

Laundryworkers

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From September, 1918 to January of the next year, Vancouver's laundry workers fought a militant but bleak strike. They faced unrelenting opposition from their employers, who included such well-placed gentlemen as ~~Al~~ Alderman Cascade Kirk~~at~~, the major shareholder in the ~~Laundry~~ Laundry and Member of Parliament Crowe. These ~~two~~ two spearheaded the efforts to break the Laundry Workers Union and defeat the mostly female strikers' demands for a ~~minimum~~ living wage of ~~\$12/hour for a 44 hr. work week,~~ ^{\$12/hour for a 44 hr. work week,} ~~and~~ union recognition., and a closed shop. ¹

The workers had decided to launch a strike after meetings with the Vancouver ~~and District~~ Trades and Labour Council women's organizer Helena Gutteridge. ² Union agitation for Minimum Wages ~~for~~ women had reached a peak, with union women strongly supporting the notion of union contracts as well as or instead ~~of~~ of employer-dominated government commissions establishing minimum rates. The laundry bosses ^{offered to} bring the question of industry wage levels to the Minimum Wage Board ^{but adamantly refused to} ~~negotiate~~ a contract. ³

on September 13th

The strike began at the Pioneer~~s~~, Star, Canadian and IXL laundries. ³ From the beginning the workers ~~organized~~ established well-organized and well-populated picket lines, making it uncomfortable for company strikebreakers to ~~enter~~ ^{and leave} struck premises. The Cascade and Excelsior laundries continued to operate in the first period of the strike, but with considerable shortages of personnel. The Cascade ~~was~~ ^{signed} soon ~~signed~~ up. By September 27th the list of struck laundries had grown to include the Peerless and the Excelsior, with a total of 290 workers out. ⁴ By the end of October, despite intimidation from the employers, who claimed that the union would fine them five dollars. ⁵ strike ~~breakers~~ breakers were interested in signing with the union.

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The [redacted] strike was fought by both union and employers within the pages of the daily press as much as on the picket lines. By early September bosses unjustly proclaimed that union women earned \$8.50 a week, while the union countered that women on heavy machinery earned a mere \$7.25.

A week later

[redacted] the latter's figures had risen to \$40 to \$65 dollars a month for a supposed 4 2 hour work week. The union [redacted] contested this, [redacted] stating that women had worked for years for a far lower rate. By the end of the month the supposed earnings had inflated to eighteen dollars per week. As the strike continued the union offered progressive arguments as to women's right to earn a decent wage. They showed that most of the women and girls working in the industry were providing for dependents through their employment, whether supporting widowed mothers, their brothers and sisters, older [redacted] parents unable to work, or were themselves widows of veterans. Women had the right to [redacted] earnings commensurate with those that men received, after their all [redacted] dependents [redacted] needed their earnings as much as those of male workers did. The union accused the bosses of provoking the strike; they had known of the unrest amongst their workforce and had been consistently unwilling to resolve issues long under dispute. The union, promoting a popular argument of the time, stated that it was impossible for [redacted] young women to remain both in appearance and lifestyle, respectable at the [redacted] existing low wage rates.⁶

The [redacted] propaganda war escalated with the onslaught of the Spanish flu epidemic in November. Leaders of the union movement died from the illness as well as four striking laundry workers, who were picketing under adverse fall conditions. [redacted] The trade union movement halted all meetings in an attempt to stop the contagion from being passed. The employers

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publically blamed the strikers for the epidemic, stating that ^{contaminated} laundry could not be cleaned because of the strike. Unionists quickly countered, offering to run laundry services in hospitals and other institution free of charge for all those with flu in their homes. While this offer was refused, the workers willingness to provide services and place themselves at risk ~~helped~~ helped to cut across public hostility to the ~~strikers~~ strikers. ⁷

The owners employed diverse tactics to break the strike, ~~beyond~~ beyond their publicity campaign. They held out the offer of arbitration through the minimum Wage Board again and again to the union, expressing their willingness by October to pay \$10.50 an hour. ⁸ The employers, after mediation by ^{Deputy Minister of Labour,} J.D. McNiven and intervention by the Attorney General finally agreed to reinstate all strikers, institute ~~some~~ ^{some} form of wage increase, but continued to refuse union recognition and the implied closed shop. ⁹ Strikebreakers were intimidated, and union workers sent letters in mid-November ~~offering them~~ stating, "I understand that you desire to return to work" and proceeding to offer them their jobs back. ¹⁰ The courts ^{believed this} indicated that ^{the owners} were critically short of skilled labour. ^{and police} were enlisted to protect strikebreakers and frame striking workers. A number were arrested and convicted in the basis of scabs testimony of assault with no corroborating evidence. The union was forced to spend much-needed strike funds on defense campaigns, and ^{support} money for ^{the} families of convicted strikers. ¹¹ Struck laundries attempted to recruit oriental workers, but the Chinese laundries refused their assistance, supporting the strike. ¹²

The course of the strike moved from hopelessness to near victory and then finally to defeat, as the employers withstood workers demands for a long enough time to break the union.

The laundry workers of this time ~~were~~ were well situated to enforce a walkout, Laundries handled not only personal clothing and linens

but major contracts from boats, hotels and other institutions. The work was labour intensive and took some training to perform safely and ~~the~~ efficiently.

