Few Utopian fantasies are quite so practical and potentially revolutionary in their effects as the demand for full employment, for if there is any program that could not be realized without transforming the system beyond recognition and which would at once usher in a society structurally distinct from this one in every conceivable way, from the psychological to the sociological, from the cultural to the political, it would be the demand for universal full employment in all the countries of the globe, full employment at a living wage. As all the economic apologists for the system today have tirelessly instructed us, capitalism cannot flourish under full employment; it requires a reserve army of the unemployed in order to function. This first monkey wrench would be compounded by the universality of the requirement, inasmuch as capitalism also requires a frontier and the possibility of perpetual expansion in order to go on existing and to sustain its inner dynamic. But at this point the Utopianism of the demand becomes circular, for it is also clear, not only that the establishment of full employment would transform the system, but also that the system would already have to have been transformed, in advance, in order for full employment to be established. I would not call this a vicious circle, exactly; but it certainly reveals the space of a Utopian leap, between our empirical present and the Utopian arrangements of this imaginary future.

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future, 2005*
On Halloween 1931, Nelson businessman Charles F. McHardy lectured Premier Simon Fraser Tolmie on the state of his province’s roads. “Good roads mean more to us in dollars and cents than tariffs, or inter-Empire trade”: McHardy based this bold declaration on his personal observations of daily life in the hinterland. “We travel the roads daily,” he wrote, “and are paying a terrific price for damages as a result of accidents and a still larger price in unwarranted and unfair wear and tear. On top of this, the loss we sustain, owing to the fact that tourists will only travel over our roads once, and will, if possible, keep their friends from coming even once, is a very serious matter.” In McHardy’s analysis, the terrible condition of British Columbia’s roads served as an obstacle to, rather than a conduit for, economic development. As long as transportation remained difficult and dangerous, he argued, the Depression would continue.\(^2\)

With this account of BC’s prospects, McHardy found a compatriot in engineer Pat Philip. Philip valued the highways of British Columbia as an asset worth $67 million at the end of 1932. Unfortunately, the policy of “so-called retrenchment” then pursued, including the suspension of basic road maintenance, meant “a heavy loss to the Government through deterioration.” Philip maintained that in calculating the balance sheet, the debit column had to include the subsequent “loss of revenue from the tourist traffic and the economic loss suffered by the people, which are incalculable.” While “fully in sympathy with the policy of reducing expense to the minimum,” Philip remained firm in his belief that cutting spending on road maintenance was short-sighted, damaging future economic development.\(^3\)

Of the plethora of commentators on the deterioration of BC’s roads, Pat Philip occupied a unique position, since he spent his days working as chief engineer of Tolmie’s Department of Public Works: as such, he was also the Deputy Minister of Public Works. From the onset of the provincial government’s relief camp scheme, Philip’s responsibilities included the planning and supervision of all work relief projects. His was a Fordist vision that embraced the potential for expansion-oriented relief projects to generate value and end the downturn sooner. A camp located adjacent to a major highway, he explained to the premier, “can be used to the best advantage in connection with construction, re-construction and repairs to the road.” Beyond the developmental promise of road work, Philip offered a simple economic rationale: this type of endeavour, which entailed the bulk of common labour being performed under conditions of relief, would ultimately prove cheaper for the government than the postponement of all projects until after the recovery, when regular wage rates would be the norm. “The cost to the Government, using unemployed labour,” Philip observed, “will amount to approximately $40.00 per month per man inclusive of materials, etc.” However, “under normal conditions, the same work would cost the Government $100.00 per month per man.” Ever the engineer, Philip dismissed the popular perception of unemployed labour as low

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in value; he estimated a loss of efficiency in his relief camps of only 30 per cent. “Even with this allowance,” he noted, “you will see that there is a vast saving to the Government by now taking advantage of the surplus labour available.”

These were not the arguments of a man chiefly concerned with how best to implement humanitarian schemes. Philip did not explain how a greater rate of exploitation than that of “free” labourers would benefit the transient. There was, in fact, no contemplation of any of the character-based issues we associate with moral regulation, such as indolence and illicit sexual activity, in his administrative correspondence. Nor did Philip seek to understand the future dreams of camp residents with an eye to facilitating their dreams through government programs. Instead, Philip posed a question of property allocation: how could the government best “take advantage” of this surplus labour? Through their collective work in isolated settings, the labour of jobless men would be objectified, used to create and develop property owned by the Province. For Philip and many others, production, not regulation, formed the crux of the camp system, although to stimulate the former required the latter. Private property lay at the heart of this civilizing project, and the quest for development drew attention to the end result — the road or the sewer, the park or the golf course — and not to the exploitive social relations that produced them. Such relief schemes had a barbaric character, “taking advantage” of misery and suffering — intensifying them, in fact — to produce property and increase its value.

One of the elements of work relief that most interested me as I set out for the archives arose from a passage in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* on the “gentle art of punishment” as applied to prisoners:

> Public works meant two things: the collective interest in the punishment of the condemned man and the visible, verifiable character of the punishment. Thus the convict pays twice: by the labour he provides and by the signs that he produces. At the heart of society, on the public squares or highways, the convict is a focus for profit and signification. Visibly, he is serving everyone; but, at the same time, he lets slip into the minds of all the crime-punishment sign: a secondary, purely moral, but much more real utility.

Fascinated by the notion of the forced labourer “paying twice,” although wary of Foucault’s all-too-neat distinction between “labour” and “signs” in light of the arguments of Vološinov and others for a social interpretation of linguistic signs and their production, I set out in search of evidence of the public signs of work relief but found few that fit with this analysis. In contrast to Foucault’s example — and to the present day, when federal billboards publicly proclaim the benefits of state spending on infrastructure projects — politicians in 1930s British Columbia do not appear to have made an attempt to display...
work relief projects in this manner. Still, questions stuck in my mind: Could BC’s Depression-era relief workers be said to have paid twice? For that matter, were these payments always made?

That Foucault’s analytical language characterized the workings of power almost exclusively in terms predicated upon its success, purging this history of elements that cannot be subsumed by a functionalist interpretation, is clearly visible in this brief account of public works. Not only did their labour “serve everyone” — a pre-Marxist understanding of “society” as a singular entity similar to the “somatic singularity” that is the modern subject9 — but the signs they produced also had a singular, automatically legible meaning: such an approach teaches us something about the intentions of policy-makers but little about the larger world beyond their calculated scheming. Just as important for our purposes, Foucault interprets the visibility of public works as evidence of the successful workings of disciplinary power because he relies on an extremely narrow, almost purely technical definition of productive relations, analytically separate from relations of signification, discipline, and security.10 And with this definition of the economic comes the assertion of the greater “utility” of the moral, an argument with which we must agree given that the utility of the economic lacks any significance. Indeed, a careful reading makes clear that Foucault had no concept of economic power or subjectivity: the self is fashioned in the web of techniques of juridical and disciplinary relations, especially the latter.11 In practical terms, this framework depicts questions about workers’ control and the moral regulation associated with Fordism as matters related primarily to disciplinary power.

The first variant of this argument appears in History of Madness, in the discussion of the so-called Great Confinement. Here, Foucault takes pains to differentiate the economic from the moral in his analysis of Houses of Confinement, although he also makes clear that he considers these categories to be qualitatively different. Similar to the account in Discipline and Punish, Foucault stresses that administrators intended the labour of the unemployed and others to “serve the interests and the prosperity of all.”12 Nonetheless, he concludes that these projects failed to lower prices and in fact created unemployment and unrest, suggesting that their real utility lay elsewhere: “What to modern eyes appears as a clumsy dialectic between prices and production took its real significance from an ethical consciousness of work, where the complexities of economic mechanisms were less important than the assertion of a value.”13 As idleness came to be considered “the supreme form of revolt” in the classical age, the mad no longer represented a boundary figure that marked an “elsewhere” but were now ensnared with the poor in Houses of Confinement. In this way, institutional confinement and compulsory labour, whether productive or not, represents “an astonishing synthesis between moral obligations and social laws,” and herein lies the “ethical consciousness of labour” to
which he attributes primary importance. Foucault thus measures the relative weight of economics and ethics according to what we might term their lasting historical significance, an argument that can be embraced because of its empirical foundations: it allows, at least theoretically, for variations in the relative significance according to context.

Nonetheless, despite his dramatic shifts from the experiential paradigm employed in History of Madness through the archaeological studies of the late 1960s and the genealogical interpretations of the 1970s, Foucault never found a context in which what he understood as the moral or ethical failed to be of greater significance than that of the economic, hinting at the debilitating limitations of his technical definition of production. The account of the workplace in Discipline and Punish differs from earlier writings in that it asserts connections between categories he initially treated as separate:

This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body.

Again, we see the descriptive language predicated upon the success of power relations — subjection is already systematic before capitalist labour power can come to exist, and need is a sign that the irresistible panopticon is already in our heads — and the functionalist reduction of history to utility. Just as important, Foucault interprets workplace rules and regulations “as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power,” making clear his conceptual division of production from power and the reduction of the former to a mechanistic process largely free from any meaningful conflict. His framework, in short, expands the category of disciplinary power until it threatens to subsume every act in the workplace, making it difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend the complicated history of Depression-era relief programs.

Over the past decade, Canadian historians have turned to the ever-increasing body of work on state formation and moral regulation to explain nation-building on the West Coast. Relief programs in general, others have observed, acted to create “the poor” as objects of discourse, while attempting to instill forms of subjectivity suitable to public order and the Protestant work ethic. Nonetheless, while the coercive dimension of relief camps is clearly visible, the archival remnants of Tolmie’s government are striking precisely
for the absence of much discussion concerning the reformatory potential of this massive undertaking. As with Pat Philip, commentators on the camp system lingered over their economic aspects and often neglected the moral dimensions so often stressed in accounts of work relief. To be sure, the vision of economic development offered by Premier Tolmie and cabinet members such as Minister of Public Works R.W. Bruhn was modest. In their glowing future, logging, mining, and tourism would solidify the foundation of provincial prosperity. Just as the Vancouver Sun had gloried in the possibilities of never-ending growth in the autumn of 1929, Tolmie’s leadership council believed in the power of BC’s natural resources. The camps, in their ideal form, would build roads to open up the province; this modernizing project would provide the infrastructure necessary to move BC’s resource commodities out to foreign markets and to bring in a certain class of foreign consumer. The Liberals, for their part, offered two primary lines of criticism of the Tory relief camps. First, they demanded that the Province’s relief spending be administered in a more business-like fashion: government could learn much from industry. Second, Liberals vowed to increase the Province’s return on its investment. Throughout the 1932 investigation into the camp system, Liberals advocated that the jobless be put to work more efficiently. Party-based political differences thus spoke to a conflict about the nature of future economic development, Tolmie’s time-honoured road-building strategy, and T.D. Pattullo’s more modern notion of Fordism via the channels of state intervention.

