A Strike, a Conference, and a Riot

DECEMBER 1929 TO JANUARY 1930

*Articles may not be exchanged.* — We are forgetting how to give presents. Violation of the exchange principle has something nonsensical and implausible about it; here and there even children eye the giver suspiciously, as if the gift were merely a trick to sell them brushes or soap. Instead we have charity, administered beneficence, the planned plastering-over of society’s visible sores. In its organized operations there is no longer room for human impulses, indeed, the gift is necessarily accompanied by humiliation through its distribution, its just allocation, in short through treatment of the recipient as an object. Even private giving of presents has degenerated to a social function exercised with rational bad grace, careful adherence to the prescribed budget, sceptical appraisal of the other and the least possible effort.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*¹

The bold type of the December 1929 headline in the *Daily Province* leaped off the page: “Vancouver Millionaire Pays Monthly Allowance to Knight of the Road.”² For all those who dreamt of the day of reckoning, when wealth would be redistributed from those who owned it to those who needed it, this report raised hopes only to cruelly dash them. “Somewhere on the continent,” explained a *Province* newsie, “is a tramp with the wanderlust that every month can present himself at any bank on the continent and receive an allowance which will continue as long as he lives.” Sadly, this was not a
universal social program but a private contractual arrangement between two individuals: the rest of North America’s wanderers would have to find their own millionaire. The nameless tramp’s benefactor was Major-General A.D. McRae, a successful businessman and one of British Columbia’s most powerful political figures in the interwar years. McRae’s government service came in many forms: he had acted as quartermaster-general for Canadian forces overseas during the war and would return home to become a member of Parliament and senator in turn. He even experimented with third-party movements as one of the founders of the short-lived Provincial Party. Yet his crowning achievement — if we can call it that — would come in 1930, the year after the publication of this story, when the Conservative Party machine he built secured for R.B. Bennett the office of prime minister.\(^3\) But before McRae could become king-maker (by unmaking Mackenzie King), he first had to cheat death on a long and lonely road.

On an automobile trip through the Rockies, McRae noticed a tramp, “unshaven, ragged, tired and dishevelled,” on the side of the road and offered the “ne’er-do-well” a lift, which he “gladly accepted.” After motoring a while, the car suddenly plunged into a ditch and flipped over. The tramp extricated himself without serious injury, but the general was helpless, pinned beneath the automobile. Then, “with almost superhuman effort,” the tramp managed to lift the car by himself, free McRae, and administer first aid.\(^4\) The tramp as Good Samaritan and the millionaire as needy victim: we do not come across this type of story very often. Yet the newsie’s account does not allow us to linger long over this nameless itinerant’s selfless act. Instead, we are put in McRae’s shoes and asked to sort through the ethical questions involved in recognizing this heroism. “How to reward the tramp was the problem,” the reporter observed. “If he was given a large sum of money it would be of no permanent benefit.” The tramp’s thoughts on his new-found “cash allowance” were not recorded, although it was implied that he was grateful for this “token of General McRae’s thanks.”\(^5\)

In McRae’s decision to redeem his life with a reward that regulated its recipient, we can discern more than a hint of what Adorno characterized as the “sceptical appraisal of the other.” From the few details available to us, it appears that the tramp acted in the immediacy of the moment — a conjuncture of time and space that made irrelevant customary lines of authority and in which he alone possessed the power to save life or allow death — without any rational consideration of the potential economic worth of his actions. He did not demand that McRae promise to make him rich or even give him a job. In fact, he did not seek anything of “permanent benefit” before acting. In contrast, McRae’s “reward” betrayed a careful calculus, “a just allocation” that figured in the flawed and essentially illiberal character of the “Knight of the Road” to devise the form of the gift, a trust fund that instructed while it
rewarded (or was it the other way around?). Despite his heroism, this nameless tramp wound up in the same place as would hundreds of thousands of his brethren during the 1930s — on the receiving end of rationalized social relationships that created value and regulated behaviour. Even the most Romantic of stories — the homeless nomad, more accustomed to life in the jungle than civilized society, who “with almost superhuman effort” generously comes to the aid of those more fortunate than he — contains, it seems, the seeds of objectification.

For the moment, however, I prefer to stay with the mildly Nietzschean characterization of the tramp’s “almost superhuman effort.” After all, the possibility exists that if the tramp had not acted as he did, Canadians could have ended up with five more years of “King and Chaos”! More to the point, this tale will probably strike Marxists (and a few others) as raw material perfectly suited to conveying Walter Benjamin’s sense of historical materialism as a method that “appropriates a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.” Indeed, the very notion of the tramp as forerunner to the pulp fiction superhero, somehow able to accomplish what lay beyond the ken of most, seems to “brush” this history of objectification “against the grain” on its own accord, demanding that this irreducible moment of subjectivity be recognized.6

The following chapter will provide a proper account of the jungles, this as yet mythical “homeland” for the homeless. Here, we consider the winter of 1929–30 — now generally regarded as the opening of the Great Depression — in order to argue for the value of an anarchist interpretation of the struggles over relief provision in the city. In this context, anarchism’s insistence on exploitation and oppression as constituent elements of the liberal-democratic polity as well as on the possibilities of effective collective action helps us understand the ways in which these thousands of itinerants exerted pressure, set limits, shaped conduct, and moved from the margins to the centre (to choose phrases closely associated with agency and determination), all by making the smooth and orderly functioning of relief government both impractical in its current form and, as we will see, impossible in its next incarnation as well.

Strikes, public conferences, and riots are classical set pieces in the historiography of the Great Depression, and in December 1929 and January 1930, Vancouver was home to them all: an abortive strike of relief workers, a public conference of notables (and the not-so-notable) on the subject of unemployment, and a substantial number of public demonstrations, one of which ended in riotous circumstances.7 Over these two months, thousands of nameless, faceless men from the world over arrived in Vancouver just in time to find and place themselves in the midst of class war — the “state of emergency” that Benjamin argued “is not the exception but the rule.”8 In this period, the tripartite figure of the transient — as the thousands of itinerant individuals who

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walked Vancouver’s streets in search of sustenance or something else, as the masses conjured up by administrators and politicians in attempting to govern those thought to resist governance, and as the backbone of a Communist-led movement that set its sights on dismantling the social relations that divided citizen from outsider—dominated the public sphere, both initiating a political debate and forcing changes in the substance of that debate. Vancouver’s crisis, in other words, did not follow directly from the crash of stock markets but rather emerged from the countless decisions, individual and collective, that led thousands of migrant workers to congregate in that city that winter. Over the course of two months, the mass need for resources literally embodied in a mobile international proletariat destabilized and made obsolete the long-established local practices of governmentality grouped together under the name of “relief.” The obligations that came with satisfying the insistent daily demands of this seemingly inexhaustible mass of itinerant bodies for food and drink, shelter, and clothing overwhelmed the administrative capacities of the Relief Department to the extent that the long-standing mandate to investigate each applicant was discarded almost entirely. This breakdown of discipline would eventually cause officials to seek out solutions in the field of scientific management, reconstructing bit by bit the foundational practices of relief administration, investigation, and provision. In this way, the Relief Department’s traditional way of doing business was a significant casualty of the itinerant phenomenon of these two months.

What’s more, the itinerant invasion profoundly shaped the broader polity. Under the auspices of the Communist-led Vancouver Unemployed Workers’ Organization (VUWO), thousands assembled to employ the time-honoured tactics of street demonstrations and parades in a quest to secure cash relief at union rates for all, whatever their place of origin. In so doing, many personally witnessed, if not directly felt, the exercise of state coercive practices, leading them to engage Police Department officials in a battle over the rights of freedom of speech and assembly, and thereby prompting the jobless movement to publicly articulate economic and political challenges, the rights of citizens and the rights of workers. The VUWO’s rejection of practices that divided the working class into the deserving and the undeserving would, over these two months, prompt a series of political realignments, culminating in a civic conference intended by officials to publicly enact the creation of “community” consensus on economic issues. There, caught up in the demands of its role as stage manager of the public rituals of civic hegemony, Vancouver became the first municipality in North America (and possibly the only one) to endorse, even in a quasi-official venue, the principle of non-contributory unemployment insurance. This was a program to make capital responsible for the cost of relieving poverty, and its most devout local advocates were members of the Communist Party. More than five years before the idea of

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the On-to-Ottawa Trek entered some anonymous itinerant’s head, Vancouver had already unknowingly agreed to the Relief Camp Workers’ Union’s central demand. In these ways, the migrant unemployed made their very existence a crisis that undermined the solidity of well-established practices of rule.

**Fall 1929: A Tragedy**

An army of occupation from the prairies is drifting into Vancouver at the rate of several hundreds a month. It is an army equipped mostly with large bank accounts and household baggage and its coming will help to swell the sum total of Vancouver’s prosperity. . . . Some of the invaders, it is true, are arriving practically penniless, following a rainbow and hoping to find the fabled pot of gold in Vancouver. Others, however, and these are believed to be the majority, have already found the pot of gold in the harvest fields of the prairies, and are coming to spend the rest of their lives at ease. Still others, having gathered a comfortable stake, bring their capital with the object of starting business here.

*Vancouver Sun, 22 October 1929*

A city is like the human body. Unless the organs can function freely, and the blood circulate without restraint, an unhealthy condition is produced in the system which leads to lower vitality, lethargy and decay. . . . Every ratepayer in the city is vitally interested in the commercial activity, the payrolls and the industries of Vancouver. Every public building which goes up in the city speeds up business by so much, and puts gold into the arteries of the city’s community life.

*Vancouver Sun, 9 December 1929*

The years preceding the New York stock market crash of 29 October 1929, or Black Tuesday, as it became known, witnessed a record-setting surge of economic growth on Canada’s “Left Coast.” “It was the greatest boom that Vancouver had yet known,” Margaret Ormsby wrote in 1958: “The spirit of the city was still, as it had been at the beginning, predominantly materialistic. An eager, grasping, acquisitive community, it squandered its own resources of natural beauty, all the time extending its economic power until it held most of the province in fee.”10 As Ormsby’s antimodern interpretation makes clear, this concentration of capitalist power in the city largely depended upon the commodification of natural resources and of common unskilled labour

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throughout British Columbia. In practical terms, casual employment and labour mobility entailed the spatial separation of production and reproduction during this period of the life cycle: it was expected (and often necessary) that these men, when not needed for production in the hinterland, would reproduce their labour elsewhere, in urban centres and on homesteads across Canada, even in other countries.11

Throughout this period, the leading ideologue of Vancouver’s pro-growth movement was Robert Cromie, publisher and editor of the Vancouver Sun. Under Cromie’s stewardship, each issue of the Sun helped readers to fill their minds with the minutiae of the good life of the marketplace. The front pages, the business pages, the real estate pages, the society pages, even the want ads—all made visible the glorious machinery of the capitalist social formation. Each weekend, the Sun featured a different industry, explaining how each helped the “community” by providing products for citizens to consume and by increasing British Columbia’s total wealth. News coverage of the business world glorified the “cult of free enterprise and money-making,” observes historian Paul Rutherford; stories “thrilled with a sense of the drama and excitement and significance of the little doings of these worlds, never troubling to criticize or question.”12

A month before the market crash, Cromie’s lead editorial proclaimed, “Vancouver Must Look Ahead.” He scolded local politicians for their failure to expand storage facilities on the local waterfront to facilitate international trade, particularly with the Pacific Rim. “In planning expenditures,” Cromie wrote, “Vancouver’s public bodies forget that Vancouver’s progress is not temporary, but continuous. . . . If periods of national or international depression come, they can only affect Vancouver for short periods, because our prosperity must continue as long as our resources continue and as long as development in trade continues on the Pacific.”13 Growth, development, progress—all served as keywords of the modern liberal press, and Cromie explicitly yoked them to a Fordist vision of class formation. In an editorial lauding Henry Ford’s decision to pay seven dollars a day to auto workers, the Sun explained, “Higher wages mean a greater buying power, a wider market, greater absorption of all commodities, including that which the men themselves produce. . . . More wages mean more demand, more prosperity.”14 This advocacy of Fordism left several things unsaid: the package of “higher wages” and “more prosperity” also meant no unions, managerial control over all aspects of production, and various programs designed to Americanize immigrants and to reform the lives of workers and their families outside the workplace.15 With each turn of the page, Cromie’s Sun articulated the identity of the interests of the “community” and those of industry.

