some locals, but they firmly opposed the closed shop. As Stewart's loudspeaker truck daily blared demands outside the gates, boilermakers and the company negotiated a basic agreement. McLaren penalized and summarily dismissed employees who listened to the trucks instead of working and called the police when he thought the union's truck or boat came too close to company property and shore lines. With the help of local federal officials, the firm and the boilermakers eliminated outstanding differences except the closed shop.[74] The boilermakers wanted all workers to join recognized unions within a month after any agreement coming into force, while McLaren insisted on an open shop. Unsigned AFL unions seeking a closed shop likewise "would support and work with other organizations in their efforts to make the yard 100% union yard."[75] To counter union propaganda, the company distributed copies of the draft agreement without the closed shop clause in an effort to show its "reasonableness." News that Ottawa settled large-scale shipyard strikes in Quebec during June 1943 by granting collective bargaining rights but no closed shop further stiffened management's resolve.[76] The company came to believe that it could win on the issue if it went to arbitration or at least delay its inception. Therefore, it stood to gain the most from a board of conciliation that Ottawa announced in July 1943 – not the unions, which had long sought government intervention.

74. McLaren diary, 24 May 1943.

75. CVA, Vancouver Metal Trades Council fonds, Add. MSS. 558, 566-B-4, minutes meeting, 16 June 1943.

76. LAC, RG 27, reel T-3032, vol. 429, file 211, clipping, "Ottawa to Run Two Shipyards in Quebec Area," 15 June 1943.

Setbacks through the Legal Approach

Union representatives pinned great hopes on the board of conciliation and the outcome of the legal approach. John Wilson, a judge from Ashcroft, chaired the body established under the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, with Fred Fearman standing in for the company and Kootenay District MLA Herbert Herridge chosen by labour.[77] Wilson had a reputation for conservative decisions and siding with established interests; Fearman would back corporate prerogatives; and Herridge, a British immigrant farmer turned CCF politician, championed workers' concerns in industry and the metal trades unions. Taking the closed shop issue to mediation was a gamble that could go in either direction. But, unless some breakthrough was made, the odds were stacked against labour receiving everything the union wanted out of the conciliation process.

The board began sittings at Vancouver's courthouse in early August 1943, invited interested parties to testify and submit written briefs, and for three months heard arguments. Conciliation required some concessions, which neither side seemed ready to offer. Thus the decision turned into an all-or-nothing dialogue, with one party certain to lose. Yet labour representatives were happy just to have someone finally listening to their long-held demand, particularly before an objective and impartial judge.

At the outset, Justice Wilson probably believed conciliation possible. William Stewart spoke on 9 August on behalf of eight unions, pointing out that the closed shop was standard in Canadian and US wartime shipyards, especially in the Vancouver area, and so West Coast Shipbuilders was in effect discriminating against its workers.[78] Its lack of effective partnership with organized labour might slow production of ships and the war effort, and so the closed shop was a simple demand appropriate for the circumstances.

Two days later, Knox Walkem turned these arguments around and maintained that an open shop was fairer to workers, made possible highly flexible production, and already achieved results. Union representatives strongly disagreed but showed even greater ire towards the turn-coat amalgamated welders who testified in favour of their open shop agreement with West Coast Shipbuilders Limited. Afterwards, the boilermakers' loudspeaker truck asked,

77. BCA, GR 1086, box 1, file 3, *An Outline of the Activities of the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Branch, under the Provisions of the Statute, in 1940, together with the Text of the Statute and Copies of the Regulations* (Victoria, April 1941), 10–11. The industrial and conciliation dispute files in the BC department of labour fonds GR 1073 held at the BC Archives end at "Mott Electric Company", although the boilermaker's union does have correspondence with other companies on various matters. Sharing a platform with Herridge, Stewart told a 1,000 strong picnic rally in Stanley Park that finally "management of West Coast Shipbuilders Ltd. and Hamilton Bridge Co. Ltd. will have to stand before a jury of public opinion and explain their open shop policy."; UBC, MWBIU, box 10, file 18, clipping, "Open Shop Policy: 'Managements Must Explain,'" 6 July 1943.