~~When the union was organized in the industry in 1934, a fairly~~ A fairly large work¹⁴ force was needed to keep the operations running. Not only were the union women in a key position to shut down the plants but ^{because it was an industry} engineers and drivers were also organized into the same local and the same strike.

Without the engineers the finicky steam engines could not be started properly and maintained. Laundries operated on a pick-up system; drivers were essential for dirty laundry to be delivered and the clean returned.

When ~~the~~ employers ~~claimed~~ that the struck Cascade Laundry was working to capacity with a scab labour ~~force~~, the union countered that this was impossible: the drivers were still on strike and the work was not being brought in.¹³

The union held fast to its demand that an agreement be reached despite mounting pressure to use the Minimum Wage Board. The close relationship between Washington State unions and BC unions was demonstrated at the beginning of the strike when workers were dissatisfied with new minimums offered to workers in the industry because they were below levels achieved in Washington State.¹⁴ The union was further angered by Alderman Kirk's statements of support for the latter carrier's union receiving a wage in the light of his refusal to recognize his own employees union.¹⁵ Throughout the strike the union attempted to recruit strikebreakers to its ranks and to extend the strike to other laundries, it was successful to some degree with both of these efforts. Again and again the workers refused arbitration for negotiations. The workers actively sought and received support from the rest of the labour movement, who donated generously to the strike fund.¹⁶ The strikers appeared consistently at labour council meetings. They also sought the intervention of city council against Alderman Kirk, showing

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Some mistrust ^{NOS} expressed at a later point in the strike when the top leadership of the VTLC ^{NOS} placed on the negotiating committee of the union. In part this move came from a desire to prove to the employers that the strikers were not isolated and that the union movement was willing to escalate its support for the strikers, if necessary. It also came from a wish to oversee the use of the ^{numerous} donations given to the strikers; unions had given liberally to the strike, "but so far they have done so without being in ^{the} position to acquire first hand information on the situation." They wanted to find out if the hard stance of the employers was a result of "misapprehension" as to the intentions of the union or their uncompromising opposition to the closed shop. While men had led the union's negotiations, despite their small numbers, in the ~~laundry~~ industry, this ^{concern} ~~concern~~ may have stemmed from ^{the} ~~the~~ gender of the strikers, who were considered inexperienced in trade unionism. The new negotiators soon learned that the problem resided clearly in the employers' house, not with the women on strike. ²²

By the end of December there was a decided shift in union strategy. While the strikers held fast, the Minimum Wage Board had decided to hold hearings into the wages in the laundry industry. The union conducted questionnaires to workers who stated that they needed between \$14.85 to \$20/ week to live. A single mother, quoting the last figure stated that ~~the~~ ^{was} ~~was~~ and tear on workers' clothes in the industry was extreme. Workers also mentioned that there ~~was~~ ^{was} no sick benefits or insurance and that their wages had to cover these exigencies. Gutteridge, appearing before the commission stated that women were facing high post-war inflation and needed a wage increase. The commission declared a \$13.50/week minimum wage, which was legally binding upon employers. The B.C. Federationist the labour press of the time, hailed this as a major victory, stating that organization counted for more than employer concessions. ²³

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It was clear that the union had won a victory through its willingness to fight for decent wages for women. The problems with the minimum wage legislation were swiftly pointed out by Gutteridge, eighteen was the lowest age covered by the act, all that employers need do now was to hire women below the age of eighteen and continue to pay them a lower scale. She demanded that the ~~NA~~ board force employers to hire only women covered by the declared scale or to extend it to all workers in the industry, withstanding age. ²⁴ Thus the act "practically reestablished the inadequate wage existing before the strike"..²⁵ ~~two~~ ^{one} years later the union was ^{still} trying to achieve a wage scale of more than \$8/week for 'girls' ~~under~~ under 18.

With the minimum wage established the ~~strike~~ strike collapsed, despite the failure to achieve union recognition and a closed shop. By the end of January the workers had ~~z~~ returned to their jobs and the union faded out in all but a few ~~shops~~ shops. The problem that the strikers had addressed in the beginning, that had forced them to hit the bricks in the first place was not resolved: minimum wage legislation was only as ~~good~~ good as a union to enforce it. Without a contract the language could be phrased to as to work in employers' interests, and without a contract the union had no means of enforcement.

FOOTNOTES

1. BC Federationist Sept ⁶ 1918, ~~Sept 13/1918~~ - Jan. 31/1919.
2. BC Fed. Sept. 6/1918
3. BC Fed. Sept. 13/1918
4. ^{BC} Sept Fed. Sept 27/1918
5. ^{BCF.} Oct 25/18
6. BCF Sept. 13/18
Sept. 20/18
Sept 27/18
7. ^{BCF} Nov. 1/1918
8. ^{BCF} Oct 4/1918
9. ^{BCF} Oct 11/1918
10. BCF Nov. 15/1918
11. BCF Dec. 13/18
12. BCF Oct. 18/18
13. BCF Nov 8/18
14. BCF Sept. 6/18
15. - ibid.
16. BCF Sept 6/18 - Jan 31/19
17. BCF Nov. 22/18
18. BCF Nov 29/18
19. BCF Sept 27/18
20. BCF Nov. 8/18
21. BCF Oct. 11/18
22. BCF Nov 8/18
23. BCF Dec 20/18
24. ibid
25. Marie Campbell, pg. 180
- 26.