Nor did Black Tuesday prompt a more cautious line. On 30 October, the Sun reported on the belief of unnamed “expert observers” that the “market
crisis would pass today" and soon “show signs of returning strength,” adding that “the continent-wide impression is that the worst has passed.”16 A few weeks later, the editorial page hammered home the same message. “This continent is too rich for panics,” Cromie wrote, “too stable and secure to be injured by stock gambling.”17 He returned to this idea often: that the crash had done nothing to change the “genuine value” of businesses.18 “So long as North America is the production centre of the world,” he wrote, “unbounded confidence may safely continue.”19 Just before Christmas, the Sun began a three-week-long celebration of business. “New Prosperity Era Here,” proclaimed one front-page headline.20 On the last day of 1929, Cromie imagined the “stupendous” growth awaiting Vancouver in the coming year, which could “double the value of every home and every piece of real estate in the city, and double the earning power of every man, woman and child fortunate enough to live here.”21 And why had stock markets crashed? Cromie had an answer:

If any evidence were necessary to connect humanity with the habits of cattle, that evidence would be fully forthcoming in a review of the recent stock debacle. Like a great herd of cattle feeding on the prairie that is suddenly stampeded into a frenzy, the public was stampeded into an orgy of stock selling that upset the entire situation.22

Responsibility for temporary fluctuations in market value thus lay with the timidity of the masses. There were no flaws in the system save for the “cattle” and their petty, ill-informed speculation. This elite understanding of the capitalist foundations of Vancouver’s progress and prosperity — what the Sun labelled “the basic laws of greatness” — would figure in much of the initial public discussion of the market. In intertwining the future of Vancouver as a city — a place that deserving people of all classes could make their home — so tightly with that of capitalist development — the only force that could prevent the body’s “lethargy and decay” — this brand of boosterism would identify as foreign in origin all purported threats to its health.

The Sun’s first story on unemployment in Vancouver was printed on 29 October, the day of the New York Stock Exchange crash; it was short, noting only that the relief officer, George D. Ireland, claimed that “unemployment in Vancouver is assuming alarming proportions.”23 The next day, Ireland informed City Comptroller A.J. Pilkington that only $8,000 remained of the department’s yearly appropriation; with two months remaining, he required an additional outlay of at least $50,000 to cover projected expenditures on married and family cases, and much more if single men were to be required to work for their relief.24 In response to this emergency situation, City Council struck a special committee consisting of Aldermen William Atherton, William Lembke, and Angus MacInnis, along with Ireland and
Pilkington; the majority recommended that relief be granted in the form of works projects at a wage of two dollars per day for married men and one dollar for single men, regardless of residency. Unemployed women, now and throughout the period under study, remained ineligible for state work relief projects.\(^{25}\)

This decision mobilized the local left in defence of union wage standards. MacInnis, a prominent member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) who would win election to the House of Commons the following year, attacked the wage scale as substandard compared to the $4.00 to $4.61 per day earned by the city’s regular outdoor workers, who were members of the Civic Employees Federation. The Building Trades Council criticized the wage scale for relief work as contrary to “the best interests of either the City or the citizens. We believe with Alderman MacInnis that short periods of useful work at the standard scale of wages is a more satisfactory method of dealing with unemployment.”\(^{26}\) The Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC), the city’s largest council of labour organizations, also went on record against the two-dollar and one-dollar scale. Noting that previous administrations had declared $4.50 the minimum “for the class of work done by these relief workers,” VTLC secretary Percy Bengough maintained that “this practice does not reflect credit on this City.” To have relief workers receiving less than half of the union wage for repairing roads and building parks, Bengough feared, would lead to wage reductions for regular outdoor staff.\(^{27}\)

In November, the issue of pay on relief projects resurfaced at a meeting of the Board of Works. While still critical of the relief pay scale, MacInnis expressed grave doubts as to City Council’s ability to deal effectively with the effects of unemployment: “The question is far too great for Vancouver,” he lamented. “It must be forced by the city on someone who is able to take care of it. It is a universal problem.” Harry DeGraves echoed MacInnis, suggesting that the councillors “are only nibbling at the question when we give work to a couple of hundred men, with hundreds more pouring into the city on freight trains.”\(^{28}\) Nonetheless, the booster faction of the council won out. Alderman Atherton, chair of the Relief and Employment Committee, maintained that relief projects — road and sewer building and maintenance, and park clearance and construction — did not conflict with the work done by permanent civic employees: relief labour was not scab labour, despite the clear wage discrepancies. Alderman Bennett cited tradition in rejecting payment at the standard scale; the last time this had been policy, he argued, “the payrolls swelled to 1100 men in a few days,” what with “drifters coming to Vancouver from all over the west to work at the expense of the ratepayers.”\(^{29}\) Later that month, MacInnis would again criticize the relief wage scale. “You are penalizing the unemployed,” he scolded his brethren, “and placing them in the same class as criminals.”\(^{30}\)
Those who opposed union wages on work relief projects usually single out transients — then administratively defined as those who had not lived continuously in Vancouver for at least twelve months — as the primary source of the municipality’s economic problems. Having contributed nothing to the tax coffers, it was said, these men illegitimately demanded aid, consuming public resources and increasing civic debt in Vancouver instead of in the municipalities to which they properly belonged, although we should note that most belonged to no municipality, given their lack of continuous residency anywhere. In an article entitled “The Problem of Unemployment,” ILP activist John Sidaway challenged this logic by linking capital accumulation in the city with the forced mobility of resource workers in the hinterland:

Of those who do the hard work in scattered parts of BC it is natural that they return to Vancouver when a shut down occurs. Many have families and homes here, and most of them are hired from this city. To lay claim, as local boosters do, to the success and profitableness of an enterprise far removed from the city, and at the same time wish to deny temporary shelter to those whose exploitation has made it possible is neither just nor humane. 31

In practice, the Relief Department’s categorization of “resident” excluded those who depended on the seasonal labour markets upon which the resource industries were founded. The logger who wintered in Vancouver, living alone in a flophouse or with family members in a rented apartment or house, thus became a transient for administrative purposes and was located several steps from the top of the pyramid of civic relief provision.

At the top of this organizational structure sat married resident men who owned property. They received first preference on work relief projects and typically received cash for their work. Married relief cases also received a food allowance, given in the form of food itself. Each week, poor folks tramped from all across Vancouver to the downtown Relief Office and back again to pick up their allotment of groceries, which was more or less standardized for every family of the same number, in what was known as the “gunny sack parade.” Resident families without a male breadwinner “head” — single mothers and older sisters were usually designated as household “head” in such cases, underlining the importance of the familial model for relief provision to residents — also took home groceries, as did single male property owners and (eventually) single women. Only a handful of cases received any kind of financial assistance with their rent, electricity, water, and clothing bills. Municipal relief, in short, covered but a small portion of the needs of the unemployed and destitute, and it was not intended to do otherwise, even
for those who received the greatest amounts of aid. In exchange for these resources, clients endured a series of investigations, the rigour and efficiency of which Ireland claimed as a source of pride:

Every form of indigency requiring relief from this Department is investigated. No help is rendered until a thorough inquiry into the case is first made. . . . This includes an inquiry into funds, domicile of the applicant, work record, relations to fraternal society, organized union and church, relatives, if any, the medical history, health of children and children’s school record. Assistance is given after the merits of the case have been fully considered. 32

For decades, migrant workingmen had typically received bed and meal tickets for local hotels and restaurants. In order to reduce the financial burden on the Relief Department, officials referred many unattached men to private charitable organizations, such as the Central City Mission, the Returned Soldiers’ Club, and the Salvation Army. 33 Since each organization provided some measure of social work, Relief Department officials assumed that most of the vetting of transients would be conducted on-site, at cost to the private agency, thus allowing for the municipality to employ a relatively streamlined application process.

With the tremendous increase in the number of people applying for relief, however, the department’s ability to function according to regulations became severely compromised. Between December 1929 and mid-March 1930, the department averaged over five hundred married cases and the same number of single cases each week, at an expense of over $10,000. 34 Soon, temporary staff hired to cope with the crisis outnumbered permanent employees, meaning that most jobless people dealt with officials with no ingrained sense of department customs. And despite these staff additions, it took little time for investigators to be tasked with concentrating on family cases, leaving single men on the relief rolls without any proper investigation for weeks, if not months. For example, of the 937 single men designated for works projects on 11 January 1930, 768 were classified as transients. 35 Each received an advance on their work relief allotment of bed and meal tickets, after which many simply avoided their assignment. Because the program to monitor work relief broke down due to insufficient staffing, many jobless men who failed to report to their work gang continued to collect relief for months because investigators remained unaware of their absenteeism. When later asked to explain discrepancies between department-issued statements of expenditures and the numbers produced by an external audit, Ireland emphasized the peculiarities of the transient situation:
For many days this winter the Relief Office building has been crowded to the doors with destitute and starving men. This resulted in a great pressure of work on all sides, and owing to the shortage of trained staff, lack of space, and office equipment, and being without appropriate machinery or system for the occasion, we were obliged day after day to tell men to come back tomorrow. The men came in faster than we were able to handle them. Large numbers were obliged to be carried over. We had no time to take their records and arrange work for them. These men could not be turned adrift and out into inclement weather at the close of the day. They were starving and had to be given Meal Tickets and a place to sleep.\textsuperscript{36}

In two short months, a deluge of homeless men overwhelmed the Relief Department’s administrative machinery. It would soon threaten the judicial system as well.

In early November, Vancouver’s chief constable, W.J. Bingham, instructed his officers to take “special measures” in order to “prevent begging on the streets and other violations of the law.”\textsuperscript{37} The intensified police presence on pavement led to a dramatic increase of charges of begging and vagrancy offences against unemployed men. In front of Magistrate J.A. Findlay on a vagrancy charge, G.W. was instructed, “Take your choice! Toronto or jail”; he chose the latter, receiving one month in Oakalla.\textsuperscript{38} For much of October, unemployed men charged with vagrancy received the choice to leave the city or be jailed. At the beginning of the month, most opted to leave within twenty-four hours. One man told Findlay that his home was “wherever he was working,” so he chose to move on.\textsuperscript{39} As the month came to a close, however, a greater number opted for jail. “I’ll have to go to Oakalla. I can’t find any work,” said one vagrant.\textsuperscript{40} Also on the rise was the number of charges for trespassing on railway property, the crime of those who rode the rods for free. In a press interview, Findlay confessed that he was “hard put for a solution of the problem of what to do with those who come before him.”\textsuperscript{41}

In December, with the increasing likelihood of inclement weather, Findlay resorted to more substantial deterrents, issuing stiffer sentences for crimes committed by the unemployed; one man convicted of stealing a pair of boots received three months in jail, while another was sent to Oakalla for one year on a begging charge.\textsuperscript{42} Constable Frank Godber reported that some of those who were supposedly needy sold the clothing and footwear they received from private charities in order to get money to purchase “[J]akey” (presumably Jamaican Gangie). Godber found the private missions anything but peaceful. The Central City Mission, he observed, “is the scene of fights practically every night.”\textsuperscript{43} Other city officials focused their gaze on how the presence of the jobless affected the citizenry. Dr. F.T. Underhill, Vancouver’s medical health
officer, recommended the removal of “crippled beggars” from the downtown area in the interests of their health and because “their appearance shocks and impairs the health of women of nervous disposition.” While unemployed men on the streets faced an increasingly coercive police force, politicians remained focused on the question of how best to make relief cases work for what they received. The council meeting on 2 December again addressed the question of relief scales. Angus MacInnis repeated his call for union wages for married residents on relief while abandoning the union wage for single men; still, he was voted down by Atherton’s faction, 7 to 4. With the parliamentary struggle of social democracy stalled in council chambers and the intensification of police repression in the courts, Communists sought to initiate a different type of struggle, one predicated upon mass support, to make the council responsible to those in the streets.