Just as important, the provincial camp system arose upon a foundation of commodities. Since the turn of the twentieth century, British Columbians had been able to head to skid row and learn of the mysteries of the commodity form. The Socialist Party of Canada, whether E.T. Kingsley’s first generation or William Pritchard’s second, is the best-known propaganda group dedicated to instructing workers — and anyone else who would listen — on the secret workings of capital. Party members, as well as a host of other soap-box socialists, offered up the labour theory of value as an economic and moral conception of how commodities were produced and exchanged and how value was created. Its moral resonance lies in one simple idea: each individual thing produced under capitalism contains within it a measure of surplus value. Commodities, in this view, are material embodiments of exploitation. To look at the camps from this soap box is to recognize that every item used to care for unemployed men — to transport, house, feed, and clothe them in bush camps — contained remnants of their exploitation and the exploitation of others in the world of waged work. The economic dimension of relief provision in BC’s work camps thus undermines the traditional separation of business and government. Tolmie’s Tories created an industry.

Along with the economic vision invested in the camps and the foundation of commodities that enabled their creation, historians must begin to
come to terms with the “work” aspect of work relief. After reading details of a “strike” at the provincial relief camp at Allco in a February 1932 edition of the Vancouver Sun, an official of the federal Department of Labour wrote authorities in the provincial Department of Public Works, seeking information. This type of request was standard practice: the Department of Labour had gathered data on strikes and lockouts for government publications such as the monthly Labour Gazette and the yearly Labour Organization in Canada since the early 1900s. After an exchange of letters, both bureaucrats decided that disputes would only be officially classified as “strikes” if the labourers involved received wages: protests involving relief workers were therefore not “strikes” per se. While superficially an administrative matter governing which department of the state was to collect information, there was a much more significant issue at stake. By reaffirming the distinction between work relief and wage labour, this decision masked the similarity between these two forms of economic activity. If we stand back from the traditional connotations associated with “relief,” we see that this system of state paternalism did not fundamentally differ from wage work in many respects.

Work relief produced a central contradiction: the unemployed worker who, in order to receive aid, worked for a living by satisfying a labour-based requirement. Works projects, we have been told so often that surely it must be true, were “boondoggles” that resulted in little of value. Delving beneath the rhetoric, a few commentators, notably Patrick Brennan and Bill Waizer, have unearthed the remaining traces of this labour in examples such as Saskatoon’s Broadway Bridge and Canada’s system of national parks. By and large, however, the labour of the Depression-era unemployed — the property they created and the value they added — remains hidden from history. This chapter aims to recover long-forgotten tales of production by the unemployed, the “work without wages” of B.C.’s relief camp residents.

In November 1930, one Communist detected a shift in elite thinking away from attacking the economic factors that led to mass joblessness and toward explicitly coercive strategies designed to separate and control the jobless. “They have given up all attempts at doing away with unemployment and concentrate on doing away with the unemployed,” argued this radical. To illustrate his argument, he highlighted the wide-ranging discussions around “the setting up of debt slave camps in the woods, the finding of work at starvation pay ‘beyond the city limits,’ the cutting of wood (for board) in Allouette Park and the many schemes concocted in the festering heads of the class enemies of the working class.” Another jobless man wrote to the Unemployed Worker from one of the camps, wryly noting that “one thing we have to be thankful for” was the fact that “our” roads are being built so cheaply. The dilemma of identification posed by this writer is significant: could the unemployed feel that the roads they built belong to them? And if they did, were they labouring under an illusion?

“Work Without Wages,” or, Paving the Way for Economic Development

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In the midst of hard times, corporate executives faced two options: contracting their businesses in order to cut costs or expanding their efforts with hopes of increasing market share. Municipal leaders in Victoria opted for the latter, engaging in a host of camp-based initiatives that can serve as a microcosm of the economics of work relief. In October 1930, Victoria’s chief engineer approached the Public Works Committee of City Council with a plan to construct a relief camp at the Goldstream Authority (now a provincial park). Unemployed men would cut cordwood from felled logs at a rate of two dollars per cord, minus one dollar per day for food. In agreement, the committee voted to allot $3,000 for the construction of a camp for single men, who would be protected under the Workmen’s Compensation Act, rare for relief projects. All governments that sought to engage the unemployed in productive labour in locations outside the city core found themselves faced with a host of choices. Consider the issue of shelter. Should they rent facilities from the private sector? Should they purchase an existing camp? Or should one be built from the bottom up as an exercise in state formation? Other issues raised a similar range of questions. Should the government employ its own staffers, or should they rely on the existing management personnel of private camps? What work would the unemployed do, and from where would the tools and other equipment be secured? How would the men be transported to the camp, and how would they be fed? In these ways, the governance of work relief involved forms of economic decision-making, from the mundane to the expensive, that challenge our categorical distinctions between the capitalist market and the liberal-democratic state.

Three days after designating $3,000 for a relief camp, the Public Works Committee heard from a Mr. Barnard, who owned a bush camp on Waugh Creek. The city engineer declared the asking price of $1,000 a bargain; eventually, Barnard accepted $900, including the camp’s stoves and heaters. To actually put the unemployed to work required more spending. The committee agreed to pay $613 for saws; a cook was hired, and the jobless would be charged one dollar per day for their food. Beyond the necessary financial outlay, launching a relief camp necessitated consideration of a range of labour-related issues. From the outset, Victoria’s unemployed men petitioned for a higher rate of pay and more days of work each month. In return, the chief engineer complained about their efficiency; the jobless at Waugh Creek averaged four-fifths of a cord per day, meaning a wage of $1.60, less the dollar charged for food, which left them with sixty cents for each day on rotation. Nor could all of Victoria’s unemployed be sent to camp. On 1 December, the city’s relief officer reported that 25 percent of the 229 men who had registered were unfit, some of them “for work of any kind.”
In 1930, the argument for the temporary nature of the downward swing still held some currency. Rather than limit spending on work relief programs in anticipation of a deeper crisis, Victoria’s City Council opted to expand its work relief operations. Having already bought one camp, the City diversified its portfolio by constructing yet another, this one at Thetis Lake. The final bill amounted to more than $3,200, including $350 on tools to be used by a rotating shift of fifty men transported daily from Victoria to cut cordwood.\textsuperscript{32} Victoria also spent additional funds on the Waugh Creek camp, and the expansion of relief projects made it necessary to hire an assistant for the chief engineer. By the end of 1930, Victoria had spent over $5,000 above and beyond the relief wages paid to the jobless; in the asset column were two camps and a store of two thousand cords of wood. Not surprising given the expansionary program, the supply of capital soon became a concern, prompting the council to bring the product to market. In January 1931, Victoria began receiving tenders for the hauling of the wood and issued a call for tenders to purchase it.\textsuperscript{33} Like hundreds of other businesses, however, the council lacked buyers for its goods, and to add insult to injury, the company contracted to transport the wood would receive $3.50 per cord, a high price, and could not begin until March because of the poor condition of the roads. Eventually, the City of Victoria unloaded the wood at a loss, accepting an offer for eight hundred cords at seventy-five cents per cord. Waugh Creek ceased operations despite the clamour for work, and single men were relocated to Thetis Lake, where they worked for the rate of a dollar per day plus food.\textsuperscript{34}

In early April, the Public Works Committee met to allot the $25,000 they would receive under the federal Unemployment Relief Act. At the same meeting, Kroeger, Hetherington, Franklin, and Bertucci of the newly formed Workers’ Alliance — a non-sectarian association involving the unemployed and employed alike — appeared in hopes of negotiating a better deal. That some men had been dropped from the rotation following the closure of Waugh Creek was a key source of complaint; relief recipients had lost their work relief jobs and were once more plunged into unemployment. For those who remained, conditions were still inadequate. Married men received a mere six days of work each month, and single men were now “compelled to work for $1 per day.” In response, the Public Works Committee pleaded poverty: they could put more men to work only if they received a substantial sum from the provincial government, but they could not consider raising the rate of relief. Two weeks later, the committee changed the payment system for single men refused entry to the camp and kept in the city to work on the Macdonald Estate: this group now received meal and bed tickets instead of cash. As well, the City brought to an end all projects that assigned “unfit men” to light work in Victoria’s parks; these workers were denied further aid.\textsuperscript{35}

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In part, Victoria officials cut the relief payroll because they already had plans for the money to be received from the Unemployment Relief Act. In early May, the committee once again commissioned the construction of a relief camp, this one to house one hundred men at Sooke Lake, where they would cut cordwood. Having unsuccessfully lobbied for better treatment, the Workers’ Alliance set out to organize the project workers, and within a month, most relief workers were willing to strike, demanding to be paid “standard wages” of four dollars per day. They also wanted to be charged for food at cost rather than a dollar per day. In the ensuing conflict over Victoria’s work camps, the debate over the meaning of work relief turned on its value. Hans Kroeger, secretary of the Alliance, argued that the jobless were not, in reality, jobless at all. “The work to be done at Sooke is necessary work,” he explained, “which, if there were no unemployed, would have to be done in any case and paid for at a standard rate of wages.” Mayor Anscomb disagreed, maintaining that the “work was not a necessity and was only started as a relief measure.” While willing “to give an appreciative ear in complaints of the genuine unemployed,” City Council would “not stand for discontent fanned by agitators.”