78. UBC, MWBIU, box 10, file 18, clipping, "Union Side is Outlined," 11 August 1943.

unfairly according to McLaren, if it was "more than a coincidence that somebody in the Welders was seen with Knox Walkem prior to the meeting coming out of his office," with "the inference that we had been in collusion with the welders."[79] The accusation was left unchallenged.

While West Coast Shipbuilders maintained no company union, it set up a so-called Yard Council with a labour co-ordinator, Alan Tolmie, from the Amalgamated Building Workers of Canada and representation from the open shop unions resident in the yard. For closed shop labour leaders, these arrangements resembled toady "yellow-dog" unions. Typically, actual representation was very limited in company-friendly labour organizations.

Justice Wilson suggested during the hearings a maintenance-of-membership clause in lieu of the closed shop, as appeared in some agreements with other BC companies outside the war industries. McLaren agreed at first because "while I would prefer not to concede anything, I recognized that some conciliation approach would be necessary, and I would raise no objection to the maintenance of Union agreements."[80] However, most of the unions said no.

By late September 1943, McLaren was telling Walkem to "resist this and yield nothing at the present time."[81] Consequently, Justice Wilson's honest efforts reached an impasse, with neither side willing to budge.

The board's public hearings ended divisively in October 1943. Lack of support for maintenance of membership was evident, while Justice Wilson failed to bring the two sides closer together. The two-day testimony of Myron Kuzych epitomized the low-point in the hearings: "If I oppose the present policy of this Union, it is only because I am honestly and conscientiously persuaded that the policy of this Union, with its closed shop and check-off system is so wrong, its evils so great, it is so consistent with everything that is good, just and beneficial to the workingman, that were he to grasp the full implication of this thing himself, then he himself would wish to see it abolished."[82] Kuzych, a Ukrainian-born naturalized worker at North Van Ship Repairs, was a vocal critic of existing union arrangements and leadership. Not surprising, many members of Vancouver locals despised him, while he himself told company representatives exactly what they wanted to hear. Howard White, who later succeeded Stewart at the head of the boilermaker's union in 1944, considered Kuzych at worst a paid agitator or at the very least a dupe of the employers: "It come [sic] up to a conciliation hearing and Kuzych appeared at this hearing to give evidence for the company. Against the union. He was opposed to the closed ship and everything we represented although he claimed

79. McLaren diary, 17 August 1943.

80. McLaren diary, 13 September 1943.

81. McLaren diary, 28 September 1943.

82. UBC, MWBIU, box 9, file 1, "Trial Report of Proceedings: Myron Kuzych," 12 March 1945. After his testimony before the board, Kuzych eventually faced this trial at which Stewart was his chief accuser, and soon after the union expelled him.

he supported some kind of true, pure unionism that was very hard to find in Canada."[83] McLaren, commenting on Kuzych's testimony about the unions' "rackets" and many of his co-workers' preference for an open shop, even questioned his motives since "apparently Kuzych had ideas of leading another type of Union from [the] Boilermakers."[84] Regardless, Kuzych conveniently fulfilled the firm's purpose. Stewart, who testified next, was on the defensive and had to explain why not all workers supported a closed shop. The boilermakers' mistimed distribution of a printed circular just gave the company more evidence for its cause. Perhaps most telling, McLaren was especially confident and upbeat when Justice Wilson and the board members retired to deliberate although union delegates remained ever hopeful.