The Defeat of the Six Points: The Politics of Financial Restraint and Law and Order

On 4 December, some 250 people gathered at the Powell Street parade grounds under the auspices of the Vancouver Unemployed Workers’ Organization (vuwo). Launched only three days earlier by Communist Party activists, vuwo was intended to be, in the language of the day, a “non-sectarian” organization, ideally bringing together in common struggle workers of every political shade around a common program that was anything but apolitical. The occasion for this initial mass meeting was to spread awareness about the parade to take place the following day, after which five members would meet with Mayor W.H. Malkin, the grocery store magnate then in the first of a two-year term. “You are out of employment through no fault of your own,” said one speaker, according to the report of an undercover officer (himself a sign of the aggressive policing campaign already underway): “It’s up to the City to provide for you, and through organizing we will be in a position to hang around the City Chambers, and compel[] the Grafters to do so.” To negotiate with government officials in the absence of collective organization would be strategically ineffective and politically misguided, these activists publicly declared. Only mass action in the forms of demonstrations and parades would forge the context in which better relief policies could be won.

The next day, “carrying no flags or placards, and marching four abreast in absolute silence except for the occasional orders of the marshals, a parade of unemployed marched from the 800 block East Hastings street, Thursday afternoon, to the square at Carrall and Powell streets.” A Sun reporter noted the illegality of the parade, which lacked a Union Jack at the front of the procession, as mandated by municipal law; Chief Bingham overlooked this
matter “in the interests of peace and quiet.” The VUWO called on demonstrators “not to answer any ‘provocation’” and issued clear instructions to marshals to remove anyone who caused trouble. The crowd assembled outside City Hall while William McEwan, chair of the VUWO, and James Litterick, its secretary, presented a letter that formally introduced their delegation to the Relief and Employment Committee. “The purpose of the deputation is to draw your attention of the unemployment situation in this city. You, Sir,” they addressed Alderman Atherton, “are probably aware of the gravity and serious nature of the situation and will, we hope, give your sympathetic consideration to our just claims.” The absence of picket signs and rallying cries, along with the firm yet deferential tone of the letter, points to the care taken by organizers to prevent the discussion of relief policies from being diverted to talk of Communist agitation.

Along with Litterick and McEwan, John Neres, Glen Lamont, and Robert McCabe represented the VUWO; the City contributed Aldermen Atherton, Lembke, DeGraves, and Miller, as well as Relief Officer Ireland. The personal histories of the VUWO’s delegates — none of whom satisfied the residency requirement set down by City Council — speak to what have become long-standing historiographical claims about the casual nature of unskilled work, particularly in the resource sector, and of the dual problems of unemployment and underemployment. McEwan had emigrated from Scotland two years before; a seaman by trade, he had not worked in three months. McCabe fished for a living, having worked for only five months in 1929, while Lamont logged and had been employed for six months that year. The only married delegate, Neres, had been let go from his job at the Canadian Pacific Railway yards two months before. Finally, Litterick, the VUWO secretary, declared himself currently employed — we can assume by the Communist Party. In just four days, McEwan claimed, the VUWO had organized between 750 and 1,000 members, a substantial portion of the estimated 14,000 unemployed workers then in the city.

After listening to a summary of the Relief Department’s programs, the VUWO delegates introduced their relief administration program, which comprised six points that generated controversy throughout the coming decade.

1. “Work or full maintenance at union rates.”

This was perhaps the most significant issue at stake because of the widespread effects across the social formation that such a policy would have engendered. In asking the City that it “provide work for the unemployed at the Union rates of pay, and that those for whom work could not be found, be given relief in money at the same rates as if they were working,” the VUWO delegates explicitly refused the existing administratively conceived differentials.
in relief, embodied by the two-dollar and one-dollar scale, and vehemently argued against any wage that would allow for relief work to become a cheap substitute for municipal public works programs, tendered for most of the 1920s at union rates of between $4.00 and $4.50.

Looking beyond the abstractions of dollars and cents, we should recognize that Vancouver’s Communists employed a universalizing logic of labour equivalence in determining their policy. The City of Vancouver asked unemployed men—usually Euro-Canadian male residents, but the evidence suggests that any man not considered “Oriental” could find himself assigned to a work gang—to undertake the same types of tasks, often at the same sites (streets and fields and sewers), as those performed by an elite group of common labourers. These “outdoor workers” were organized as part of the Civic Employees Federation, also male residents and more likely to be Anglo-Canadian and to have marketable skills pertaining to white-collar work than their unemployed colleagues (although this ratio clearly decreased over the years). In using this fact to argue for the equivalence between relief and wage work, Communists sought to universalize union rates traditionally reserved for skilled Anglo-Canadian white men.

It requires little effort on our part to imagine the profoundly revolutionary effects of such a program. Many of the already unionized would see little or no decrease in their standard of living due to unemployment or underemployment. A more explosive consequence was that the poorest of the employed—workers who made less than the union minimum of the Civic Employees Federation, a rather substantial number including those who encountered some form of gender, racial, religious, or national discrimination in labour markets—would actually enjoy a substantive increase, not just in monetary terms but in relation to their autonomy within social relations more broadly. The actual achievement of the union minimum—in essence, a guaranteed daily income—would, for instance, spell the end of sweated labour conditions across the city and elsewhere. Profound changes would be required to entice women back to domestic work and other positions central to the commercialization of the reproduction of labour, and this policy would also probably begin the long process of eroding the significance of racial classifications in the labour market: Japanese men would have an alternative to the hop fields while Chinese men could avoid the bowling alleys, both segments of the labour market organized according to a combination of racial and national categories. Four dollars per day would also reduce the economic need that obliged many to participate in prostitution and organized crime more generally. Finally, this policy would allow all of these groups a greatly increased measure of autonomy in their dealings with social agencies, whether public or private. In these ways, four dollars was an abstract figure that owed its meaning to the capitalist market, all the while imaginatively overturning...
so many of the basic social relations of this market by allowing tens of thousands of Vancouver residents forms of autonomy and choice that had never been theirs. In this context, the VUWO’s demand for union wages for all in need offered marked change, especially in relation to the identitarian segmentation of the labour market, that would materially benefit most of those workers considered to be the most marginal.

2. “That a sufficient sum of money be appropriated by the City Council for the purpose of immediate relief of all unemployed workers irrespective of color or nationality pending action on the part of the Provincial and Dominion Governments.”

In anticipation of the coming years of political buck-passing among various levels of government, the VUWO called for immediate action so that no worker should be made to suffer because of intergovernmental intransigence. The VUWO also explicitly reinforced the call for union wages for all, whether working or not, by rejecting the claim that relief provision was a privilege of race or nationality. Again, on the one hand, the VUWO promised security and stability for the archetypal British North American working man: a guaranteed weekly income at union rates. On the other, the VUWO entertained a much more revolutionary transformation by allowing everyone access to the same standard of living.

3. “That proven unemployment be sufficient claim for relief and the question of twelve months residence be discontinued.”

As with the previous resolution, this plank refused policy-based differences in access to relief that separated resident and transient, citizen and foreigner. Intended to combat the effects of seasonal labour markets that made twelve months of continuous residence impossible, this was both a moral stance — unemployed workers deserved support regardless of legal residence — and a political position — the working class would never become a force while divided by race, nationality, and citizenship. Also, by bringing to an end the means test and the investigation of residency claims, the plan would drastically reduce the civic relief bureaucracy and act as an obstacle to the administrative pretensions characteristic of private charity administrators associated with the Vancouver Welfare Federation. Nor would workers have to reach the point of destitution before they could apply for state aid. Instead, the unemployed — presumably including those whose jobs would be rendered obsolete by such a policy change — could walk in with a letter from their former employer and walk out with assistance.
4. “That applicants in receipt of relief be paid in cash, not kind, as permitting 
recipients to purchase at any store they may desire.”

Here, too, the civic bureaucracy would be shrunk by dispensing with the 
elaborate system of clerical practices necessary to the printing, distribution, 
and redemption of bed and meal tickets. With cash in their pockets, the unem-
ployed could avoid the sneers of restaurant and rooming house owners that 
often accompanied relief tickets. Indeed, cash in pocket also served to make 
one immune to vagrancy charges, if not police intimidation in general. For 
marry unemployed men, the humiliation of the “gunny sack parade” would 
disappear, and their purchasing power would stimulate the economy and 
put money in the hands of local merchants. Finally, those responsible for 
organizing domestic reproduction would have a measure of income security, 
especially in terms of predictability in budgeting expenses.

5. “That the City Council call upon the Greater Vancouver School Board to provide 
boots and clothing for children of the unemployed.”

Singling out the needs of children was a popular tactic across the political 
spectrum in the 1930s. This type of demand would be particularly popular 
with community-based party organizations such as block and neighbourhood 
councils of the mid-1930s. Clothing and footwear were essential because with-
out them, most children would be unable to attend school.

6. “That a special meeting of the Council be called for the purpose of meeting the 
representatives of the above organization and giving consideration to our demands.”

Rather than shuffling before the various subcommittees of council, the V U W O 
wanted its platform to be discussed in special session, in recognition of the 
import of the matter.

Obviously, the V U W O’s six points would have revolutionized the practices of 
civic relief, if not the broader social formation. Rather than engage with these 
matters of race and residency, of cash relief and aid for children, however, 
the City Fathers limited their response to two elements: budgetary restraints 
and the ideal of self-sufficiency through hard work and thrift. Atherton noted 
that given McEwan’s estimate of 14,000 unemployed in Vancouver, a city of 
150,000, union rates for relief work would cost the City $56,000 a day, an 
unimaginable expense. Alderman DeGraves attacked what he saw as McEwan’s 
lack of concern for the City’s budget and wondered why Vancouver should be 
“singled out” by migrant workers. An offer of union wages, DeGraves believed,
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would “induce unemployed from other cities to pour to the coast.” Logger Glen Lamont retorted that many so-called transients flocked to Vancouver of necessity: “we must come here to ship out, and when the lumber camps close down we have to come back here.” After Lamont suggested that most of the province’s 11,000 lumber workers would soon be unemployed, he was asked “if the lumber men could not make enough money in six months of work to tide them over the winter.” He responded, “Not on a proper standard of living; they could if it were a question of merely existing.” The “proper standard of living,” in Lamont’s mind, meant union rates of pay.

In the end, the Vuwo representatives walked away from the meeting with only the hollow promise that the committee would consider their six points. “At the conclusion of the interview,” Atherton reported, “I told the delegation that we sympathized with the unemployed and were doing as much as we could out of the funds at our disposal to meet the problem, and that we could not hold out any hope that the demands of the Organization would be met. I promised them, however, to take the matter up with my Committee.”