Anscomb’s remark points to another dimension of the conflict: the investigation of this jobless labour force. Victoria had already initiated deportation proceedings against several radicals among the unemployed. Tolmie’s government, too, had received information from a spy in the Alliance. These agitators, reported the undercover operative, threatened “the welfare of not only Victoria (nearest home) but dominion and empire.” Meanwhile, members of the Workers’ Alliance voted to join the new Communist-created umbrella organization, the National Unemployed Workers’ Association. Eventually, tensions at the Sooke Lake relief camp broke, apparently after the arrival of a new batch of applicants. In September, the committee denied requests from residents for better wages and a half-holiday on Saturday, and established a new policy: anyone “discharged from a job for ‘loafing’” would be suspended from relief work for a period of two weeks. In an echo of the events in Vancouver with which we began, the organized unemployed of Victoria met with a blanket refusal every time they presented collective demands. Instead, they would now be given smaller amounts of relief, and they would have to work harder to get it.

From civic officials’ pleas of financial hardship and their business-like approach to relief, to the disenchantment with work relief projects and the organization of a protest movement, these events have a familiar ring to them. And as before, the political analysis offered by the movement that emerged, the Workers’ Alliance, centred on the identity between the work relief experience and that of wage workers. Tasks previously done under conditions of free wage labour were now accomplished under a charitable, and thus voluntary,
program: municipalities did not have to spend money on these projects but did so to care for the poor without the degrading conditions of direct relief. But to receive relief, many impoverished workers had to be subjected to the extraconstitutional burden of compulsory manual work. With the distinction between “free” and “relief” labour, these men were superexploited, living somewhere between wage and chattel slavery as “involuntary philanthropists” who gave while they received.42

Few municipal governments enacted programs as ambitious as that of Victoria. And in the face of the financial crisis that consumed municipal governments throughout 1932, most were forced to cut back on, if not eliminate entirely, their use of work relief. Nonetheless, the reality of these camps is clear. For the course of fifteen months — the camps were finally shut down in January 1932 — the City of Victoria was a minor player in BC’s lumber industry. Because its operations were conducted as work relief, as opposed to the customary conditions of waged work, the government benefited from its use of compulsory labour at sweated rates to get wood to market. This exploitation of unfree labour formed a basic component of the capitalogic that governed provincial Depression-era work camps.

Municipal Campaigns for Labour Camps

While the relief program of the City of Victoria looked keenly ambitious from an entrepreneurial standpoint, its choice to try to sell cordwood was hardly propitious. The collapse of world markets undermined logging more than most sectors; the more wood they gathered for market, the less its potential price. For most municipalities, however, the key difficulty with the work relief projects mandated by the Unemployment and Relief Act of 1930 and the Unemployment and Farm Relief Act of 1931 lay in the capital outlays required to launch them, particularly those involving the spatial confinement of the unemployed outside the cities. The political will to devise a carceral archipelago of forced labour was certainly there, but the cash was harder to come by. The provincial relief camps attempted to meet, at least in part, the repeated calls of municipal governments for both economic development and social order through a powerful, spatially oriented strategy. In this way, the unemployment figures of the cities would be reduced by relocating the unemployed themselves.

If labour camps were to be the solution to the transient problem, it would make fiscal sense for those who already owned camps to branch out into this line of business. On 29 October 1930, Relief Officer Cooper, along with Mayor Malkin and a handful of aldermen, met with a delegation from the BC Loggers’ Association at the latter’s request. In a memo to Alderman Atherton a
few days later, Cooper noted that “bad market conditions” would soon add to the seven thousand lumber workers already jobless. The association’s representatives, led by those from the Abernethy Lougheed Logging Company, offered to “accommodate these men in the Camps” under the arrangement that Vancouver would contribute money toward feeding the jobless loggers, while the industrialists would provide “sleeping accommodation free” to the municipality. “A salient point of the proposal,” Cooper pointed out to Atherton, “is that the men should sign acknowledgements for the amount expended, which would be collected by the Loggers’ Association from their pay, when conditions are again normal.” In short, as part of a relief program, unemployed men would be charged not just for food but also for the use of a bunk in a bunkhouse that would have otherwise remained empty, and then would have to work off their incurred debt once market conditions indicated the resumption of activities: not for nothing had British Columbia earned the nickname “The Company Province.” Cooper and the City’s other elected officials believed that they lacked sufficient funds to devote at the outset of the project and encouraged the association to present its plan to the Province. Meanwhile, several representatives of the United and Anglican churches expressed their concern that the plan entailed “comparative idleness” for the unemployed because it contained no work-related component.

Substantial controversy erupted when knowledge of the offer became public: the Abernethy Lougheed Logging Company was partly owned by Nels Lougheed, a long-time Tory MLA and a current cabinet minister of Tolmie’s government. With a political firestorm spreading, Lougheed contacted Cooper via telephone to clarify matters, after which Cooper wrote a curious memorandum to Atherton, which, in today’s terms, resembles a non-denial denial:

The suggestion that the Abernethy Lougheed Co. be paid $1.00 per day for boarding single men, did not originate with the Company. During the discussion between representatives of the City and the Company as to how best to utilize the vacant camps for relief purposes, a tentative suggestion was made by the Company’s representatives that the City pay $1.00 towards the $1.50 per day which is the approximate cost of feeding the men under usual conditions.

Alderman Angus MacInnis loudly denounced the plan at the 3 November meeting of City Council. Observing that no actual logger had been consulted, MacInnis highlighted the Loggers’ Association’s long opposition to industrial unionism, which had led the association to maintain what MacInnis claimed was “the most efficient blacklist of any organization on this continent.” Instead, “the loggers should get assistance the same as all other workers,” he demanded. Most council members ignored MacInnis and passed
a motion that civic representatives should express their support for the plan in the upcoming meeting with the provincial government. On 11 November, Mayor Malkin offered to purchase bedding to be used by Abernethy Lougheed as an incentive for the Province to adopt the plan.

Nonetheless, MacInnis did not stand alone in opposition to the camps. “Not a ‘Bum’” wrote to the Vancouver Sun to complain of the association’s logic. He noted that an association member had declared that the lumber workers to be housed in the camps “are not bums. They have too much pride to appeal for aid from the city.” The disgruntled worker went on: “This appears to be a direct slap to all who register for relief work. It is a fine state of affairs we have arrived at when a man who registers for work is branded as a ‘bum.’” The most detailed critique of the plan appeared in the Unemployed Worker under the title “Back to the Woods”:

The Lumber Bosses of the province intend taking advantage of the plight of the thousands of idle loggers in order that in the future they will be able to exploit them even more savagely than heretofore. This gang of industrial pirates have presented to the civic and provincial authorities a scheme which in its viciousness beats anything yet launched. They want to get the jobless loggers out in their logging camps to be fed until the camps open up (whenever that will be). The money is to be advanced by the government and charged against the loggers, to be paid back by them when they start work. This scheme is along the same line as the Belgian bosses, through King Leopold, put over in the Belgian Congo, which was, and is a world scandal. Or like the debt system of slavery in the British African possessions and India. The lumber barons want a tighter grip on their slaves and this is why they are trying to introduce the peonage system in the woods. . . . The introduction of such a system will mean that the loggers will be bound to the bosses by the debts contracted and be in an even more helpless condition than before. This is the most brazen attempt yet made to prevent workers leaving the job when conditions become rotten.

The global analysis in this Communist critique captured the plan’s most notable feature: its quasi-legal binding of loggers to logging companies in a manner calculated to ensure their future dependence and thus their availability for work. Just as meal and bed tickets issued for the Central City Mission or the Emergency Refuge separated homeless transients from the free market and subjected them to forms of discipline, the scheme of the Loggers’ Association would deny to lumber workers the right to apply for government relief or even to remain in Vancouver. Instead, relief would become a loan, although without the contractual protections usually afforded in such an arrangement.
In other words, this was not relief at all but rather unfree labour-in-waiting, a form of “peonage” made possible by the economic crisis.

Not surprisingly, the loudest municipal campaign for relief camps was Vancouver’s. While lobbying the province to endorse the plan of the Loggers’ Association, the Relief and Employment Committee simultaneously discussed a proposal for a “concentration camp” to be set up in the Exhibition buildings in Hastings Park. The cost to house a thousand men for five months was estimated at $10,000, exclusive of food, in addition to the $7,000 start-up expenses. Some residents worried that council members had not thought through the ramifications of creating a camp on the Exhibition grounds. Although then a luggage salesman, Mr. F. Leighton Thomas had had some experience with disciplinary projects; besides having worked as an inspector on the Canadian Pacific Railway, Thomas claimed to have participated in British campaigns in Afghanistan, Alexandria, and Burma. While believing the idea of labour camps to be “an admirable one,” Thomas felt obliged to draw attention to their history in Vancouver, building his narrative around “the tremendous difference in morale of the unemployed today, and the men (largely Veterans of the Great War) who were formerly in camp at Hastings Park” in 1922:

The unemployed of today are largely made up of the scum of Europe, wholly undisciplined, and almost entirely under the influence of these Communist Leaders, and if you put a thousand men in camp there, I am perfectly certain that unless they are under the strictest discipline and controlled by an adequate Police Force, then you are going to have trouble galore.

Thomas advocated using RCMP officers to control the population, because “the scarlet coat and the gun on a North West Constable has more effect, on these scum of European hoboes, than twenty City Constables (no matter how good they may be) would have.” If the council failed to take adequate measures, “the City may wake up to find the whole of their Exhibition Building in ashes.” But even before the mayor received this dire warning, support for a civic camp had met with practical limits, related not to fears of destruction but to financing. Civic leaders once again turned to their brethren. In January 1931, City Council sent a group to the capital to meet with Tolmie’s Unemployment Committee. The message was a simple one: “single men could be maintained in camps or central stations at considerably less cost” than the current arrangements of bed and meal tickets. Delegates stressed the necessity of a “substantial initial outlay” in order to reconfigure “certain public buildings... as central stations for the unemployed single men.” Additionally, the representatives argued that the lion’s share of financial responsibility should rightly be assumed by the other governments because the camps would be
used to house transients from across Canada. The politicians left Victoria optimistic that Tolmie would fund Vancouver’s camps.