In November 1943 news accounts reported a negative majority decision from the board of conciliation. Justice Wilson and Fearman favoured maintenance of membership while Herridge dissented in favour of labour's core demand.[85] The non-binding result went first to the federal minister of labour and then to the parties. West Coast's management quickly agreed to the finding. Although MacMillan's renamed Wartime Shipbuilding Limited had slowed launchings, halted continuous production, and directed the release of workers in all Vancouver shipyards, it was still building tankers and looked forward to contracts for naval auxiliaries and support ships for Royal Navy service in the Pacific and Indian oceans.[86] McLaren treated the board's decision as the final word and casually brushed off any approaches by unions to reopen the

83. Howard White, *A Hard Man to Beat: The Story of Bill White, Labour Leader, Historian, Shipyard Worker, Ranconteur: An Oral History* (Vancouver 1983), 121–122; Kuzych successfully pressed his case in provincial appeal court and to the Supreme Court of Canada, funded by the Vancouver Board of Trade, until he lost a historic appeal to the Privy Council in London, U.K. in April 1951; UBC, MWBIU, box 9, file 3, "In the Privy Council on appeal from the Court of Appeal for the Province of British Columbia between White *et al.* and Kuzych: Record of Proceedings"; Jack Stewart, a late comer to the controversy, felt Kuzych's expulsion unwarranted and retributive: "there was reason for charging him for something and trying him and exacting a penalty because of his appearance as a witness for the employer, but the penalty should have been something far short of expelling him from the union and putting him out of work."; Stewart, 114–115; Kuzych was discharged by North Van Ship Repairs in March 1945 immediately after his expulsion, as part of the company's closed shop arrangements with the union.

84. McLaren diary, 12 October 1943; McLaren had met with Kuzych prior to the start of the board of conciliation, when the latter first claimed there was widespread support amongst workers for an open shop on the North Shore; McLaren diary, 17 July 1943.

85. CVA, clipping file M 10260-1, "Board Rejects Closed Shop Bid," 5 November 1943; the federal minister of labour released the board's report to the public on 16 November 1943; UBC, MWBIU, box 10, file 18, clipping, "Closed Shop Refused: Security Clause is Advised in Dispute with Ship Workers," 18 November 1943.

86. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich UK, Vice Admiral James Wilfred Dorling papers, JOD/185/2, diary, 12 November 1943; LAC, RG 28, series A, vol. 568, file 200-985, agreement between H.M. Majesty and West Coast Shipbuilders Ltd., 29 May 1944.

issue. Management declined even to meet with union representatives, except to discuss the open shop.

In early December 1943, the unions announced non-acceptance of the ruling, which, they argued, simply confirmed the status quo. Maintenance of membership was no substitute for the closed shop, they contended. Stewart and other labour leaders met to decide on strategy and tactics, with the boilermakers taking the lead. McLaren refused to respond to what he called impertinent ultimatums, and when the eight unions threatened strike action, he warned that any vote "will not change our attitude," but "if work is interrupted there may be a cancellation of contracts."[87] In other words, the choice before workers was now either open shop or unemployment.

The limits of labour receiving a fair hearing through the legal approach were laid bare for the world to see. The conciliation process had robbed the unions of their most effective chances to close the shop at West Coast Shipbuilders. A full-blown strike or labour action might have succeeded a year or six months earlier, but as wartime BC shipbuilding started to contract by 1944, organized labour and workers became more and more vulnerable.[88] Any talk of an impending fight was really bluster. Worker militancy and aggressive organizing could not deliver the closed shop at West Coast Shipbuilders.

Draw or Defeat? Management and the Unions

The atmosphere at West Coast Shipbuilders in the first two months of 1944 was almost surreal. The union loudspeaker truck appeared daily; McLaren stood grim-faced at the shipyard gate with his loyal lap-dog union boys standing behind him and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police keeping a watchful eye at a distance; Walkem was in the office counting the profits and figuring out how not to give up too much under mandatory government renegotiation; and, throughout, workers remained disappointed that a resolution was taking so long and feared losing their jobs. The legal issues, while important to Stewart and the Communist leadership of the boilermakers union, encountered some measure of ambivalence from the type of employees working in the West Coast Shipbuilders yard, as "newcomers to industrial work, who were concerned primarily with jobs, wages and economic advance and often had no particular commitment to the union movement."[89] Wartime shipbuilding was temporary employment after all. The closed shop was far removed from the concerns of most everyday employees. The work routine continued, ships rolled – perhaps a little less often – down the ways, and people still with jobs received regular paycheques. The Shipyard Joint Conference – a new federation of Vancouver-area unions – worried about declining wartime business