Press coverage was disappointing: the Province did not cover the meeting, while the Sun had a small story, 90 percent of which was preoccupied with Mayor W.H. Malkin’s awkward legitimation of the demonstration that preceded the meeting. “There is no objection as far as I can see to an unemployment parade,” he said. “It would be foolish to try to prevent the unemployed from making a demonstration.”

The following day, Vuwo representatives met with Mayor Malkin himself. “We are all trying to find a solution to this terrible situation,” he told them, “and if you have anything practical to suggest I shall be glad to consider it. At the same time, it must be remembered the council has only a limited amount of work and a limited amount of money.” Why a “limited amount of money” prevented the municipality from giving relief in cash rather than groceries or meal tickets, for instance, passed without explanation. Malkin ended the meeting by recommending that the Vuwo meet with Atherton, which it had just done twenty-four hours before. If Atherton was favourable, then Malkin would call a special meeting of the Finance Committee.

No doubt frustrated by the procedural obstacles, the delegates agreed to Malkin’s offer, hoping that they could eventually force the council to publicly address their grievances. Three days later, members of the Vuwo once again paraded to the meeting of the Relief and Employment Committee, where they were refused an opportunity to speak. In the interests of time, and to avoid repetition, Atherton had already agreed that they should present their case to the Finance Committee.

The lone City Council voice of concurrence with the Vuwo’s program came from Angus MacInnis, who drew parallels with an earlier crisis. “When the state needed these men to protect the country, it took them,” he observed.
mournfully. “If their stomachs are good enough for the point of a bayonet or a piece of shrapnel, they are good enough to hold a square meal.” But MacInnis could not compete with the chorus of voices stressing financial restraint. George Miller lamented, “I cannot see that we shall get anywhere if the unemployed insist on taking an unreasonable attitude,” and Relief Officer Ireland questioned the motives of Vuwo organizers, claiming that “this organization of unemployed is primarily political . . . and I do not think unemployment ought to be confused with politics.” Alderman Atherton agreed with both colleagues: the city had done all it could to relieve unemployment. Work relief was underway; roads were being repaired and extended, and hundreds who flocked to Vancouver for its mild winter climate found themselves shovelling snow on city streets after a particularly bad storm. Other projects in parks and sewers would soon begin. Several days later, the Sun published an interview with Alderman John Bennett, chair of the Finance Committee. He joined the chorus sounding the note of monetary restraint. “We all know the demands of the unemployed organization are unreasonable. It is financially impossible for the city to pay out $4.50 a day to all the unemployed.” Bennett did see a solution on the horizon, however: Vancouver should handle the jobless “easily and inexpensively” by housing them in the sheds maintained by the federal Department of Immigration.

The theme of financial restraint espoused by the council’s booster faction never addressed the Vuwo’s challenge to the practices at the core of relief policy. While the Vuwo asked that relief be paid in cash, Alderman Bennett proposed to take away whatever choices existed for propertyless unemployed men in matters of food and shelter by forcing them into shabbily built sheds whose original purpose was to house unfortunates awaiting deportation. The demands to abolish racial and residential restrictions, the calls for clothing and shoes for school children—all were ignored by the council in its emphasis on the bottom line of civic finance. And the final demand, for an immediate special meeting of the council, was also eventually refused after the Vuwo delegates had completed their second tour of the subcommittees. In contrast to the Vuwo’s expansive vision of relief as an automatic entitlement granted to everyone when unemployment struck, for most City Fathers, relief was ideally something of a gift furnished by the propertied taxpayer, to be given only to those truly deserving (based on residential and moral as well as racial and national criteria) and only for something such as work in return. Yet the claims of financial obstacles offered by Malkin, Miller, and others made up but one dimension of the local government’s response to the Vuwo’s program: another would be provided by Chief Constable Bingham.

While Bingham initially reported that unemployed “processions have been orderly,” conducted with “no cause for Police interference,” he soon changed his assessment and argued for a view of unemployed demonstrations
as part of a conspiracy against constituted authority.\textsuperscript{61} As noted, Communists had on occasion refused to carry the Union Jack at the front of their parades, “which in itself is illegal,” declared Bingham, a violation of a civic bylaw. He had overlooked this, however, because “the unusual circumstances justified latitude in my action whilst the processions were orderly.” The increased availability of work relief, Bingham wrote, satisfied the genuine jobless but “did not appear to suit some leaders of the Communist Party, who gathered around them a number of mal-contents discharged from City work.” He then used his presumed knowledge of plans of violent protest to ban “unauthorized” processions:

Information was forthcoming that if a clash came between the Police and the Unemployed, it was to be in the streets where advantage was to be taken of the melee to start a window-smashing campaign. In order to avoid this, I instructed the Unemployed that, whilst I was prepared to allow them to hold their meetings, an unauthorized procession could not be permitted.

For the Vuwo, in contrast, Bingham’s ability to ban parades under city bylaws violated the time-honoured rights of assembly and free speech. Indeed, the increasing limitations that Bingham placed on unemployed parades served to underline Communist critiques of state coercion.

On 15 December, the \textit{Vancouver Daily Province} reported the death of a common labourer in the east end under the headline “Man Starves to Death Here.” The next day, some five hundred people, the bulk of them jobless, “stormed” the Relief Office, but Ireland refused to deal with their complaints “en masse.” “I have been used to dealing with men,” he began to say, but was interrupted: “You’re dealing with men now — not slaves — hungry ones,” someone shouted.\textsuperscript{62} Ireland offered them work at the rate of a dollar per day but was met with the cry, “No Scab Jobs!” \textsuperscript{63} Ninety minutes later, after being dispersed by police, another crowd assembled in front of City Hall, where Litterick and McEwan spoke about the Vuwo’s demand for a hearing with City Council. At one point, a group attempted to gain entry into the council meeting in progress, only to meet with police resistance. An editorial in the \textit{Daily Province} noted that the mood had been one of “good humour on both sides.” However, the Vuwo’s plan for subsequent daily demonstrations was “crazy”: “no good can come of it, either for the unemployed themselves or for anybody else.” The Sun editorial gently criticized police tactics, maintaining that “demonstrations and disorders are too often confused. The one is merely a safety valve, letting off steam. The other is a frequent result of keeping the safety valve shut, and the martyr complex flourishes under high pressure.” At the same time, the Sun made clear that Communist agitation, as opposed to genuine discontent, lay behind the demonstrations.\textsuperscript{64}
The next day’s gathering of the vuwo saw the “threatening” of a police officer: “Vancouver’s unemployed continued their demonstrations Tuesday afternoon with a noisy parade through city streets, shouting and occasionally breaking into ‘The Red Flag,’ the revolutionary song.” The parade, moving west on Hastings Street, stopped at the traffic light on Main Street, and Communists in a car at the head of the procession began honking the horn. Police Superintendent J.W. Tracey motioned to the car, telling the driver to obey the signal. In response, one of the men inside shouted, “Grab him in. We’ll strip him.” After reaching the Cambie Street parade grounds, the crowd was, according to one reporter, “harangued by leaders,” and eventually dispersed after planning another demonstration. Tracey and the press took the “stripping” comment not as a harmless joke but as a legitimate threat to Tracey’s person, evidence that Communist revolutionaries controlled these gatherings and could make their will manifest. Tracey asserted that “not 25 per cent of the so-called unemployed parading the streets were bona fide. Most of the men came from the prairie provinces, and while they marched through the streets the legitimate unemployed of Vancouver were standing on the sidewalks.” Bold declarations like this played well in the press, particularly in light of denunciations of transients who drew on the civic treasury and clogged the courts with vagrancy charges. “These men don’t want work,” Tracey concluded. “They want $4.50 a day or nothing.” The vuwo began its public career as a peaceful, even quiet organization of jobless men. In less than two weeks, it had been declared a centre for lazy foreign Communist agitators. On 18 December, the vuwo asked to send a delegation to be heard by City Council; their request was denied.

While Alderman Bennett’s suggestion to house the unemployed in the Department of Immigration’s sheds went unheeded, one jobless worker did end up there. On 18 December, “direct action was taken against the organization of unemployed” when William McEwan was arrested and exposed as Allan Campbell, a local Communist Party member. Department officials ordered Campbell deported, but he was allowed to stay pending appeal. The vuwo immediately applied for a permit to march on 20 December in support of Campbell’s release along West Hastings to Burrard Street and the offices of the Immigration Department. Bingham refused, limiting the march from the Powell Street parade grounds to the Cambie Street grounds, a route that bypassed Campbell and much of the downtown business district. On the appointed day, some four hundred men and women collected at Powell Street before they snaked their way through downtown streets, passing well-known gathering places for unemployed and migrant workers on Abbott, Carrall, Cordova, and Hastings Streets.

After arriving at the Cambie parade grounds, William Bennett, James Litterick, and others attacked the municipality’s relief program and
complicity with federal deportation policies that targeted left-wing radicals. Litterick then proposed marching to Immigration Hall, both in support of Campbell and in protest of the chief constable’s unjust decision to redirect the march. “It was at this point that Litterick broke faith,” Bingham later rationalized to his bosses on the Board of Police Commissioners. Walking through the downtown core, small groups of protesters assembled on Burrrard Street, where they encountered a line of policemen at the foot of the ramp leading to Immigration Hall. The crowd cheered impromptu speeches calling for Campbell’s release, at which point Bingham sensed danger and instructed his constables to prevent the Communists from reaching the doors to the hall:

The leaders were instructed they could go no further, and as a result the crowd was dispersed. The necessity for keeping such a crowd, approximately 400, off the railway property and docks or approaching nearer to the Immigration Hall, is obvious. They insisted, however, and it became necessary to call upon the Police present to disperse the crowd.69

The veracity of the rumour of plans for a “window-smashing campaign” is questionable. The extant reports of undercover officers contain no reference to this plan, implying that Bingham himself was the likely source, making public this rumour only in the course of defending the actions of his force to the Board of Police Commissioners and City Council. More to the point, had Communists actually planned to provoke attacks on businesses, the police response to their illegal march provided what to them would have been a legitimate cause for anger and harmless property destruction, but the only damage done was to the demonstrators themselves, several of whom were wounded by mounted police assisting in the “dispersal.” Nonetheless, Bingham’s claim that the parades of the unemployed undermined order was technically correct: in defying the chief’s decision against an assembly in the vicinity of Immigration Hall, the crowd had literally challenged the ruling order, thus demanding from his constables a physical response to enforce the original policy and secure the chief constable’s authority to regulate marches in the municipality.

In less than three weeks, the vuwo found its platform largely ignored, if not rejected as financially unreasonable, and its organization portrayed as the leading bulwark of Communist subversion of the state itself. Yet the available evidence makes clear that this joint campaign by the Relief Department and the Police Department to situate the vuwo outside the realm of legitimate political conduct — the reasoning being that given the fiscal constraints, daily demonstrations could serve no purpose save to increase the

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existing chaos — involved few moments of coordination and more practical day-to-day conflict among the various staff members involved in determining and enforcing policy in these two departments. Moreover, the Police Department, a unique administrative entity within the municipality, in that it was governed through the Board of Police Commissioners rather than directly by City Council, proved relatively immune to public pressure, whether individual or collective, and the almost ritualistic rejection of the vuwo’s six points by Alderman Atherton and the other brokers of civic relief programs could not reverse the process whereby the daily struggles of itinerant unemployed men became an all-too-present “absent cause” for a marked shift in municipal political alignments.