At the council meeting on 14 January, Atherton formally proposed the creation of a civic-run camp and won a majority, despite opposition to the scheme. City architect Arthur Bird submitted a plan for three bunkhouses, each with room for 320 men, who would be stacked on raised platforms in sleeping berths thirty inches wide, at an estimated total cost of $17,000. The building would be situated at the northwest corner of Doman Road and 58 Avenue in the recently absorbed former municipality of South Vancouver, which was regarded as a working-class district. Officials planned to charge the construction costs to their direct relief accounts, of which the municipality’s share was 25 percent. Deputy Provincial Secretary Pat Walker, however, declared that the full cost of construction would be borne by Vancouver. The Relief and Employment Committee was dismayed, to say the least: “The City has no intention of building a camp and bearing the entire expense,” its members proclaimed.

Meanwhile, many Vancouver residents lacked enthusiasm for the project. Jeanette George, for example, criticized the lack of public consultation: ratepayers should be allowed to air their opinions about “whether they want a large camp of unemployed men dumped in their midst,” since a thousand transient men would “constitute a real danger” in a community without adequate lighting and police patrols. Other groups sounded a similar note. The Collingwood branch of the Canadian Legion wrote to protest the camp’s location in a working-class neighbourhood. “Not wishing to dampen Alderman Atherton’s humanitarian suggestion,” these veterans wryly wrote, “we respectfully suggest that a site should be chosen in the vast open spaces of Point Grey or Shaughnessy,” both exclusive environs of the wealthy. With the provincial government refusing to assume financial responsibility for Vancouver’s proposed camp, City Council responded by terminating its support for many jobless transients in March 1931.

Vancouver was not alone in its complaints about congregations of transients. By the spring of 1931, the size of the itinerant population had increased to the extent that cities such as Kamloops could reasonably claim to be the temporary home of more than a thousand tramps, who built and sustained jungles just beyond the city’s edge. Many British Columbians feared that the growth of the jungles dotting the landscape close to railway lines facilitated the mass communication of tramping values. Only state intervention, it seemed, could prevent the spreading of jungle characteristics such as indolence, immorality, and contempt for constituted authority. The year 1931 thus brought with it the solidification of the hobo figure as the greatest threat to social harmony and to the public purse. “Rid us of this hobo army, and we can take care of our own” — this would serve as the rallying point for municipalities.

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The City Council of Kamloops began debate on “the drifter problem” on 21 May. A week earlier, one alderman had mentioned a report of three hundred “box car tourists” on a train passing through Ashcroft. Transients numbered “almost as many [as the] people in that town,” he fretted. On 19 May, the front page of the Kamloops Sentinel screamed, “Hoboes on Loose; Citizens Assaulted.” Near the jungle on the south side of the Thompson River, Harry Turner of the Kamloops Lumber Company had been confronted by a man “evidently under the influence of liquor,” Turner stated in an interview. A fight ensued, with two tramps arrested, while another group of tramps were “drunk and lying around on the ground.” Even worse, they became “mutinous and refused to obey the constables” who ordered that they move to the other side of the river. Eventually, a “ringleader” and five others were arrested. “The residents are often bothered in the night by vagrants wandering from house to house,” Turner bemoaned. Some aldermen shared Turner’s concern for the absence of work discipline, telling stories of drifters refusing jobs in town because the “terms” were “too low.” Farm work, in particular, found few takers.

With these events in mind, the Kamloops council adopted a resolution to open a soup kitchen, under police control, in the local arena; the City of Vernon had already decided on a similar course. While the council authorized some money for this purpose, members argued that the lion’s share of funding would have to come from individual “citizens” so that the “expense to the taxpayers should not be great.” More to the point, by starting a soup kitchen, the council believed it could eventually rid Kamloops of transients altogether. After registering, tramps would receive two meals a day for two days at the arena, after which police would require them to leave the area. But the kitchen project would work, councillors agreed, only if tramps had no other local sources of support, and thus residents were asked to stop giving meals to men approaching them at home. Nor were they to give cash to “drifters on the street, as so much of this goes into the liquor store.” In theory, tramps would receive aid only through the municipal program and only under police supervision, after which they would be forced to move on. Alongside its coverage of the council meeting, the Kamloops Sentinel offered an editorial on the city as “a hospitable city” for tourists. Ten days later, a hobo from the Kamloops jungle saved a young boy from drowning in the Thompson.

The Kamloops kitchen initially served from fifty to sixty tramps, who received soup, porridge, bread with jam, and tea. Mayor Moffat himself was “impressed by the gratitude of men eating there,” estimating that only 5 percent of drifters were genuine “malcontents.” Their character, however, mattered not at all in questions of access: deserving and undeserving alike would be cut off after two days. Citizens were again warned against giving money to tramps, so as to “eliminate begging”: those desirous of contributing
were to give to local merchants or Police Chief Anderson, so that it could be distributed by the police only to those transients who registered. The tone of the Kamloops Sentinel during these initial days was optimistic. “Many of the men are well educated,” read one article. “They are appreciative of what is being done.” Meanwhile, the Anglican Synod of Kootenay adopted a hard line on the enforcement of vagrancy statutes, calling for the creation of labour camps:

It is hoped that by the setting up of such camps, men who are in their present plight of idleness and unrest through a chain of unfortunate circumstances would find a way out, and that as prosperity returns these fellows will return to their ordinary occupations, their morale undamaged. On the other hand, the idle, shiftless fellows, who refuse work under almost any and all conditions, will find their plight so unpalatable that they will move out of the country. . . . The thought of marshalling the army of unemployed into camps and putting them to work may be repugnant to many persons. It is a measure of compulsion whose justification is necessity.

To lend credence to their campaign for relief camps, H.C. Calder was dispatched to take a census of the jungle, promising him “police protection if necessary.” Meanwhile, the shine had gone from Mayor Moffat’s initially positive view of soup kitchen attendees; in an interview, he now “deplored” the fact that many of them “could not speak a word of English,” and, as had his Vancouver compatriots, he called for police to be stationed at the Alberta border to prevent transients from entering. A Sentinel writer strongly commended Vernon’s policy of requiring work of all who received aid, he explained “the longer a man is out of work the more he forgets how to work.” “The better food he gets and the more idle he continues the more he succumbs to pernicious propaganda. . . . Vernon is not to become a Mecca for tourists who desire neither to labor nor to go hungry.”

By the end of June, the Kamloops soup kitchen was feeding an average of two hundred men per day, most of them “foreigners.” The Sentinel reprinted a story from the Vernon News that inquired of readers, “Would we be a nation of tramps?” Unless the Dominion government intervened to prevent mobility, the answer would be “yes.” Transients, the writer suggested, were taking advantage of local charity networks to fund their expedition to “see the country” and thus “tend to destroy the good old-fashioned virtues of honesty and independence.” Throughout the summer, this increase in transient numbers was repeated in small towns throughout the interior of BC, in the Crowsnest Pass region, and on Vancouver Island. While none would rival Kamloops as a centre of jungle construction, all traced their financial problems to the presence of transients, outsiders who unjustly drained resources from civic coffers.
G.A.B. MacDonald, reeve of Penticton, asked for the “movement of transients riding free on railways to be curtailed.” Fearing that “young men and young women seek adventure through this means to their detriment,” MacDonald believed that “such transients are not beneficial to selves or municipalities.”

The mayor of Nelson, J.P. Morgan, brought attention to the 150 “transients at present camped on lakeshore who daily canvass [the] city for money and food.” In his estimation, only the creation of “labor camps in country districts” would help to “relieve [the] situation and . . . would stop educating [the] unemployed into hoboism.”

As the financial burdens on municipalities increased, many sought to expand the category of “transient.” At a meeting of the Union of BC Municipalities, a motion was passed asking Tolmie’s officials to classify as resident those who had “resided continuously in a municipality for one year and who previous to taking up such residence [were] not destitute nor sufferin[g] from disability.”

All others would be considered transients for relief purposes.

It is striking that in their comments, community leaders in Kamloops, Vernon, and Vancouver did not typically subscribe to the view of transient unemployed men as immoral and indolent individuals. In fact, City Fathers often stressed the genuine suffering experienced by the jobless, at least the Anglo-Canadian jobless, and their willingness to work. In other words, work camps were not to be created for the sole purpose of punishing the lazy and undeserving; all transients, deserving and undeserving, were to be interned in order to remove the burden from the municipalities, figuratively and literally. In the intervention of the Province and the Dominion lay the salvation of the cities.

Economic Development and the Crisis of the Tolmie Government

Premier Tolmie and his cabinet responded to municipal demands for the segregation of transients with a program designed primarily to stimulate development of the province’s economic infrastructure, and others shared in this vision of growth through relief. The residents of Port Renfrew, for instance, sought road development on the stretch of Vancouver Island from Jordan River to Bamfield in order to “open a large section of country rich in minerals[,] timber and farming land and facilitate the marketing of forty percent of British Columbia’s fresh salmon.” Organized through the Department of Public Works under Minister R.W. Bruhn and Deputy Minister Pat Philip, the camps were to effect the type of economic transformation envisioned in Port Renfrew and elsewhere through the use of the physical labour of unemployed men. In business, however, timing is everything. Within two months of their opening in September...
1931, the camps had become holding tanks for the idle jobless due to the combination of the gold standard crisis and the subsequent parsimony of the federal government. Before entering the camps themselves, we will examine the economic context in which they were born and subsequently malnourished.

In early 1931, Tolmie lamented that his government had “never needed markets as badly as we do today.” Provincial revenues from timber and mining had declined substantially “as a result of the bad business conditions existing world wide.” One Communist dryly noted, “Everybody’s getting laid off except the stools and the cops.” With conditions worsening and municipalities crying out for “relief from relief,” Tolmie met with his minister of Public Works, R.W. Bruhn, who declared that he needed $4 million for road development, the bulk of which would have to be secured through an additional bank loan. Tolmie agreed that the time was propitious for such a program: as he explained to Prime Minister R.B. Bennett, depressed conditions allowed for construction projects to be carried on at a substantially cheaper cost than had been possible in recent memory. Given that he saw “no sign of improvement in conditions as far as labour is concerned for 1931,” Tolmie asserted that “it will be necessary for us to provide work for the people; I do not know of any more useful way than in improving our roads and bridges.”