87. McLaren diary, 18 January 1944.

88. TNA, ADM 1/17097, private secretary to financial secretary, 10 April 1944.

89. John W. Jeffries, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (Chicago 1996), 57–58.

and post-war prospects.[90] Yet this dawning realization that business and employment were shrinking was still not readily apparent to most workers in local shipyards. McLaren banked on their indifference, while Stewart and other union leaders promised them greater benefits and a brighter future. The art of salesmanship would determine what was ultimately acceptable and possible. It was in this context that Justice Stephen Richards arrived back in Vancouver.

Unlike the board of conciliation, Richards exceeded low expectations by getting the two sides talking again and carefully crafting satisfactory language. His appointment arose directly from the unions' application to the Department of Labour for a strike vote: "Judge Richards arrived in Vancouver on February 7, 1944. It has been stipulated that fifteen days would be allowed in which to arrive at some agreement. It was agreed that the right of the Unions to request a strike vote would not be affected."[91] This cooling-off period, which eventually extended to March, aimed to have the parties sit down, with Richards intermediary, air differences, and achieve some common understanding. It represented a last-ditch effort to salvage labour-management relations in the shipyard.

Most people involved already knew Richards from the previous royal commission, and the union representatives held a high regard for his impartiality and objectivity. Delegates to the AFL Vancouver Metal Trades Council reported after the first week:

> Efforts of Judge Richards to effect a settlement had not met with very much success. Unions, however, are standing by their determination to have closed shop agreements in this yard. They feel that the closed shop agreements in other yards will be affected if the West Coast fails to sign an agreement. While the situation looks hopeless at the present, some settlement may be made in order to avoid a strike for a showdown.[92]

If anyone was capable of settling the matter, Richards was likely the person to succeed. With enormous patience and forbearance, he consulted labour and management, offered suggestions and passed along counter-proposals, and slowly nudged both sides towards conciliation. He removed objectionable wording from agreements and redrafted clauses to give closed shop-like conditions without using the actual word. A draft union agreement, acceptable to most parties, was ready by 14 March 1944. Instead of a strike vote, federal labour officials arranged to ask different classes of shipyard workers to decide which unions they wanted to represent them and duly sign agreements on their behalf with the company.

90. LAC, TLCC, MG 28, I103, vol. 72, file 17, "Minutes of the BC Shipyard Federation Conference Holden Building, Vancouver, BC January 15–16, 1944."

91. LAC, RG 27, reel T-10094, vol. 90, file 423.2:10 pt. 8, "General Report of Shipbuilding Progress & Personnel Department, Wartime Shipbuilding Limited British Columbia 1943"; UBC, MWBIU, box 10, file 18, clipping, "Unions Welcome Move: Richards Will Probe Dispute," 4 February 1944.

92. CVA, VMTC, Add. MSS. 558, 566-B-4, minutes meeting, 16 February 1944.

With the prospect of large lay-offs looming, the votes proceeded, with some narrow victories leading to unforeseen and sometimes surprising results. The CCL dock and shipyard workers union squeaked out a mere one-vote lead over an AFL competitor, 44 to 43 among riggers. Justice Richards oversaw the voting, and the company, to show its good intentions, presented an agreement for signature the next day to the victorious side. The boilermakers went next, the biggest upset coming when voting welders and burners chose the amalgamated welders union over the boilermakers, 255 to 248.[93] Nonetheless, the firm signed an agreement with the boilermakers (minus the welders), and the AFL painters duly followed. Ironically, if a closed shop had been on the ballot, the boilermakers would have lost. This result was certainly sobering for Stewart and his supporters. Certain AFL unions still stood defiant, since it appeared "that Judge Richards had some concessions to give but the five CCL and Amalgamated Unions caved in and accepted the Maintenance of membership scheme. This is not acceptable to the three AF of L unions (Machinists, Plumbers and Engineers) and they will not accept that kind of an agreement."[94] They wanted the same deal as sister AFL locals in US Pacific Coast shipyards.