**A General Strike and Spies in the Workplace**

Following the confrontation outside Immigration Hall, the vuwo changed tactics and, with a general strike in favour of union wages in mind, launched an organizing campaign among the dozens of work relief gangs spread throughout the city. The removal of “agitators” from work gangs thus became a key issue for the City; one Communist labelled the use of undercover spies “police terrorism.” The vuwo’s recruitment drive commenced with a series of public meetings, the first of which took place at the Powell Street parade grounds on 30 December; approximately 150 men and three or four women attended, according to police constables in attendance. Bill Bennett criticized the mayor and City Council and labelled the police “cossacks,” and Litterick also honed in on the coercive strategies of Vancouver officials. According to a police report, Litterick

had been in the Office of the Chief of Police, and he had asked the Chief if he had Stool Pigeons working for him amongst the unemployed, the Chief said “no” and gave his word as a man that he had not, he then said that as he left the Office he saw two men sitting on a bench at the door waiting to see the Chief, he said he recognised these two men as members of the unemployed workers association, and he said now what were these two men doing there, I leave it to yourselves to judge.

At a New Year’s Day meeting at the Royal Theatre, Allan Campbell, out on appeal, condemned “the state” with a ferocity that made Constable Daniel Dorroch blush uncomfortably. According to Dorroch, Campbell “called all Law Enforcement officials in Vancouver ‘Sons of Bitches’ and ‘Bastards’ also our Sovereign Lord the King a ‘Bastard’ and a ‘Son of a Bitch’, also said the same of President Hoover and some German official.”

48  *Hobohemia and the Crucifixion Machine*

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The vuwo’s charges about relief spies circulated through the work gangs, generating a considerable amount of discontent regardless of individual politics: one could accept the terms of work relief and still take offence at the use of state resources to collect information for such a purpose. Constable Mackenzie discovered that some of the men working at Second Avenue and Beach “have been annoyed as they had heard that there were stools at work among them.”

Another undercover agent had been observed in the Relief Office, picking out agitators to be fired from the work gangs. “The men wanted to wait for him & beat him up,” noted one constable, “but better judgement prevailed.”

The Communists’ highlighting of the espionage practices of local officials was not without basis. In the wake of the battle at Immigration Hall, Chief Constable Bingham devoted more resources to the surveillance of agitators on the rationale that his department now needed to be able to anticipate Communist plans. While thousands found themselves jobless, the expansion of the city’s surveillance apparatus created employment opportunities for those willing to become stool pigeons and help create unemployment by identifying the discontented jobless on work relief programs so that they could be fired from their non-job.

The assignment of spying required these men to act as intellectuals, producing knowledge crucial to devising state strategies for dealing with the unemployed. One Captain Jervis carefully sketched the international character of left-wing radicalism, of which Vancouver’s agitators were a central piece. “The Communists, as they style themselves, in North America, are in three circles: 1. Chicago, 2. New York, 3. Vancouver, bc,” he wrote. “The leaders are working on a schedule. Every phase or step in this programme or schedule is being strictly adhered to, and promises some interesting developments a little later on.” Their goal “in its ultimate fulfilment” was nothing short of “the overthrow of the British Empire.” “The movement is growing,” Jervis warned, “and these Communists are becoming bolder and bolder in their methods, which can have but one result, bloodshed.”

While obviously fascinated by the inner workings of the continental Communist conspiracy, Jervis did not think much of the party’s actual work in Vancouver: “The usual abuse of the Civic Authorities, the emigration officials, several of the police and the usual garbled and warped interpretation of the laws of political economy, these things were all that could be obtained from the open meetings.” Two Communists told Jervis of plans to “harass” city officials until relief rates were increased; another said he did not expect any violence until later in January.

Despite Jervis’s fanciful vision of Communist agitation, others found the radicals to be relatively tame; they were, after all, organizing a strike of common labourers (albeit of a special type), not a revolution. In late December, at Ireland’s request, Constable Eric Hichens began an undercover stint.
as a transient on Gang 25 at a rate of $100 per month. Under the pseudonym G. Pearson, Hichens showed up for an assignment of improving roads and clearing drainage ditches, and then accompanied his colleagues to the Relief Office to pick up his bed and meal tickets. To collect information, then, Hichens put in a full day shovelling dirt under the supervision of a gang boss unaware of his real name or purpose, while genuinely jobless men were forced to go without relief work due to insufficient funds. On 2 January, Hichens “noticed first sign of trouble, a man came round & spoke to sundry men, he did not speak to me, so I did not press myself on to him.” The general strike was not scheduled for three weeks, and Hichens remained cautious in his approach, “not attempting to rush matters.” In the same period, Captain George Ash reported to Gang 20, which was then improving a section of West 34th Avenue. “I found many of the men grumbling on the conditions they are working under,” Ash reported. Two organizers from the “Communist Labour Party” had been travelling from gang to gang “in order to get these men to go on strike,” enjoying a measure of success; some men discussed absenting themselves from relief work to attend a vuwo parade. “I also made acquaintance with a man who goes under the name of Scotty (Alias).” This man was “one of the agitators,” Ash wrote, “that is he stated he was going to do this & that, & that he would go & steal again & would sure go on strike & parade again.” Ash included a physical description, because he had “an idear [sic] that this man might be wanted by the police or immigration officials.” Scotty had already been the subject of police concern; department officials had secured his personal file from the Salvation Army.

While undercover constables were tasked with the surveillance of Communists, the nature of their work brought them into contact with Relief Department officials, who were found partially responsible for the spreading discontent with relief work. While at the Relief Office for his meal tickets, Eric Hichens encountered a clerk whom he described as “a supercilious fool and an insufferable prig, totally unfit to come in contact with a body of men”:

After making some sarcastic remarks to men proceeding [sic] me, he considered it part of his privilege to say to me ‘What do you do for a bed, beg it or steal it,’ — I merely replied ‘Steal it.’ One man who was near me said to me, ‘The bloody bastard, if he had spoken to me like that I would have knocked shit out of the fucker.’ . . . The manner in which the remark, and others were made, were such as to be likely to cause a breach of the Peace. They were not said in any tone of bantering, such as men use among themselves, in which accusations of the foulest immorality may be made as a joke to be passed over and forgotten, as in the Army: but in a manner most offensive and aggressive.
Hichens was not alone in tracing some of the problems with relief provision to the authorities. “I am confident,” proclaimed Constable Frank Godber about the work gang to which he had been assigned, “that no trouble will arise unless fostered & caused by some incident attributable to over anxiousness by the authorities.”\(^8^2\) And the problems with Relief Department staff went all the way to the top. Hichens’s work on relief gangs was terminated by Ireland on 16 January. The constable approached Ireland the following day to ascertain why he had been fired, but the relief officer’s “aggressive manner could only lead to heated words so I left.”\(^8^3\) Also dismissed was John Mackenzie, whom Ireland refused to pay because he had submitted his reports to the Police Department rather than to Ireland himself. In July, with the matter not yet been resolved, Mackenzie was residing at the YMCA and hoping for Chief Bingham’s intervention on his behalf with the new relief officer, Colonel H.W. Cooper.\(^8^4\) The irony was telling: men paid to inform on relief workers with grievances against the Relief Department found themselves jobless and in need, shortchanged by the same officials who had assigned them to the work gangs.

Chief Constable Bingham remained firm in his conviction that the relief strike could be traced to the agitation of “a few Communists out for trouble”: “intimidation became evident at various centres of civic unemployed activities, and every effort was made to suppress, but not arrest.” Nonetheless, Bingham argued that the Communist “intimidation” of the unemployed had largely failed, as “only a small percentage left their work, and many have tried to get back.”\(^8^5\) Communists were also blamed for “attacks” on downtown cafés and restaurants. Local establishments had anywhere from a handful to upwards of forty people asking for or taking free meals; one constable concluded that “the situation in this regard is not so acute as it was late in November, and so far no attack in mass has been made upon them.”\(^8^6\) With newspaper headlines screaming about crime, Bingham laid the blame on “a section of the unemployed.”\(^8^7\)

The general strike of relief workers never got off the ground.\(^8^8\) While Bingham suggested that those “with no hope of obtaining even necessary food . . . presented fertile ground for Communist propaganda,” others came to different assessments.\(^8^9\) Constable Godber reported that “whilst this proposal is acceptable to the men to strike for $4.50 per day there is a decided doubt & suspicion in the minds of these men that the communist party will not be able to furnish the funds necessary to support any attempt at strikes.” Communists recognized this, he noted, and worked to strengthen their organizational base.\(^9^0\) A week later, the constable discovered that “the attitude of the men is day by day more distrustful of the Strike movement fostered by the Communist Party of Vancouver.” The VUWO remained disorganized, and three German socialists on his work gang had come out in opposition to the strike.
“I find the greatest number of Communists to be amongst the unemployed who still walk the streets and are not on the ‘relief,’ and one hears around the camp fires only the echoes of the mutterings of this type heard in the restaurants, lodging houses & pool rooms,” Godber reported. The vuwo managed to pull off a few strikes: at least one gang of married men left their intersection and returned to the Relief Office because “they were afraid to work being intimidated by men in a Single Gang nearby.” Others “stood at the fires practically all day” instead of working. Nonetheless, the dream of a general strike of relief workers was dead.

The reports of undercover officers made clear that there were sizeable pockets of support for the vuwo’s demands for union wages and the expulsion of spies from relief gangs. The subsequent failure of the majority of relief workers to support the strike is not evidence of a fatal flaw or weakness in Communist political practice, although there were plenty of those, as much as an indication of the generalized independence of itinerants in relation to the vuwo leadership’s program and tactics. Listening to speeches, participating in marches, even physically confronting the police — none of these automatically required the itinerant to sacrifice money and the possibility of making more as would taking strike action and being fired from relief work altogether. Many potential strikers feared the blacklist because it would leave them and their dependants to seek private charity, since the vuwo obviously lacked the financial resources to support those who struck. Others, like the three German socialists, were no doubt suspicious of the Communist leadership and its increased sectarianism leading up to the strike. The only surviving copy of the Unemployed Worker from this period criticizes “Labor Party opportunists” and “yellow traitorous labor fakers,” and even launches an attack on the tiny local chapter of the Industrial Workers of the World. And while the vuwo leaders clearly sought to make their organization function as a union, they lacked most of the power and privilege accorded the union bureaucrats of the labour movement for wage workers: although they could devise a program, they had nothing but speeches as their means of inducement for the thousands who participated in demonstrations and marches during these months. In short, each itinerant probably made his own assessment in a context of relative freedom from any compulsion to follow the official line of the publicly identified Communist leadership, which, given its tenuous organizational base in the work gangs, amounted to little more than the adventurist desire that spontaneity would win the day. Jobless men on civic relief gangs nonetheless continued to turn out en masse for vuwo demonstrations, asserting their political rights of freedom of speech and assembly and expressing their support for equal access to municipal relief.
A Conference on Unemployment, January 1930

While January 1930 thus saw Communists shift tactics with their attempt to launch a general strike, Vancouver's labourists and social democrats continued to look to the boardroom as the primary venue for change. Several International Labour Party (ILP) members had participated in the Western Labour Conference in Regina in late October 1929, where delegates called upon municipalities to relieve “immediate suffering and want” while looking to a “permanent solution by means of a social insurance scheme.” Upon their return, the representatives recommended a civic conference on unemployment, an idea that had already been endorsed by the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council (VTLC).96 One day before Christmas, after the initial wave of VUWO demonstrations, John Sidaway asked for an interview with the Finance Committee.97 The request was granted, and Sidaway, along with fellow ILP members R.H. Neelands and Lyle Telford, convinced the aldermen to endorse the concept. The easy passage of the conference lay in a common perception of crisis circumstances brought about by the itinerant invasion: politicians of all stripes could disagree about the worst consequences of and best solutions for unemployment, all the while remaining steadfastly united in the desire to remove the thousands of wandering jobless men then moving in and out of the city.