Despite the size of the loan requested by Bruhn, Tolmie expressed his confidence to his Finance Minister, J.W. Jones: “We know that Bruhn will get full value for every dollar expended.” An extensive program of road works made good economic sense. “We have a good province,” he wrote, “and I think it would be better for the Province and the Government to speculate a little on the future rather than to cut off this road work too abruptly.”

Like Tolmie, R.W. Bruhn believed in the applicability of business principles to the management of government. The Salmon Arm Observer, the newspaper of record in Bruhn’s riding, suggested that he was “free from the taint of ‘politician.’” Instead, he endeavoured to organize government “as a business institution which should be maintained as such.” The key, as Tolmie had hinted, lay in the transformation of rocks and gravel into roads. In August 1930, Pat Philip, chief engineer and deputy minister of Public Works, filed a detailed list of projects that could be accomplished through the adoption of a camp system. By using Bruhn’s Department of Public Works to extend and improve transportation networks, mining, logging, and other industries could get their natural resources to market faster. The resulting increase in revenue meant an increase in taxes paid to the government, helping the latter to recoup its initial outlay on the camps. Just as important, Bruhn believed that relief projects could be initiated at below the so-called Fair Wage rate of four dollars per day.
In June 1931, Tolmie and other cabinet members met with the Dominion Minister of Labour, Gideon Robertson, then touring western Canada to assess conditions. The premier stressed both the economic development that work relief would stimulate and the need to separate transients from the rest of the population. The relief camps would bring economic dividends, Tolmie argued, acquainting Robertson with the plan devised by the BC Loggers’ Association the previous year. The “rather stagnant condition of the lumber market” meant that the transportation infrastructure had fallen into neglect. In order to facilitate growth in the lumber industry, roads needed to be built. Because the logging proprietors already operated camps, start-up costs would be minimal. Most of all, Tolmie stressed the necessity of separating the jobless from the city. “Those who know the young logger,” he explained, “fear that these fellows, accustomed to dangerous work in the woods, and possessing many adventurous spirits among them, will not stand for much hardship in the city and if relief is not provided for them, will promptly help themselves.” Tolmie cited the strike conducted by the Workers’ Alliance in Victoria as evidence of the need for immediate action: “This is the sort of spirit that prevails among them. They would rather ‘bum’ than work.” Robertson readily embraced the idea that transients threatened order. Bruhn later testified during the Unemployment Inquiry of April 1932 that Robertson pushed the Province to move with great speed in camp construction and shared responsibility for the ensuing expenses.

In August, H.H. Stevens, British Columbia’s senior parliamentarian in Ottawa, met with Tolmie’s cabinet. The Province estimated that over the course of the subsequent year (until 31 July 1932), British Columbia would be home to approximately thirty thousand municipal resident relief cases and fifteen thousand provincial resident and transient cases. Such a massive undertaking, Tolmie estimated, would require just over $41 million. Stevens gave the cabinet verbal authority to construct camps, with arrangements to be negotiated later. Provincial officials continued to talk with Robertson while establishing the first camps. In the third week of September, the Province submitted proposals for camps valued at $6,675,000. Tolmie had tightened the budget somewhat: the bill for both work and direct relief programs was estimated at a little more than $40 million. Gideon Robertson agreed that his government would pay 50 percent of the total costs, although he later claimed that he had not authorized Tolmie’s estimated figure. Also in dispute is whether Robertson understood Tolmie’s plan to use the camps to house both transient and resident men, as the federal minister later claimed to be surprised to learn that resident unemployed cases would also receive aid through the camp system.

To this point, there had been no overwhelming signs of the chaos to come. The turning point came on 21 September, when Britain abandoned the
gold standard. This policy led to talk of retrenchment in Ottawa — a “complete rearrangement of plans for [the] future”; it also made it more difficult for Tolmie’s government to secure financing without help from the federal government. In mid-October, R.B. Bennett cabled BC’s Finance Minister, J.W. Jones, warning him that “conditions require most rigid economy in expenditures.” Bennett argued that direct relief spending provided aid to four times as many jobless people as did work relief. On a visit to Calgary, Tolmie wired Deputy Minister of Public Works Pat Philip, recommending that any construction of new camps be halted: “Looks like severe curtailment appropriation from Ottawa end may be expected.” In order to meet expenditures, Deputy Minister of Finance E.D. Solomon estimated the need for help from the federal government at a further $7 million. The resulting provincial debt was impressive: over $140 million at the end of September 1931, increasing to an estimated $154 million by the end of March 1932. The interest charges alone totalled $7 million. By late October, it was clear in Victoria that the administration would have to depend upon federal loans. “It will take all our borrowing authorities to carry unemployment relief payrolls for [the] next ten days,” noted one assessment. “Impossible to carry on after November fifteenth without Dominion loan.”

In late October, Finance Minister J.W. Jones headed east to secure financing for the loans the Province required to cope with the unemployment crisis. From Toronto, he wired Tolmie with news of his situation: “Bank and financial syndicates much worried over reports [of] our relief expenditures. Our credit seriously affected.” According to one banker, “there appears to be quite a bit of gossip going around in financial circles in the East regarding the Province.” The government’s road program was being described as “extravagant” with “extremely expensive highways . . . that can serve practically no population and open up no agricultural territory.” Jones received “a hot welcome” in Ottawa and confessed to Tolmie that “the criticism has been all I can stand.” Negotiating with H.H. Stevens and Gideon Robertson because of Bennett’s illness, Jones received notification that the federal appropriation for relief was to be slashed. “You can see that our programme has been butchered,” Jones wrote, observing the impact of the gold standard crisis: the Province would have to “turn many of the work camps into soup kitchens.” Jones faced a litany of complaints: high wages paid to camp carpenters, extravagant expenditures in camp construction, faulty accounting procedures, and delays in submitting provincial vouchers. Most of all, the province stood accused of providing relief to people not in genuine need. Jones attempted to persuade Robertson and Stevens of the short-sightedness of their position, emphasizing “the Communistic propaganda being carried on,” but to no avail. The federal representatives stressed financial exigencies and said that “the municipalities must assume much more of the burden that[n] what they have shown any indication of doing.”
On Halloween 1931, the Tolmie government received the biggest scare of all. Despite Jones’s efforts in eastern Canada, the Dominion government would provide only $3.5 million for work relief in BC’s unorganized districts, and $2.8 million in its municipalities. Jones advised his deputy to get the word out: work on the camps was to “close down . . . immediately.” Up to that point, Tolmie later suggested, “a lot of very valuable work” had been done by the unemployed. “There was no extravagance,” he claimed, “and work was executed at a low unit rate as the Engineers’ reports will verify.” According to estimates issued on the same day, in the six weeks previous, the Province had spent over $2.2 million in outlays to unemployed workers, camp contractors, land owners, logging companies, and merchants, and this flurry of economic activity represented just the beginning. A memorandum for the premier revealed the Province’s need to spend substantial amounts simply to keep the relief system alive. Work projects were no longer possible. Instead, the camps became holding pens for unemployed men, who would be maintained as direct relief recipients; the cost was $300,000 per month for ten thousand men.

In mid-November, Pat Philip reported on his department’s accomplishments. The provincial government had under its purview 210 work camps, all of them in full compliance with the standards set out in the provincial Health Act. Financial exigencies, however, required that 111 “semi-permanent camps” be closed down, displacing about eight thousand men, most of them provincial residents sent to the camps in place of regular public works projects. Eighty-two camps remained open (with 17 in reserve), housing five thousand transients. Tolmie confessed to Bennett that the province had erred in “allow[ing] too many in the camps.” But to be fair, Tolmie suggested, “it was almost impossible to keep these men out of the camps. Everybody demanded a job.” Finance Minister J.W. Jones offered a similar interpretation to E.B. Ryckman, the federal acting minister of Finance, observing “a tendency on the part of individuals who, while idle, were not necessarily destitute, taking advantage of the unemployment relief programme.”

Because of the termination of the production side to the camps, we can only partially reconstruct the vision of development possessed by Tolmie, Bruhn, Philip, and others. Some groups argued for projects that would facilitate the growth of agricultural pursuits. Tories in the Salmon Arm district demanded that funds be channelled from roadwork to irrigation projects “for the fruit lands.” The available evidence, however, suggests a primary focus on roads to facilitate logging and mining, as well as tourism. In late November 1931, as conflicts between federal Tories and provincial Liberals intensified, Tolmie defended the economic vision of his government at the annual meeting of the BC Conservative Association. “We found that while the traffic on our main highways had been rapidly increasing,” he explained, “the roads
had not been maintained in proportion with the development of the traffic.” Under the auspices of the Department of Public Works, roads were improved in a way that provided “profitable employment for a number of idle men.” “Excellent work was performed,” enthused the premier. “These roads will pay for themselves as years go on.”

As chief engineer, Pat Philip had assembled an ambitious program of road construction, designed to open new areas of the province and to shorten already existing routes. The Hope-Princeton project, for example, would decrease the trip from Nelson to Vancouver by ninety-nine miles. Philip estimated that shorter trips would reduce the “running expenses” of drivers by $50,000 per year.

A number of business groups attempted to exert influence over Philip’s road program. J. B. Knowles, president of the Kelowna Retail Merchants Association, wrote Finance Minister Jones to request that work on local roads be shut down in order to shift resources to the Naramata road project connecting the region with the United States. S. G. Blaylock, head of the Consolidated Mining & Smelter Company in Trail, believed that the building of a road in mining country between Rossland and Nelson would “have a wonderful effect” on the economy. With the Dominion’s assumption of a share of financial responsibility came partial control of the designation and selection of projects. Public Works Minister R. W. Bruhn agreed with Tolmie that many of the problems with the camp system lay with the “Dominion Government in laying down certain roads on which this work should be carried out.” This interference, Bruhn estimated, cost the federal government at least $1 million dollars.

Along with working on roads, the jobless laboured on tourist-related projects, clearing land and constructing parks. Nels Lougheed pushed for the development of a provincial park at Garabaldi, arguing that “a park near to Vancouver, with its large centre of population and its numerous outside visitors, might be made to contribute a considerable amount of revenue in repayment for expenditures in opening up and development.” One government official suggested that the business community’s opposition to work-relief spending — exemplified by the 1932 Kidd Commission report — was ill-founded. “The tourist trade runs exclusively on roads and demands roads comparative to its own,” he explained. Although the Department of Public Works brought projects to a halt in November 1931, several undertakings were attempted during 1932 to clear land and begin the road that eventually led to the resort of Whistler. Tolmie also believed that provincially owned camps could, once the economic crisis passed, be “rented for summer tourist accommodation.” J. W. Jones would later tell a representative of Woody Gundy Inc. that the deficits accumulated by British Columbia were not “operating deficits but expenditures in the main from which we have a real live and valuable asset.”