Despite strong speeches and pressure tactics, Stewart had not mobilized sufficient support to ward off rival unions. New leadership at the amalgamated shipwrights, which considered the signed agreements without a closed shop a major defeat and betrayal, ousted the union officers it deemed most responsible: "the subterranean cells of the L.P.P., a political sect which stands out as the crystallization of political degeneration has taken over control in the larger Unions, and a streamlined plan featured by sound-trucks, sound boats and loud speakers from which poured forth the gaseous blasts of the L.P.P. neophytes, interspersed with an occasional scream from pistol packin' mamas, pierced the atmosphere of the West Coast shipyard."[95] Communist action, whatever the agenda, was hobbled. A more radical approach had proved no more effective in delivering a closed shop than the compromising unions, to which Stewart and the boilermakers in the end acted so much like in accepting maintenance of membership to obtain an agreement. Worker militancy and aggressive organizing had not achieved the desired result in the end.

Not even the signed agreements and long-sought union recognition could protect workers. By summer 1944, West Coast Shipbuilders began laying off many workers and telling those who remained that it would need no more than 1,000 men after the war, if it remained in business.[96] Women and

93. McLaren diary, 21 March 1944; UBC, MWBIU, box 1A, file 2, minutes executive committee, 27 March 1944.

94. CVA, VMTC, Add. MSS. 558, 566-B-4, minutes meeting, 15 March 1944.

95. LAC, RG 27, reel T-10094, vol. 90, file 423.2:10 pt. 8, deputy commissioner RCMP to deputy minister labour, 3 June 1944.

96. LAC, RG 28, series A, vol. 210, file 196-2-31-2, report "Lay-offs in War Industry July 25 to July 31," 31 July 1944; West Coast Shipbuilders had already terminated a total of 1,682 workers

unskilled men were the first to go, as the unions closed ranks in favour of long-time, dues-paying members. The shipyard progressively switched from building to conversion and finishing work on naval auxiliaries earmarked for British naval forces in the Indian and Pacific oceans. The British Admiralty also asked the yard to take in the Blue Funnel liner *Menetheus* from the Ministry of War Transport for refit and alteration into an amenities ship for Admiral Bruce Fraser's British Pacific Fleet, arriving 18 January 1945 and scheduled for completion later that year.[97] This type of work put a premium on skilled electricians and metal workers, as opposed to the gangs of assemblers heretofore used in shipbuilding. Since West Coast Shipbuilders could make do with significantly fewer workers, McLaren was free to lay off and call back with scant reference to the unions under the maintenance of membership clause; a closed shop would have been much harder because union leaders had to be consulted and have a say. Angus McGugan, manager of the Canadian shipbuilder's association, described the enduring animosity in talks about post-war shipbuilding: "Mr. McLaren, General Manager of West Coast Shipbuilders Limited, who prepared and presented this Brief on behalf of the BC Shipbuilder's Federation, advises me that he had to occupy the platform for fully two hours while Labour representatives put questions to him. He also stated that they did not take it very amiss to be told that Labour had to put

through discharge, lay-off, voluntary leaving, and ill-health from late December 1943 to May 1944; UBC, HRM, box 113, file 6, J.A. Tyrwitt to A.C. Taylor, "Manpower BC Shipyards," 14 June 1944.