The Communists embraced the opportunity offered by the conference. Litterick wrote Alderman R.N. Fraser, who was acting mayor while Malkin lobbied for federal money in Ottawa, to inform him that because the VUWO “represents over 1,500 unemployed and relief workers we will send five representatives.” What’s more, the Communist Party itself would send William Bennett as a delegate. “As the solution of this problem is one of the first interests of the Communist Party,” Bennett told Fraser, “we decided to accept the invitation extended to all bodies to send a representative.”98 Both groups were late additions to the list of attending community groups, as were other working-class organizations such as the Building Trades Council and the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers’ Association. After learning of the conference plans, all asserted their right to send delegates, and were, Fraser noted, “allowed to take part.” The markedly inclusive stance of City Council speaks to the continuing unevenness of the state response to itinerants within the ever-changing context of mass actions that took on a host of forms, and radicals hoped that this inclusivity would be easily channelled into support for union wages on relief projects. Several VUWO organizers already known in Chief Constable Bingham’s Police Department to be dangerous subversives were publicly embraced and accorded starring roles by Fraser; the hope was that a carefully controlled conference crowd would defuse the Communist-led campaign for the six points more effectively than an exclusionary policy, which would virtually guarantee demonstrations and confrontations with the constabulary.
That a politics conscious of public presentation formed the impetus for the inclusion of labour and leftist groups in addition to the long-established Independent Labour Party and the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council was clearly spelled out in Fraser’s draft copy of the confidential agenda. Meeting in the Board of Trade Building, the three-day conference was to begin on 14 January with the reading of the council’s resolution sponsoring the conference as well as telegrams from Prime Minister Mackenzie King and BC’s Minister of Labour, W.A. MacKenzie, both unable to attend. As chair, Fraser would offer introductory remarks, after which Litterick and Bennett, as representatives of the Vuwo and the Communist Party, would address those in attendance for five minutes each before Lyle Telford of the ILP would move to “open discussion.” The agenda allowed time for “general discussion” during this initial session; Fraser jotted in the margin of his copy a reminder to “control debate.” Finally, a committee would be struck to deal with the dozens of resolutions already submitted: “After short time, Chairman suggests appointment of resolutions committee. Mr. W.C. Woodward will move that such committee be appointed by chair. Chairman suggest names of Mr. W.C. Woodward, Alderman MacInnis, Mr. John Sidaway, Mrs. T.H. Kirk and Alderman Vance.”

This preliminary agenda had changed by the conference opening: Woodward’s place on the resolutions committee was filled by C.E. Tisdall; Vance was replaced by fellow North Vancouver Alderman Bridgman; and Relief Officer Ireland was added as a speaker, sandwiched between the Communists and the ILP’s John Sidaway, who replaced Lyle Telford.

Of all the groups to attend — at least twenty-nine private and public organizations, including fraternal organizations and municipal councils from across the Lower Mainland — only the Vancouver Unemployed Workers’ Organization, the Communist Party, and the Independent Labour Party had been guaranteed a place on the agenda. Moreover, with only the mayor preceding them, leftists had been granted the opportunity to shape debate at the outset. Fraser and other political figures endeavoured, both on stage and behind the scenes, to fashion a “public transcript” about a united “community” that could be useful to the City’s representatives in negotiations with the provincial and federal governments. With this spatially bounded response to unemployment, local unions, socialist parties, and even the Communist Party could be seen to multiply rather than to reduce the force of the campaign for others to assume financial responsibility for transient relief in Vancouver.

With almost two hundred delegates at the initial session, the conference’s wide representation of accredited groups certainly facilitated the appearance of a “community.” According to a Sun reporter, “subjects treated ranged all the way from wholesale condemnations of the capitalistic system and the city relief department, to discussions of immigration, unemployment
insurance, limitation of hours of labor and prosecution of public works along [a] definite, ten-year program.” ¹⁰¹ Paul Raymond of the Hope and District Board of Trade suggested that the prevailing state of unemployment could be converted into a prime opportunity to cheaply develop the transportation infrastructure necessary to economic recovery and future growth. Raymond had in mind the building of a road between Hope and Princeton: once “this shorter route is open,” Raymond had written earlier to the mayor, “British Columbia will gain the business from Tacoma, Spokane, Portland and Seattle visitors, who will be enabled to make this round trip as a week-end excursion.” ¹⁰² At the conference, he declared, “Any business which comes from this tourist traffic must help all districts of British Columbia in a large way.” ¹⁰³ The existence of unemployment could thus be translated into a source of capitalist development, creating the infrastructure necessary for economic growth by employing the jobless at wages lower than the accepted rate for common labour. Raymond’s scheme was one of hundreds suggested to government officials during the first three years of the 1930s, each a mapping in microcosm of the capitalist totality in which the state exploitation of cheap relief labour, organized under public or private auspices, served as the human foundation for British Columbia’s future economic development.

The next day’s session, which focused on Communist charges about the secret machinations of the Relief Department, disrupted Fraser’s nascent “community.” The headlines “Blacklisting Charged by City’s Jobless” and “Espionage Laid to Relief Office” leaped off the back page of the Sun. In session, Allan Campbell publicly charged that the Relief Department “has maintained a system of stool pigeons on relief work this winter, carrying on espionage among the men and blacklisting all who have attempted to organize relief workers.” He also claimed that many of the blacklisted activists “have been ‘railroaded’ to jail by the city police.” Many delegates reacted strongly to these accusations, and Fraser immediately promised “a full investigation of the complaint” in order to “forestal[ll] a motion calling for an inquiry,” according to one reporter. Campbell estimated that of the ten thousand unemployed workers he believed were in Vancouver, fewer than one thousand had received aid on works projects; four hundred more were jailed at Oakalla Penitentiary. Reiterating the demand for union wages on city projects, Campbell told delegates that “the cheapest respectable ‘flop’ in the city costs 75 cents a night,” thus making the one dollar per day allotted to single men grossly inadequate. James Thomson, president of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council, joined in Campbell’s condemnation, suggesting that BC’s lumber barons “are largely to blame for the present situation” because they maintained “a huge blacklist in full and constant operation . . . and have spent $2,000,000 on a lobby at Ottawa to induce the Dominion government to allow unrestricted immigration from Europe in order to prevent their employees
from forcing them to pay decent wages.” What was needed, according to Thomson, was “an intellectual revolution along industrial lines to prevent a possible revolution of blood.”

After the interventions of Campbell and Thomson, the delegates had the following day off, while the resolutions committee — E. H. Bridgman, C. E. Tisdall, Mrs. T. H. Kirk, Angus MacInnis, and John Sidaway — screened the numerous motions proposed by the delegates. The conference resumed on 17 January to consider its report. Because the internal deliberations of the committee are undocumented, we can only guess as to responsibility for its decisions or divisions among the group. The committee chose to discard many proposals concerning various taxation and other fundraising schemes offered during public meetings, and appears to have taken care to distribute motions among significant persons and organizations. Also rejected were recommendations that “dual or multiple incomes in single families be discouraged” and that “all civic employees whose wives and husbands are working be discharged immediately”; these rejections may provide evidence of lobbying on the part of Mrs. T. H. Kirk, an executive member of the Local Council of Women and the wife of a Conservative M.L.A. Here, the focus on external solutions acted to temporarily trump calls for gender exclusion.

The committee chose as the first motion to be considered one from Vancouver Aldermen Harry DeGraves and Warner Loat that “deplore[d] the attitude of the Provincial Government and the Federal Government in not sending Official Representation to this Conference.” DeGraves and Loat articulated the vision of community consensus in the argument that it was “only by the co-operation of all public and semi-public bodies, but more particularly of the Governing bodies such as the Provincial Government and the Federal Government and Civic and Municipal Governments that this present national problem can hope for a solution.” The involvement of federal and provincial legislative bodies did not mean, however, that municipal politicians envisioned relinquishing control of the administration of relief. As with provincially funded Mothers’ Pensions, officials actively promoted the use of local Relief Department staff to serve as investigator and administrator, if not banker, of welfare measures. With city government well served by the first motion, the resolutions committee proposed its own motion asking the Dominion government to halt state-sponsored immigration schemes, which only “accentuate[d]” the “Unemployment situation,” and to assume responsibility for “all such persons and their families by means of employment or Relief until they have been domiciled in Canada for two years,” policies that “would be in the best interests of the Country.” By emphasizing an external federal solution and omitting any characterization of the immigrants themselves, thus avoiding a key difference among the presumably all Euro-Canadian conference crowd, the committee’s careful stance could appeal to the Right and the Left, nativists and socialists.
alike, if not the Communists, who opposed all restrictions on the free flow of labour.\textsuperscript{108} Both motions were ratified at the final public gathering.

The Independent Labour Party submitted by far the most detailed set of proposals. Of the twenty-four motions officially considered by the resolutions committee, fifteen had been submitted either by the \textsc{ilp} itself or by Dr. Lyle Telford, one of its prominent members. Telford’s first plan was a direct tax on industry to create a fund to provide relief for seasonal workers “during slack season”; this motion committee members laid on the table in favour of a similar one put forth by the Vancouver Labour Council, the local affiliate of the All-Canadian Congress of Labour. Telford’s next idea — that “Birth Control information should be made legally available to all” — no doubt would have struck some as the most controversial, and it too was set aside by the committee.\textsuperscript{109} Telford also asked the conference to go on record as “strongly opposed to men being compelled to work a full day for relief wage[s].” The solution was to require only half a day’s work for the same amount, thus allowing the jobless “to search for further employment.” This too was rejected: while approving “of the principle of doing relief work,” the committee decided that the “real value of work done” should be “computed by the Engineer.”\textsuperscript{110} To this point, the most substantive determining factors had been the marital status of the recipient and, most important, the budgetary restraints upon Relief Department programs. The city engineer had had no involvement in establishing the two-dollar and one-dollar scale, which became policy through the estimates of Relief Officer George Ireland and the actuarial calculations of City Comptroller A.J. Pilkington. Again, we can imagine Communist dissension over the difference between an administrative fiat and collective bargaining as methods for arriving at the value of labour power.

The gathering considered eleven motions from the \textsc{ilp}, from changes to old age pensions and the Minimum Wage and Workmen’s Compensation Acts to the creation of state-run health insurance and an incremental income tax “to bring greater returns from those better able to pay.” The \textsc{ilp} attacked other levels of government for “passing the buck and shielding behind the legality of B.N.A. Act,” as well as Canadian industrialists who profited “in foreign lands [with] the use of foreign labour while we are faced with the problem of unemployment in this Country.”\textsuperscript{111} Delegates thus spent considerable time discussing many of the core political ideas to circulate among third-party movements in the interwar years, all of which looked beyond the borders of the municipality for their instruments of change.\textsuperscript{112} Indeed, despite the recommendation from the resolutions committee to table some of the \textsc{ilp}’s motions, delegates voted to endorse them anyway. The \textsc{ilp}’s prospects, then, looked good on 17 January 1930. In the February issue of \textit{ILP News}, Sidaway proudly noted that their delegates had “put up a very good case”: while the “resolutions adopted were mainly suggestions as to how best to treat the problem now,” he
noted that “much of the discussion centred around the method of finding an ultimate solution.” Nonetheless, the ILP joined with City Council members in stressing that the City was limited in what it could do: it too would endorse a works program for Vancouver residents alone, and it would also remain silent on the racial and national categories so central to relief provision. And despite its prominent role at the inaugural gathering, the ILP would later find itself on the outside, looking in. In August 1930, R.E. Timmins, secretary of the ILP’s Vancouver Branch, wrote to city officials after reading a report about an upcoming civic conference on unemployment. “We would be pleased to remind you,” he gently chided, “that it was our organization that, to some extent at least, was responsible for initiating the idea of the necessity of holding a conference to discuss unemployment. The three day conference at the City Hall held last spring was the direct result.” This time, however, the ILP had not been invited to participate; Timmins fruitlessly offered to send a delegate.