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Critics of the Tory camp system rarely discussed this vision of economic development. Instead, the relentless talk of a “wild orgy of expenditure” focused attention on spending estimates, which themselves were suspect. In November 1931, the Sun estimated the cost to that point of $1.5 million; R.W. Bruhn and J.W. Jones both rejected this figure and claimed a bill in the area of $500,000. Liberal Leader of the Opposition Duff Pattullo wrote to Victor Odlum, publisher of the Star, to ask how his paper devised its estimate, which was also $1.5 million. Odlum responded: “The estimates have been all the way from two million dollars down to . . . five hundred thousand. . . . The figure of one million five hundred thousands, which was used by the Star on a certain occasion, was picked up from the Vancouver Sun. We used it because it was not extreme in either direction and seemed to be a fair average of the estimates that had come in.” As of 20 March 1932, British Columbia spent $2,986,081.68 on work relief projects throughout the province. To that date, the cost of construction and materials for permanent, temporary, and rented camps was calculated at $667,631, just over 22 percent of the total.

The scholarly consensus around the characterization of Premier Tolmie’s camps as an “orgy of expenditure” is overwhelming. We would do well, however, to remember the sources for the image of corruption. Duff Pattullo and his colleagues ravenously devoured any story about Tory excesses, no matter how unreliable the source. Nor were federal Tories, who publicized similar stories, wholly disinterested parties. Relations between national and provincial wings of the party were often tense; the former believed that the latter had done little to aid Bennett’s 1930 federal campaign. Moreover, federal cabinet members, especially Minister of Labour Gideon Robertson, found it convenient to lay the blame for the crisis on their provincial counterparts. In addition, the equation of work relief projects with Tory corruption fails to do justice to the continuing access of Liberals to the trough: both parties sought to gorge themselves on government appropriations for relief. Indeed, the fracturing of the Conservative Party into four separates entities in 1932 and 1933 stemmed in part from the premier’s inability to effectively play the time-honoured partisan game of rewarding friends and punishing enemies.

There were, inevitably, numerous complaints about favouritism under the Tories. A certain D.T. Scott assailed Tolmie for “handing out the wealth of the country to your capitalist friends.” At the same time, Tolmie’s government witnessed a steady supply of missives complaining about the lack of patronage. Attorney-General Pooley informed the premier that he received “letters in continuously — and I have had two this morning — in which most of the complaints, it would appear, centre round the Public Works Department and the Deputy Minister.” To the best that can be determined, Philip’s managerial ethos played the most significant role in selecting the type of projects and the organization of work: his primary focus, however, lay in the
technical aspects of project planning, with an eye to developing the provincial infrastructure rather than strengthening the Conservative Party. The demands of local party organizations increased when it became clear that relief camps were in the offing. At least one constituency association publicly requested that Tories be given preference, prompting a rebuke.122

At the same time, those camp projects selected by the Dominion appear to have relied upon the networks organized by previous Liberal administrations, both federal and provincial. Surveying the situation, Tory organizer Frank MacKenzie reported that because federal officials did not consult with the Province before initiating projects, “superintendents, assistant superintendents, bridge superintendents, bridge crews, gatemen, patrolmen, road foremen, timekeepers, caterpillar operators, cooks, etc. were practically what were left on those jobs when the Liberal Governments went out.” In MacKenzie’s opinion, far too many “key positions” were “held by those of the Liberal faith, — giving the Opposition an advantage that rightly belonged to us.”123 John McBride informed Tolmie that “an old-time Liberal healer” ran the relief program in Dewdney.124 C.E. Barry, secretary of the Fraser Canyon Conservative Association, complained about the lack of co-operation from project superintendents and road engineers in their district: these “strangers” were hired from “outside our district” for administrative positions that should have been selected locally. “Apparently,” he lamented, “anyone that is a real Conservative is like a bad cheque on road work here.” Moreover, the supplying of the project was “all done through Liberal stores.” “Is this a Liberal or a Conservative Government?” Barry wondered.125 Six months later, complaints continued to pour in. A certain Mr. MacArthur of Abbotsford enquired of the premier if “some plan [could] be worked out so that the Liberal Councillmen and Reeves do not Hog these funds for their friend[s] as it has been in the past?”126 On the issues of patronage, D.T. Scott wrote, “I have only to listen to the Liberals to know just what the Tories are, and to the Tories to know what the Liberals are.”127

While the Tories proved unable to eliminate the vestiges of Liberal privilege, they certainly attempted to arrange for key contracts to supply the camps to go to Conservatives. Tolmie later claimed that his officials strove to purchase items wholesale as much as possible. At the same time, some merchants received orders at the wholesale price plus 10 percent. The premier rationalized this decision to give “a reasonable profit” to these “taxpayers and citizens” by arguing that many merchants had gone into debt because they extended credit to the unemployed. Without a profit, a contract to provide goods for the relief camps was of no value to merchants; refusing to subsidize these businesses would have resulted in supply problems.128 Public Works officials also divided their purchases of low-grade lumber among mills, hoping that the department’s policy would allow these firms to cut the price

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on their high-grade wood and thus find a market. Pat Philip later testified before the Select Committee on Unemployment that he was approached by the Associated Timber Exporters, the leaders of which were Tories, with an offer to provide all the lumber for the camps from existing stores: Philip refused because “purchasing lumber in stock . . . wasn’t going to help the unemployment situation to a great extent at that time.”

The provisioning of the camps became a much sought-after source of money. M.L.A. Dr. C.M. Kingston complained that the supplies for camps in his riding “are being purchased outside the District.” This, Kingston argued, was a missed opportunity for Tolmie’s government. “I think I can safely say there is not a wish to exploit the Government and I think the Government will suffer very little, if at all, economically, but on the other hand, will gain substantially in a political way by placing all the business possible with local merchants.” One Liberal charged that the firm of W.A. MacKenzie, a Tory M.L.A., raked in a profit of 10 percent on its deals to supply relief camps in the Squamish area. Of course, the wheels of the patronage machine did not always run smoothly. Ed Bush, president of the Dewdney Conservative Association, asked Tolmie to personally intervene in his five-month dispute with the Department of Finance. Bush had sold $584.75 worth of lumber to camps in Yale in mid-September 1931. “We were told by the Engineers that this was a National Emergency and I felt that it [was] up to me to do my bit,” explained Bush. Thus, the lumber was sold at cost, plus a “handling charge,” resulting in a margin of $400. To realize this profit, however, he had to receive his price, and this proved difficult. Estimating that he had spent $397.10 on long distance telephone calls and trips to Victoria to plead with department officials, Bush begged Tolmie to help him finally be paid.

Attracting much public attention, talk of patronage usually turned to calls for increased economy and efficiency, with camp residents experiencing the greatest effects of this particular way of framing the economics of relief provision. In late February 1932, faced with mass evacuations from the camps and a Communist-led movement thousands strong, as well as very public denunciations of the “orgy of expenditures” by opposition politicians and Vancouver’s corporate media, the Tories agreed to strike a Select Committee to inquire into the camps. Chaired by Tory M.L.A H. Despard Twigg, the Select Committee, in early April, exonerated Tolmie and the Department of Public Works. Tolmie defended his government’s spending, which he claimed was brought about by other forces: “The pressure therefor, on the part of the public, including Municipal authorities, the Police, and the Press, was unanimous, and the need for immediate action in that regard was of the most urgent nature.” The removal of radicals from urban areas and the infrastructure development programs that put money in the pockets of local businesses, they believed, offered a solution to the transient crisis.
To protect their credibility, Tories went on the offensive against Harold Brown, the current president of the Vancouver Board of Trade. In a speech to the Vancouver Real Estate Exchange, Brown maintained that the hearings of the Select Committee had become “a spectacle of shameless evasion and distortion of the truth.” Brown had “sat in on some of the sessions” and was shocked at what he saw. “If any one told the truth, he would have been crucified.” After reading an account of Brown’s speech, the Select Committee asked him to testify. One of the commissioners asked Brown which sessions he had attended. “That is a misrepresentation,” he responded. “My expression was that I had listened in to the Committee, and I meant generally, in a sort of radio sense.”

Asked about the “shameless evasion and distortion,” he responded that “there is a slight misunderstanding” regarding his comment. Asked if specific officials, such as Pat Philip, were lying, Brown stated, “No; I wouldn’t say that for a moment. It is not a question of detail, but you have not developed the situation yet, and the detail is known by the people who are in the actual operation. I am representing a formidable element of the people of the business world.” In the end, Brown refused to name one witness he believed had lied.

The case of Harold Brown represented an extreme version of the popular attitude toward Tolmie’s camp program. The premier even received a medal-lion made of leather, handcrafted by a member of the Ku Klux Klan, as an award for his “non-service” to British Columbians. The Klansman charged the administration with financial corruption and dismissed the Select Committee’s report as “just so much hooey.” Nonetheless, critics of the camp system consistently understated the importance of relief programs as a means to stifle radicalism. The Tory vision combined a program of economic development and ideological reformation through forced labour with a spatial strategy of political rule, identifying and isolating radicals in bush camps. This interpretation was challenged by Duff Pattullo’s Liberals, who pledged to reorganize work relief projects along more labour-intensive lines.