97. TNA, ADM 1/18525, British Admiralty Technical Mission to Admiralty, 27 October 1945; Peter V. Nash, *The Development of Mobile Logistic Support in Anglo-American Naval Policy, 1900–1953* (Gainesville, FL 2009), 34–38; Chris Madsen, "Dollars, Diplomacy and Fleets: John Maynard Keynes and Stage II Naval Requirements for the War against Japan," *International Journal of Maritime History* 19 (2007), 127; Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Allies against the Rising Sun: The United States, the British Nations, and the Defeat of Imperial Japan* (Lawrence, KS 2009); The British Pacific Fleet formed a task force within Admiral Chester Nimitz's US Third or Fifth Fleets and required logistics support ships, the so-called fleet train, to stay at sea longer away from operating bases, as was American practice. Repair and maintenance ships were paired with floating dry docks to provide forward mobile bases supporting fleet and amphibious operations. British Columbia shipyards converted large numbers of these ships and started construction on transport ferries, a British upgrade to the American Landing Ship Tank (West Coast Shipbuilders Ltd. was contracted for six out of a total 58), most of which were cancelled as no longer needed after Japan's surrender, throwing more shipyard employees out of work; LAC, CDH, MG 27 IIIB20, vol. 42, file S-9-25(2), D.B. Carswell to C.D. Howe "Admiralty Vessels," 20 August 1945; Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "One Last Crusade: The British Pacific Fleet and Its Impact on Anglo-American Relations," *English Historical Review* 121 (2006), 429–466; Thomas Hall, "'Mere Drops in the Ocean': The Politics and Planning of the Contribution of the British Commonwealth to the Final Defeat of Japan, 1944–1945," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 16 (2005), 108; Michael Coles, "Ernest King and the British Pacific Fleet: The Conference at Quebec, 1944 ('Octagon')," *Journal of Military History* 65 (2001), 121–122. Peter C. Smith, *Task Force 57* (London 1969).

its own house in order."[98] McLaren remained shamelessly unrepentant: the company's prerogatives and maximum flexibility to control, direct, and when necessary dismiss workers were duly upheld.

In March 1945, the Walkem family sold the shipyard to Colonel Victor Spencer, the owner of nearby Western Bridge and Steel Fabricators, and Frank Ross, a well-known Montreal businessman most recently director general of naval armament and supply in Ottawa, who was moving his affairs to BC.[99] Effectively, the wartime profits and capital in West Coast Shipbuilders were cashed out while the going was still good. Though Knox Walkem and William McLaren remained on the payroll for the transition, the new owners were singularly unsuccessful in attracting new business and continued incrementally laying off workers. The temporary nature of wartime shipbuilding in British Columbia, as even the additional Canadian work for the Royal Navy wound down, meant that the unions had simply run out of time and favourable opportunity. The union struggle for a closed shop at West Coast Shipbuilders must be judged as a disappointing failure for labour.

Conclusion

Canadian labour historians have so far paid little attention to the work experience and struggles in Canada's wartime shipyards as a subset of war industry and economic mobilization for total war, especially in British Columbia. In spite of Conley's clarion call in this journal's pages back in 1991, they have been slow to integrate scholarly work and primary sources in the United States, extend beyond the theoretical trappings of their own field, and subscribe still to an overarching view that successful outcomes through worker militancy and aggressive organizing applied uniformly outside Central Canada.[100] This study has told the story of a single issue in one wartime British Columbia shipyard giving some context of its local and Pacific Coast dimensions pertaining to the World War II shipbuilding effort in North America. The attempt on the part of labour to obtain a closed shop at West Coast Shipbuilders was thwarted by strong employer opposition to the very proposition and delayed by the choice to pursue a legal approach rather than direct action.

98. Marine Museum of the Great Lakes, Kingston, Canada Steamship Line Corporate (Davie Shipyards) fonds, series B-II, box 24A42 (993.2.22), file 12.9, Angus McGugan to R.B. Thomson, "Post-war Shipbuilding – Brief," 13 March 1945; UBC, MWBIU, box 10, file 18, clipping, "Shipbuilding's Future Sound with Co-operation by Labor – McLaren," 10 March 1945.