The practical limits on any “community” consensus at the January conference became clear with the question of unemployment insurance. The resolutions committee recommended the adoption of a motion proposed by J.B. Macaulay and Henry Burgess of the Vancouver Labour Council. This motion distilled the collective wisdom of the Left: given the systematic character of unemployment (and underemployment) under capitalism and the similarly central inequalities in the creation and distribution of wealth, poverty should be relieved by taxing capital, in one sense giving workers the full value they would have received were it not for the accumulation process. Macaulay and Burgess argued for “a measure of unemployment insurance to be enacted as a Federal measure and to be a direct charge against Industry, and that provision be made for Labour representation on the Boards of Administration.” Leftists labelled this type of unemployment insurance “non-contributory,” funded as “a direct charge against Industry” rather than with money deducted from workers’ paycheques. Others saw non-contributory programs as economic heresy and held out for contributory unemployment insurance, a tripartite solution in which workers, employers, and the government unevenly shared the financial burden. Alderman John Bennett argued that while the seasonal nature of industry could be blamed for unemployment, industrialists should not be blamed for its effects:

Owing to the great distress and serious economic loss caused each year in Canada by Unemployment, and due to [the fact that] the seasonal operation of many of our Industries is unavoidable, this unemployment Conference strongly recommends for the earnest consideration of the Dominion and Provincial Governments the introduction of Legislation with a view to the enactment of an Unemployment insurance measure to be contributed to by both Governments and the Employers and Employees.
The resolutions committee referred both motions to the conference. Faced with a clear choice between contributory and non-contributory unemployment insurance, what did delegates do? They passed both resolutions: the workers of Vancouver would have not one unemployment insurance plan, but two, one of which they would pay for, and one to be funded solely by the bosses. In the quest to create a “community” consensus in support of the municipal government’s approach to provincial and federal counterparts, local officials created the context in which delegates postponed serious consideration of the conflicts engendered within every urban locality across Canada’s capitalist social formation. While Vancouver’s leftists used their new-found public resources to secure legitimacy for a wide range of radical programs, none of these measures could be implemented by the municipality alone: the victory of public endorsement of non-contributory unemployment insurance was therefore of ceremonial value alone.

And the Vancouver Unemployed Workers’ Organization? It offered the following motion:

That this conference realizing that work provided for a small portion of unemployed workmen at less than half union pay for a married man and less than one quarter for a single man, while it provides work, leaves the problem of relief of chronic poverty untouched; And further the past and present method of arresting unemployed workmen as vagrants be discontinued. The Vancouver Unemployed Organization therefore states emphatically that the only available methods to be adopted are work or full maintenance at Trade Union Rates, the cost to be borne by the exploiters of the workmen.

The resolutions committee endorsed the first sentence up to the word “untouched” and noted that “unemployment is not in itself sufficient cause for arrest.” The sentence on “Trade Union Rates” was deemed “not relevant.” In general, the specific problems with relief administration articulated by Communists in the initial six-point program and in subsequent actions were not so much ignored as left to dissipate in the netherworld of bureaucratic procedures that insulated the various departments from democratic control. The blacklist is a wonderful example: aldermen at the 15 January session who knew of the blacklist’s existence did not publicly confirm Allan Campbell’s suspicions, even to justify the policy. Nor did Fraser’s promised investigation of the charges of undercover spying ever occur. In the end, Vancouver officials managed to keep private the seamier aspects of public administration, ensuring that coercive and restrictive measures would remain an essential part of their relief programs.
What did citizens learn of the conference? *Daily Province* readers were treated to a dry recitation of several successful motions, while *Sun* readers divined even less: a single story on the proposals for various works projects was printed side by side with a much longer article enthusiastically detailing the medicinal experiments of John D. Rockefeller’s father. Here, we descend into the comi-tragic: City Fathers had worked incredibly hard to convey the impression of an inclusive “community,” but few citizens would learn of their endeavours. Alderman Fraser concluded his final report with a grandiloquent passage on the pleasant tone of the gathering:

A full and free discussion took place at each of the sittings of the Conference; every one who had anything to say on the problem of unemployment and any remedy to propose was given the opportunity and a reasonable time within which to lay his or her views before the Conference. Most of the delegates availed themselves of this, with the result that the ideas and opinions expressed were many and of wide range. I may add that the meetings were orderly, and that the utmost good feeling prevailed throughout.

In one sense, it is difficult to believe that Fraser had paid attention to the proceedings over which he had presided. Delegates had engaged in debates over the relative merits of capitalism and socialism, and the “orderly” nature of the Saturday session had disappeared amidst charges of blacklists controlled by the Relief Department and by logging companies. Yet, in another sense, Fraser’s summation perfectly captures the actual spirit of civic citizenship that had ruled at the conference. In the interests of “good feeling,” delegates had sidestepped the fundamental conflicts among different proposals and had given every group in attendance save for the vuwo something to take back to their members. That the resulting program was a jumbled, contradiction-ridden mess was of little consequence. All who participated had been heard and a “community” formed.

There were exceptions, however. Communists would experience an intensification of their outsider status in the aftermath of the conference, which probably facilitated the embrace of the new Comintern program of “Third Period” ultra-leftism, as in the decision to run one of their own, William Bennett, against Angus MacInnis in the upcoming federal election. True, a programmatic basis for a united front existed in embryo: during these two months, Communist, socialist, and labourist alike called for union wages for relief work, an end to the blacklist against activists and the discontented, and the rights of freedom of speech and assembly. What they lacked was organizational unity, and here none emerged because few partisans of any stripe desired the combination of forces, at least at the leadership level: even
before the start of the Third Period, most ILP members evinced nothing but disdain for their Communist counterparts, and the feeling was mutual. Yet the lack of an effective united front on relief translated into the dissipation of political pressure on City Council, enabling officials to ignore the promise of an investigation of the blacklist system used against those who had organized on work gangs and participated in demonstrations. This, in turn, eviscerated the economic supports for many jobless itinerants who counted themselves as part of the movement. Within weeks, the vuwo would be reduced to a paper tiger, a shell of an organization that existed in name only. Eugene Debs once said that “the thud of a policeman’s club on the head of a striking workman is merely the echo of the last election.” This echo would be heard in Vancouver.

A Four-Minute Riot and Its Aftermath

The title of the front-page story in the 27 January evening edition of the *Daily Province* read “Whips Used to Break Up ‘Jobless.’” At 2:30 that afternoon, some seven hundred had gathered at the Powell Street parade grounds. After listening to three speakers, those at the front motioned to begin a parade downtown; Allan Campbell suggested that the police should be “careful with their truncheons” because the crowd was in a “dangerous mood.” When Deputy Chief Murdoch informed Campbell that the vuwo had no parade permit, Campbell responded by saying he would “take responsibility”: “The men then started to march and half a dozen mounted police charged them, beating down the ranks of the unemployed with their sticks. The uniformed men then charged, striking down anyone who refused to leave. In about four minutes the parade formation had been broken up.” The *Daily Province* noted the randomness of police violence; in fact, one of those “clubbed over the head” by constables was Detective John Berry, assigned to the demonstration as a plain clothes officer. The *Sun*’s recap of events also emphasized the police’s offensive role. “Monday’s parade was smashed before it had really started,” readers learned. “As soon as the jobless clan had taken the first step they were charged by four mounted police, whose horses were spurred to a gallop. Back and forth through the disorganized regiment of strikers rode the police officers, lashing in at demonstrators with their lead-tipped whips.”

Chief Constable Bingham rejected this interpretation. In his explanation to the Board of Police Commissioners, given after dozens of groups and individuals had condemned police conduct and defended the rights of freedom of speech and assembly, the chief maintained that his force had not erred in any way:
Speakers on the day of the demonstration openly stated that it was their intention to hold a procession, and the Police could “Go to Hell”. Those were the words used by a man named Litterick. During the meeting there were unfortunately many hundred of sightseers who packed the streets immediately adjoining Powell St. Grounds, and I distributed a number of Police amongst these sightseers and caused them to be acquainted with the danger to them unless they dispersed, as the procession would not be permitted, and this might lead to a clash.

I then . . . approached them, advising moderation. We were defied. The procession formed up about 400 strong with boards containing inflammatory print. Again, without any Empire flag, and I walked out on to Powell St. Grounds, with other officers, and again appealed to the leaders not to march off. Litterick gave the command to march. There was much shouting, and bad language, as the procession commenced to march from the Grounds. I again called on the leaders to halt, and they declined. One man holding a banner said “Go to Hell,” and pushed the banner-post against me. Missiles began to fly, and a woman struck one of the Police horses with a stick.

Seeing there were no other means of enforcing the law of this land, and the necessity for keeping disorder away from the streets, I called upon Police to break up the procession, which they did, using very much less force than one would have anticipated under the circumstances. The procession was then dispersed. The strikers rushed amongst the crowd on the footways, continued to pelt the officers, and put up a running fight out into Hastings Street, on Dunlevy Avenue. Many of the strikers had their pockets full of stones. One of them arrested with his pockets full of stones, was found to be receiving relief from the City for a number of years.123

The intertwining of vagrancy, unemployment, and Communism to produce a portrait of demonstrators of weak character and worse politics would prove a hallmark of Bingham’s term as chief constable. In this case, he conjured a picture of Communist extremists, swearing, armed, and disloyal to the Empire. Looking for violence, they had provoked moderate policemen, and their illegal parade had required that constables enforce “the law of the land.” While many onlookers thought that the police had attacked the unemployed, as evidenced by their letters of complaint, the cause of the violence of 27 January, according to the chief constable, was the procession itself. “It is clear that Litterick, Drayton, Campbell, and Bennett intended to force an issue,” Bingham wrote. All four were arrested on charges of unlawful assembly. “The law must be maintained.”124

The chief constable’s defence of his actions and those of his men was absolute. As the melee of Communists and cops flowed onto Dunlevy Street
that afternoon, combatants had found themselves in the midst of another crowd — people attending the funeral of the late Mr. E. Demer, a former member of Local 138 of the Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators, and Paper-hangers of America. Ed Smith, secretary of Local 138, mournfully noted that the funeral had been “delayed some twenty minutes” because “the mourners were subjected to rough handling, one of them suffering a broken rib,” but his complaint did not touch Bingham’s heart:

Many persons who could merely be described as sight-seers, were roughly handled. One woman, Mrs. [D.S.] . . . was attending the funeral mentioned. As one, amongst many of the men fleeing from the officers tried to pass her, she alleged he struck her with his fist, deliberately causing injury to her rib. She was later seen and examined by Dr. Graham, who now reports that she has no injury, or evidence of an assault; that she has been an out-patient of the Hospital for four years. It is clear that this allegation is merely another effort to counter the action of the Police in enforcing the law. 125

As with the person on relief with rocks in his pocket, Bingham used the fact that Mrs. D.S. had used state social services — which in another context would be a sign of the humanitarian impulses of liberalism — to disqualify her testimony. Yet Bingham also argued that violence against “bystanders” like Mrs. D.S. inevitably occurred; the crowd had been warned to disperse, yet people stayed in the streets. In a press statement, Bingham simply noted, “It is not possible to distinguish the innocent from the guilty when trouble starts.” 126