The legislature was thus treated to debates about what could be expected and what could be extracted from the jobless. What obligations best suited the unemployed? What form of work discipline would see the best return for the state? For British Columbia Liberals, the work relief issue was of fundamental importance to the province’s future. For Pattullo, in fact, it embodied the struggle between conflicting social formations. In a November 1931 speech, Pattullo attacked Tolmie’s administration for supposedly offering to provide work for every jobless man, just as had Bennett and other politicians across Canada. Pattullo believed that such a program “would mean that the Government must control the means of employment and thus it would mean the nationalisation of industry and that would mean the Russian system.” He maintained, “I am not ready to surrender the marvelous substance we have in our Anglo-Saxon system for the nationalisation of industry.” The Liberal
leader made this claim repeatedly: the pledge to provide work relief for every unemployed man meant Communism. In an August 1932 letter to a person who suggested that he needed to be friendlier to the business community, Pattullo proudly defended his record as their champion. “I have many times publicly stated that I was out to aid the business and industrial interests of this Province, and I doubt whether there is any other man in the Province,” he proclaimed, “who did more than I did last year in tempering public opinion to a basis of sanity. A year ago public opinion was very much more radical than it is today, and at no less than eighty public meetings I attacked the whole question, including the situation in Russia.” He also sniped that Tolmie’s government “should have foreseen the unemployment situation,” a universal criticism of opposition politicians throughout North America. In general, Pattullo advocated a different form of state spending: public works projects that paid wages rather than relief. Even with the greater expense, infrastructure work done under normal conditions would, he argued, bring a greater return for the state.

The key to measuring the productivity of the unemployed lies in the rate of exploitation. Most accounts suggest that the productivity of men on relief work gangs paled in comparison to that of their comrades who received wages for similar tasks. Yet so, too, did their wages. Of the almost $2.2 million spent on road construction between 1 January and 31 October 1931, more than $1.4 million, or 66 percent of the total, took the form of wages. In the initial period of work in the camps, September and October 1931, the total cost per man per hour of employment was sixty-five cents. Philip and his corps of engineers expected an efficiency rate of 50 percent from the unemployed and were pleasantly surprised to see rates of between 60 and 80 percent on various projects. Even with the lower rate of 60 percent, the return to the province was not substantially less than if projects had paid wages. During the Select Committee hearings, several Liberal MLAs, including George Pearson, the future minister of Labour, grilled Philip about the rate of production. They argued that with a higher rate of pay, the efficiency of the unemployed would have increased substantially. Philip rejected this notion because it occluded one of the primary purposes of the camps: work in an isolated setting. “It wasn’t a question of efficiency,” he maintained. “It was a question of getting these men to work.” On this occasion, the partisan debate between Tories and Liberals was not that of Victorian traditionalists and modern reformers. Instead, Tories argued that the nature of the financial crisis and the need to isolate transients constrained the ability of the governmental infrastructure to extract labour-power from those without jobs. Liberals, however, offered an alternative understanding that insisted the unemployed work harder and receive more. But by the time of the hearings of the Select Committee in March 1932, the biggest obstacle to efficiency of production and economy of administration had become those forced to call the camps home.
This Modern and Civilised Slavery: Communist Organizing in the Camps

Spring on the slopes that ripple and gleam in the sun,
And birds that voice the surprise of the new-born flowers
Beholding the wonder of skies and the pure white silence of clouds,
And below, in the harbor, a lean greyhound of the sea —
A battleship, bristling with murderous guns!

Who is the enemy? Why this menace of war and of death?

And Canada answered, her words embittered and shamed:
‘My sons have dared, on the soil that brought them to birth,
To ask for the freedom to work and to earn, by their toil,
Bread for their children and wives. And this is the crime
That has called the lean war-dog to crouch at my door.’

A. M. Stephen, “Starve Quietly, My Sons!” 1 May 1932

According to a joint report drafted by four police constables who attended the 27 September 1931 meeting at the Avenue Theatre on Main Street, the opening speaker was “a foreigner, name unknown, 5’7”, dark, thickset.”

This was probably J. Brodsky, an organizer for the Vancouver branch of the Canadian Labour Defence League, who began the gathering of the National Unemployed Workers’ Association (NUWA) with a call for a “united militaristic front to convict camps” and encouraged everyone to attend the meeting with Colonel Cooper at the Relief Department scheduled for the following morning. Tom Ewen spoke next — for sixty-five minutes, according to the wearied constables — and condemned the relief camps as well as the deportation policies of the Bennett government. Ewen proposed, and those in attendance eagerly passed, motions condemning sections 41 and 42 of the Immigration Act and section 98 of the Criminal Code.

Next to speak was Jack Cunningham, just out of Oakalla Penitentiary after serving six months for sedition; he would be back in prison within a week, arrested on charges of inciting to riot. Finally, Mrs. Tom Bradley spoke, a “firebrand type,” according to the constables; she called for the movement to “organize women and children and get them out into the streets and fight.” The meeting ended with the singing of “The Red Flag.”

At 8:30 the next morning, approximately six hundred collected on the street outside the Relief Department office at the corner of Cambie and Pender Streets. The group elected three men — Brodsky, Vandritin, and Andrews — to present their demands to Colonel Cooper. The creation of the camps,
they argued, expressed “the obvious intention of the authorities to compel us by a threat of starvation to accept work under such slavish terms.” The delegation issued a twelve-point platform that would “apply] to all workers, irrespective of race, creed or color; and to all unable to earn a living.” As they had in the past, these representatives of radical reconstruction demanded an “equal amount of relief” for all single workers, whether resident or transient. The first demand of the N U W A delegation, the reinstatement of all declared ineligible for aid because they refused to enter a relief camp, had become a fundamental precondition to any political discussion of the future. In order to truly consent to any government relief program, workers had to be assured of viable alternatives. The ninth demand articulated this with great firmness: “The action of workers entering those camps shall be considered as entirely voluntary, and no discrimination shall be exercised against those who refuse to go.”

In fact, many protesters seem not to have opposed the idea of work camps in principle. In late August, a N U W A gathering went on record in opposition to the jobless being sent to camps “unless on the basis of agreement between the Government and the organized workers, employed and unemployed.” And the N U W A continued to espouse this position after the camps opened, objecting to the substandard wages offered for work and not the camps themselves. In the initial stage of construction, wage rates were determined by marital status: married men received $2.80 per day and single men $2.00; eighty cents per day was deducted for board. Opposed to these rates, the six hundred protesters offered instead to sign on for work relief under the right conditions: “No worker will go out to camp unless on the basis of a specified agreement between the workers and the Government, said agreement to be on the basis of a standard scale of hours and wages, namely, five days to constitute a working week, four dollars to be a day’s pay at seven hours per day.”

The N U W A delegation also rejected the possibilities of military or semi-military rule, foreshadowing what was to come, and demanded that the rights of freedom of speech, assembly, and organization be “recognised in all camps. In addition, delegates called for bedding to be provided free, for other basic supplies to be provided at cost, and for “constant, competent, and sufficient medical supervision.” Finally, the delegation demanded that access to this program be guaranteed “to all workers, irrespective of race, creed or color; and to all unable to earn a living.” Such a program took the core elements developed in the winter of 1929–30 and added demands specific to the realities of late summer 1931. The N U W A combined attention to the economic dimension — the demonstrable fact of exploitation — with a detailed exploration of the coercive aspect of political rule — the fact of oppression.

Cooper responded to the delegation’s program by claiming that the Relief Department was “simply that of Agent of the Provincial Government” and
that W.A. McKenzie, chair of the provincial Committee of the Executive Council on Unemployment Relief, the ultimate regulatory body, had instructed the Relief Department to discontinue relief to those “who refuse to go to camp.” Taken narrowly, this statement had an element of truth, but the unspoken reality was that Vancouver’s government freely chose to deny relief to these men. True, McKenzie declared that the province would not fund relief for those who refused the order for camp. But no provincial policy obligated the Relief Department to do the same until January 1932, when, after persistent lobbying by civic politicians, the Province ruled that those who did not “avail themselves of the opportunity of going to camp” were to be declared ineligible for relief in the municipalities. In September 1931, cities still had the power, albeit one bounded by financial exigencies, to provide relief to transients.

The relief officer also positioned himself as the one who determined the value of unemployed lives in another sense. The question posed by the unemployed delegation, he explained, “narrows down solely to a change in the locality where relief is provided”: “It is obviously an improvement for [the] unemployed to received three meals a day under conditions such as exist at the Allco camp, rather than to remain in the City on the present basis.”

We might note, however, that jobless men might have viewed the camps in varying ways as entailing more than just a change in “locality”: some may have preferred the camps because they would be able to work for their relief at higher rates than that allotted them with bed and meal tickets, while others may have objected to what they viewed as forced labour. No doubt more reasons on both sides were assessed. Nonetheless, the choice was not theirs to make, nor was the issue theirs to name.

Two days after meeting with Cooper, a massive crowd of between two and three thousand assembled on East Hastings Street, again at the invitation of NUWA organizers. Demonstrators were dispersed by police, only to re-form at the Powell Street parade ground. After a few speeches, the meeting ended of its own accord. The headline of the 3 October 1931 edition of the Unemployed Worker read “WAGES — NIL!” Beneath it was a cartoon depicting workers being trucked to the camp in Allco, while policemen lined the streets to ensure their orderly progress. The article accompanying this picture addressed the question of coercion, referencing the “protection” provided by the police as well as the broader context of economic deprivation and human need. Cast off by the Relief Department and thrown out of the missions and refuges, many saw no option but to resort to this “particular form of slavery.” This view of the coercive intent behind the relief camps only intensified when three miners were shot dead in Estevan, Saskatchewan, on 29 September, one day after the protest at the Relief Office. The stark headline in the Unemployed Worker declared, “WORKERS SHOT TO MAINTAIN PROFITS.”
Originally offered as part of the Loggers’ Association’s plan, Allco was a “feeder” or distribution camp where workers were initially taken before being dispersed to other locations. Beginning in September, more than ten thousand men found themselves herded into trucks and deposited at Allco for processing and a physical assessment. Once declared fit, they were sent to camps based on the demand for labour on each project. Allco also functioned as a depot for unemployed men considered to be “in an emaciated condition,” who were maintained there until fit for manual work. One of the initial unfortunates sent to Allco described it as an “old deserted logging camp entirely in the wilderness.” This feeling of isolation was a standard trope in writing from the camps that was published in the Unemployed Worker, as were complaints about basic living conditions: one writer reported that “the toilets and washrooms are not fit even for the use of pigs,” adding, “This place with its dirt and scrap piles which breed thousands of flies to torture us has an outlook of a great city dumping ground, with our camp upon it, like the former Vancouver harbor jungle.” While urging workers to organize, he also advised others to avoid the camps altogether if possible because residents were subject to the “ruthless mercy of the boss.” He concluded, “Let our slogan for the coming winter be: A general strike of the workers in relief camps all over BC followed by a hunger march into the nearest town.”