99. CVA, clipping file M10260, "Spencer Purchases West Coast Shipbuilding, False Creek," 31 March 1945. Two years later, West Coast Shipbuilders was sold to Arrow Transfer Company Limited which used the large assembly sheds for warehouse space. The wood structures burned to the ground during a major fire in 1968.

100. James R. Conley, "Peculiarities of the British Columbians," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (1991), 190–192.

Many Pacific Coast wartime shipbuilders in Vancouver and elsewhere recognized the value of the closed shop for harmonious relations with unions as co-partners in war production. Indeed, the closed shop, at times, seemed far more beneficial to employers and the union bureaucracy than to labour in general. William McLaren and the rest of the management at West Coast Shipbuilders, however, believed differently and insisted on an open shop, irrespective of union affiliation or membership. The attitude reflected the durability of older values amongst some employers in regard to the closed shop which stood contrary to the cooperative and regulated model espoused by the New Deal in the United States and to a lesser extent in Canada. Clearly, not every industrialist had bought into the idea and were left free to push their interests and firmly held views in day-to-day relations with workers. The open shop movement in the United States and Canada gained traction from these convictions.

The union campaign, privately and publicly, to push for a closed shop at West Coast Shipbuilders invited a strong counterreaction from the firm and McLaren, who likewise vigorously defended the stance before an appointed board of conciliation. The Communist-led boilermakers, inspired by the win over the CCL in the courts, had hoped to get a favourable hearing before the law. The negative majority outcome, however, was hardly surprising because labour during the war seldom fared well in such boards and government, according to Fudge and Tucker, was inclined to coercion.[101] Any compromise and concessions made generally favoured employers. It was the first serious tactical mistake on the part of shipyard workers, as precious time was wasted. The loudspeaker trucks and threats of strike action represented desperate measures, designed more to put pressure on negotiations with management rather promoting radical action. In this instance, labour organizing was driven much less by militancy than calculated stunts to get some movement from the employer and the government on the main issue. Union leaders like William Stewart appeared reluctant to strike until almost all other routes by arbitration were exhausted. According to White, words were always bigger than actual concern for the interests of shipyard workers because Stewart "was in his glory campaigning against the Congress or heading up delegations to Ottawa or rearranging the world at party drinking sessions."[102] The observation is certainly heavily biased, but may in fact contain a kernel of truth.

The return of Justice Richards to broker an agreement between the parties, making no direct reference to the closed shop and oversee acceptance votes to bring privileged unions into the shipyard, achieved some measure of accord for a maintenance of membership clause, but few were left satisfied. McLaren and Walkem believed that they had given too much ground, Stewart and other union leaders became sell-outs to parts of organized labour, and workers

101. Fudge and Tucker, *Labour Before the Law*, 251.

102. White, 41.

lost their jobs one way or another, as wartime shipbuilding inevitably wound down. State intervention in the labour relations of this shipyard, consistent with the situation elsewhere in wartime Canada, was inadequate and uneven. Unlike the United States, the Canadian government did not attempt to reach zonal shipbuilding agreements at national and regional levels by serious consultation with industry leaders and labour organizations. It left matters in local hands, mostly for company owners and union locals to work out themselves. The discord at West Coast Shipbuilders was the direct result. Wartime shipbuilding was temporary in nature and treated as such with no long term prospects for employment amongst the thousands of people who laboured in the yards. If the closed shop at West Coast Shipbuilders demonstrated a failure to achieve a modicum of co-operation between labour and management in one of British Columbia's principal wartime shipyards, the wider significance for workers was the incompleteness of the wartime experience in furthering the cause of labour in the province, and their struggle to be heard in the years after. The exceptionalism of British Columbia labour history truly rests in its variety.

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