In the aftermath of the 27 January riot and Bingham’s decision to refuse all future requests for parade permits, the Board of Police Commissioners was inundated with letters, some from as far away as Brandon, condemning “the brutal attacks of the Vancouver Police on the Unemployed workers and relief strikers in that City.” 127 Perhaps the strongest criticism of police conduct was found in the motion of Local 452 of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, a union with a small yet vocal Communist presence. The attack on the parade “has raised within the ranks of organized labor, a storm of protest and resentment. The spectacle of well fed, clad and paid, strong and healthy Policemen, beating up undernourished, poorly clad and shivering working men, who because of vile conditions and starvation rations, dared to protest in public, is one that no right thinking Citizen can afford to ignore.” In the final analysis, such violence denies the right of free speech and assembly to those, who by reason of circumstances are placed in that section of society, which has to
toil for a livelihood. Surely the administrative ability and humanitarian principles of those in control must be of the poorest character, when they have to resort to the primitive methods employed by their hirelings on the Powell Street grounds.128

Similarly, Local 213 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers bluntly claimed in a letter to City Council,

There is absolutely no justification for using violence in dispersing a gathering of citizens, who through no fault of their own are unable to obtain employment and wish to draw their plight to the attention of the authorities and other citizens of the community. We are also of the opinion that these men could be employed on public works at the current rate of wages for laborers and mechanics. Relief is a misnomer when you extract a day’s toil at a quarter of the wage paid for that class of work.129

ILP members also criticized what they saw as the use of “unnecessary force” and asked for an investigation into police conduct and the chief constable’s ban on parades.130 Some unionists, however, were not as ardent in their defence of the rights of freedom of assembly and speech due to the prominent role played by Communists in organizing street demonstrations. The Building Trades Council protested against police “brutality” while suggesting that “the same object could have been obtained by more peaceful and gentlemanly methods.”131 A similar opinion was voiced by Local 844 of the International Order of Operating Engineers: “The brutal tactics adopted were absolutely unnecessary and better results could have been obtained through more peaceful methods.” For these and other unionists, mass action, especially that directed by Communists, represented a potentially dangerous response to unemployment.

Other members of the “community” welcomed an inquiry into the administration of the Vancouver Police Department, not in condemnation of violence against protesters but to increase the efficiency of street policing. The Vancouver Central Ratepayers Association notified the council, declaring that “under the present conditions now prevailing in Vancouver, no lawabiding citizen, his wife or family are safe from molestation even on the streets of our City, but the same brutal treatment applies even in the home, where the taxpayer has been grossly and ignominiously assaulted[,] robbed, shot, left bleeding, by this contemptible scourge just for the want of a proper trained protective police administration.” The entire force, from individual constables to the police commissioners, has “not only shown gross incapacity, but lack of the necessary initiative and ordinary police executive ability to grapple with
the serious condition of Crime which has for several months been raging in all parts of our City.” Crime waves apparently made for better headlines than mass unemployment, the defence of property superseding the rights of freedom of assembly and speech.

The riot of 27 January did not bring an end to Communist-sponsored demonstrations, but it diverted much energy and many resources to the trials of Campbell, Litterick, Bennett, and Drayton, sapping the organizational strength of the vuwo. More to the point, Bingham clearly interpreted this riot as the ultimate cause that allowed him to suppress Communism wherever he found it. The chief constable’s “war on Vancouver’s ‘Red’ front” moved to Stanley Park on 29 January, when a demonstration at Lost Lagoon resulted in twenty-nine arrests. The following day, he reported to the Board of Police Commissioners that “the Unemployment situation” in Vancouver was “well in hand.” After listening to Bingham’s assessment, Police Commissioners Malkin, Ditmars, and Neelands — the latter a printer and long-time executive officer of the Independent Labour Party — stated that “no objection should be taken to the Unemployed Association holding their meetings on Powell St. Grounds, but that no parades should be allowed without a permit.”

Two weeks later, the board convened in response to a council motion asking it to investigate police actions on 27 January. A. F. Amor, secretary to the board, read aloud the letters from various unions and individuals, after which Bingham gave his account, laying the blame for the violence on the protesters themselves and completely absolving the police of responsibility. Mayor Malkin reported that Corporation Counsel George McCrossan advised against initiating an investigation at that time because of the upcoming trial of the four Communists — Bennett, Campbell, Drayton, and Litterick — on charges of unlawful assembly, and as a result, board members voted to send Bingham’s report to City Council in lieu of the postponed investigation, with Malkin informing the press that the board “was anxious to conduct a thorough enquiry into the charges made upon completion of the cases now before the Court.”

In one sense, the police coercion against the unemployed on the streets on 27 January did not finally end until three months later. On 28 April, the Board of Police Commissioners held a special meeting to again take up the matter of the riot; City Council had requested they do so in light of the conclusion of the trials of the Communist four, which had resulted in guilty verdicts and short sentences. The decision of W. H. Malkin, David Hall, W. J. Blake-Wilson, and R. H. Neelands was as follows: “In view of the fact four men were convicted of being members of an unlawful assembly in the courts in connection with this demonstration, it was moved, seconded and carried unanimously that this matter be laid on the table.” Four Communists had been convicted; whatever was done to the crowd was justified. No clearer message could be sent to those who contemplated taking to Vancouver’s streets in protest.
In part, this verdict was the bitter fruit of the sectarianism of Communist Party activists. To a large extent, they chose isolation from other leftist groups, believing that the strength of their organization would exact concessions from the municipality and win over the bulk of the resulting newly politicized workers to the party. This assessment proved incorrect: they won neither significant concessions from government nor popular support outside of the conditional endorsement of large numbers of itinerant men. In fact, the consequent decline of the vuwo should be seen, in part, as a reaction against its Communist leadership, which hindered the development of a functioning united front. At the same time, the riot of 27 January cannot be explained solely in terms of Third Period adventurism. In a context in which they had been denied justice through every other legitimate channel, this day’s demonstration and parade involved the collective assertion by hundreds of migrants and other men and women of their rights of speech and assembly. Coupled with the particular viciousness of the police response — clearly calculated by Bingham and yet chaotically diffuse in its targets — the vuwo’s frustrating tour of Vancouver’s civic institutions had done much to confirm the view of the constabulary as operating in the interests of the propertied.

The final irony? While media outlets and ratepayers’ organizations crusaded against an imaginary crime wave and Bingham decried the disorder of illegal demonstrations, a real criminal racket went undetected in the brightly lit offices of Cambie Street. It would emerge in the coming months that Relief Officer George Ireland had pilfered on a grand scale from his own department with the help of C. Maxwell, the clerk responsible for meal tickets. Between them, they had funneled over $5,000 into their own pockets during 1929. Their most profitable sideline was the scam they ran with local restaurants: meal tickets were worth twenty-five cents per day, but weekly books of meal tickets were valued at two dollars, so for every transient given aid, Ireland and Maxwell earned themselves twenty-five cents. Two city investigations revealed that in addition, Ireland had lined his pocket with “commissions” totalling $2,500 and “donations” of $2,500 from several restaurant owners.¹³⁷ What’s more, the personal property of a number of entrants to the Old People’s Home had gone missing. Bill Bennett, now editor of the Unemployed Worker, saw in the Ireland fiasco an opportunity for one jobless man:

We, the Executive Committee of the Vancouver and District Unemployed Workers Organisation, herewith make application on behalf of Allan Campbell a member of our Executive, which was democratically elected by the unemployed workers from whose pinched stomachs your former Relief Officer the Reverend Ireland, withheld five per cent for his own use, by cutting down on the sloppy mulligan which your niggardly and corrupt Relief Department so reluctantly “granted.”

¹³⁷
Our applicant, Allan Campbell, is both able and honest — he is not an Ireland. He is interested in feeding the hungry workers for whom your City Council is unable to find work except at scab coolie wages. He has been active in organising the jobless workers, for which “crime” he received the clubs and whips of your police and lodgings in your lousy jail, while Mr. Ireland and other respected, hypocritical and god-fearing vampires were sucking the blood from their emaciated bodies in order to play the stock market and feather the nests, which, in their inordinate greed, they fouled. . . .

Unless you appoint a member of the unemployed or some other militant worker, we fail to see the sense of removing Ireland, for he is neither better nor worse than any other you may select from the same decadent class that spawned him.

Campbell naturally did not get the job, and would, in fact, be deported. Instead, the new relief officer would be Colonel H.W. Cooper, a former warden of the New Westminster Penitentiary and an all-too-obvious herald of the new era of Relief Department discipline.

Since the 1970s, the bulk of Canadian historiography on the Great Depression has portrayed the central political conflict of the era as that within liberalism between outdated Victorian (if not Elizabethan!) conceptions of joblessness as a self-made product of an individual’s flawed character and modern understandings of the structural underpinnings of mass unemployment, according to which many Canadians wanted for work through “no fault of their own.”

The former, so the story goes, meant various types of punitive relief policies that blamed the victim, while the latter roughly translated as an interventionist program that assumed national responsibility for economic development and its consequences, and advocated unemployment insurance as well as broader welfare state measures. If this is true, then Vancouver must be commended for the incredible pace with which its residents conducted this debate, achieving in January 1930 — we are told — community consensus on a political program regarding unemployment so radical that it has yet to be realized.

There was, of course, no real “community” to be found, and yet the civic conference on unemployment in January 1930 — its existence, its agenda, and its democratically ratified program — is evidence of the powerful realignment of local forces as a result of the twinned threat of itinerants and the leftists who envisioned new societies because of them. As far as we know, the Vancouver Unemployed Workers’ Organization held dozens of public meetings; met with bodies of the City Council three times; organized nine street demonstrations, four of which ended with dispersal by police; and “caused” at least one

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riot. These two months occasioned the creation of an organized movement with a radical program supported by a series of sustained militant protests, the likes of which had not been seen in Vancouver since the 1919 labour revolt. And it was also a local movement, with a program that was determined in Vancouver and that would come under sharp criticism from Communists in the centre of the country. Transients were the particular preserve of the vuwo: with its six points, the group agitated for a union minimum standard of living and the abolition of racial, national, and residential hierarchies in relief provision. In time, every jobless worker — indeed, every worker — would receive union wages, and Vancouver would never be the same.

Yet while Communists may have controlled the vuwo’s program (although extant evidence does not allow for a conclusive assessment), they did not control the movement or the events in which it participated. Front and centre during these moments were itinerants, most of them property-less, many of them receiving the barest of aid. Their power to shape if not control events, short-lived and limited as it proved to be, was secured through two means. First, itinerants overwhelmed the administrative machinery of Vancouver’s Relief Department, with the ensuing chaos frustrating the liberal principle of no relief without regulation. This fact alone necessitated a substantial overhaul of civic methods of relief administration, beginning the process that led to labour camps, as we shall see. Second, itinerant power also stemmed from itinerants’ willingness to organize and repeatedly take to the streets — or to refuse to do so — over a host of issues. For the vuwo, migrant workers served as both its biggest source of organizational strength and its Achilles heel. Without the support of itinerants, the vuwo could do little, as seen in the failure of its call for a general strike of relief workers. In this sense, these wandering workers represented the ultimate cause of and the outer limit on radical activity in Vancouver. The itinerant challenge to Vancouver’s social order transcended the conventional historiographic wisdom that opposes outdated Victorian moralists, living in the shadow of the Elizabethan Poor Law statutes, and modern advocates of provisioning that would soon be associated with the coming of the welfare state. It struggled, in the program of the six points and subsequent acts of resistance, to make an individual’s character irrelevant, superseded by the right of all workers to reclaim the fruits of their labour and enjoy a minimum standard of living that has yet to be achieved.