Owned by the Abernethy Lougheed Logging Company Ltd., Allco had been rented for $625.00 per month. An eighty-eight-building structure, the camp housed 350 men, with bunkhouses, wash-houses, a laundry house, and a dining hall. Most lived in bunkhouses with eight beds. The company provided beds, sheets, and stoves; arranged for a supply of water; and covered insurance costs. One bureaucrat argued that the lease arrangement was “in the interests of the Tax payers”: to build a camp of this size would, according to estimates, cost more than $13,000. In addition, Allco was “practically isolated,” which was ideal for “housing this class of men.” Defending his government against conflict-of-interest charges involving Nels Lougheed, Tolmie argued that Allco could immediately house the bulk of transient men in “the most economical way.”

According to Tolmie, one of the key reasons for the high cost of camp construction was the NUWA’s campaign against what they called “slave camps.” In June 1931, Tolmie pleaded his case to H.H. Stevens. “Things are becoming very acute,” he cautioned, “and we do not desire to give these men a chance to riot and have to call out the militia, but would prefer to give them reasonable relief work where they can be comfortable, reasonably well fed and give them some cash.” The premier also conveyed to the prime minister his grave concern about the rising tide of radicalism. In a February 1932 letter to Conservative members of Parliament and other notables, Tolmie stressed the importance of context in understanding his government’s actions during the summer of 1931.
Municipalities had faced a “grave situation” and insisted that the province intervene. In Vancouver, parades and meetings of the unemployed served as proof of “a distinctly communistic spirit.” Chief Constable W.J. Bingham had feared “wholesale damage to property,” but City Council had balked at the expense of building its own camp. Minister of Labour Gideon Robertson had concurred with the assessment offered by western politicians and supported the program to remove the transient unemployed from the cities.172

“Possibly there was a little too much speed shown” in the construction of the camps, Tolmie allowed in a letter to Bennett, “but this is hardly surprising in view of the urgency of the situation.” Repeatedly, he stressed that radical propaganda set limits on his government:

No doubt we could have built cheaper camps but they would not have complied with the Health regulations of the Province. Remember that the unemployed, especially the Communists, were using the expression “prison camps.” They were enlisting public sympathy when they stated the Government was preparing camps not fit to live in.173

During Philip’s testimony before the Select Committee, Liberal A.M. Manson suggested that money could have been saved by erecting temporary camps. Philip disagreed, arguing that the “propaganda” of the National Unemployed Workers’ Association about the “slave camps” required the province to build permanent camps, since such structures were required under the Health Act. “These men were very critical as to the accommodations we were going to provide,” Philip maintained. The camps already in existence were simply “not sufficient to carry out a siege of unemployment such as we have had.”174 This was one of the consequences of the gold standard crisis: governments took on an increasing debt burden in order to spend money on projects intended as an antidote to radicalism. At year’s end, Tolmie cabled Leon Ladner, a long-time Tory MP (defeated by Angus MacInnis in 1930) and his primary conduit to Bennett: “Banks will not advance a dollar for unemployment relief. Won’t even carry direct relief. Vancouver demanding three or four thousands men be removed to camps at once. Impossible to do this unless finances forthcoming. Desire avoid any possibility riots which beginning to threaten.”175 The desire of provincial politicians to suppress radicalism, then, both necessitated and legitimated the expense of the camp system.

But if Communist organizing indirectly led to the adoption of a minimum standard for camp conditions, as implied by Tolmie and others, it could not close the camps themselves. For six months following the destruction of the jungles in early September 1931, Communists called for all recipients of relief to reject the camps and instead to maintain the unity of unemployed workers in the cities. One undercover constable suggested that, on occasion,
some Communists characterized those who went to camp as scabs. In general, NUWA organizers emphasized the fight “for immediate emergency relief in town, and for weekly cash relief administered by the unemployed themselves that will enable them to live in comfort and decency whether employed or unemployed.” “DEMAND RELIEF IN TOWN! DEMAND CASH RELIEF! FIGHT FOR NON-CONTRIBUTORY UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE!” one headline in the Unemployed Worker exclaimed. Consistent with the Communist platform of two years earlier, this appeal stressed workers’ entitlement to a standard of living that, in economic and cultural terms, greatly differed from that provided for by public and private charity. Workers could only control their standard of living through collective action, which would enable them to administer relief based on their own notions of “comfort and decency.” Finally, the struggle against impoverishment could best be organized by rejecting the camp system and its separation of unemployed workers in the camps from their brethren in the cities. As late as February 1932, Communists maintained that the situation demanded that “unemployed workers should not only refuse to go to the camp. They should stay in mass [at] the Relief Office, and refuse to be cut off.”

While Communist propaganda on the camps was rarely mentioned in the jungles, it is clear that Communists’ demands would have also benefited those who sought to live temporarily outside of liberal-capitalist social relations. As already discussed, access to cash relief in itself enabled mass participation in jungle-building because of the well-nigh universal recognition of money as the medium through which the value of goods could be abstracted and made equal (or identical) and thus exchangeable. Cash could purchase the would-be transient a measure of autonomy and freedom in comparison to those fed and housed with tickets or through their own exploited labour in the camps because it allowed them direct access to the capitalist marketplace. Yet cash could also purchase autonomy from this market: the voluntary collective management of resources manifested in the groups that inhabited the jungles offered the option of almost complete withdrawal to those willing to live in this manner.

Groups ranging across the political spectrum joined Communists in their criticism of the relief camp scheme. The Independent Labour Party passed a motion opposing “prison camps for unemployed workers” at a mass meeting that June. The members of Vancouver Branch No. 19 of the Canadian Legion lamented the fact that one of their brethren, who had lived in the city for thirteen years and was “well known and highly respected,” had been ordered to camp. The most dedicated opponents of relief camps were, not surprisingly, those who were sent to them. On 13 January 1932, fifty spots for single men opened up in the camps; Cooper later admitted that “of the 161 questioned, only nine accepted, and two of this number changed their
In the first two weeks of March 1932, 323 men were “warned” but only 157 were reported.

One of the ironies of the camp system lay in the composition of its population. When the Department of Public Works ceased work-based operations in November 1931, they also began removing those considered residents from the camps and returning them to the municipality from whence they came. As a consequence, while many transients sought to avoid being sent to camp, many residents criticized the fact that labour camps were now reserved for itinerants. Public Works Minister R.W. Bruhn warned Premier Tolmie that “to discharge [residents] in favour of transients and others would be political suicide, as well as unfair.” W.S. Simpson of Sweetwater conveyed to Tolmie his “indignation” over the government’s relief policies: “Alien single men getting relief, British single men refused.” This type of favouritism toward transients amounted to little more than “a crying shame” in Simpson’s mind: “Conditions in Russia compared to conditions here, in favour of Russia.” That transients protested in large numbers served only to heighten conflicts over entitlement to relief. Repeatedly, the same complaint was made: residents were denied places in the camps so that transients, including those involved in revolutionary plots against the government, could be housed in comfort.

Initially, the battle for cash relief in the cities as an alternative to the camp system was strongest, not surprisingly, in the cities, directed by unemployed workers who had not yet been sent to the camps. While camp activists did raise the larger questions surrounding unemployment in the pages of the Communist press, most of the initial organizing work focused on improving living conditions. In October 1931, food costs averaged 60.5 cents per man per day for 140 camps, an extremely small amount compared with the Loggers’ Association’s estimate of $1.50 per day. Overhead costs for the same period came to 26.6 cents per man per day. Since every “inmate” saw 85 cents deducted daily from his pay, the province lost 2.1 cents per man per day on the basic costs of labour reproduction. After work was halted in November, however, the province dramatically reduced its costs to 29.5 cents for food and 11.5 cents for overhead per man per day.

Along with reductions to the per unit cost, the Department of Public Works looked to increase its revenue. One resident of a camp near Squamish pointed out the high cost of goods in the government store: a blanket that cost $2.00 in town was priced at $5.25 and a $5.00 rain slicker cost $8.00. Blankets cost $10.00 at the camp in the Boston Bar region. One man who had resided for thirty-two days in a camp near Jones Hill complained of having “often done hardest manual labor in mud and rain, with insufficient clothing.” He added, “As wages for those 32 days being out I got a pair of rubbers, a thin blanket, a pair of socks, and two pieces of soap, for which I still owe $3.45 to the camp bosses.” His message was simple, if graphic: “If it keeps going on like

“Work Without Wages,” or, Paving the Way for Economic Development
that we will spend here a very ‘soft’ winter, after which we will be entirely nude.” The Unemployed Association of Prince Rupert launched a protest against the deduction of 85 cents per day for board, and prepared a petition to “run their own cookhouse from beginning to end.” The group, most of whose members resided in the Cloyah Bay relief camp, continued to protest the quality of the food, even after changes to the menu: “It is believed that the penitentiary ration would compare favourably.”

In December 1931, workers in a camp on the outskirts of Kamloops formed a council and won improvements in the form of mattresses and tobacco. A worker in the Jones Creek camp enthused, “We now have a camp committee, and are bettering things as we go.” In the Rock Bay camp, a Communist reported that attempts to organize were proceeding slowly because his brethren were “an indifferent lot.” Workers in “Prison Camp” No. 4 at Hope initially had difficulty persuading the foreman to secure more and better food, prompting “some of the boys [to] get disgusted and throw a few dishes around the dining room.” Within a couple of weeks, an organization had been formed. “The work has been done quietly and efficiently,” one activist noted, “so that none of the delegates have been discriminated against.” The local committee strategized that it would form the backbone of the NUWA’s drive against sweated wages. Democratic to the core, at least in theory, the committee was described by one member as “a Camp Committee, elected by the workers in camp, and responsible to them, whose function it is to mobilise the discontent and give it direction.”

Despite the establishment of rudimentary organizations, early struggles for better living conditions appear to have been disjointed and scattered, the result of the standard department practice of transferring radicals and troublemakers. This was particularly evident in Allco, where protests over basic amenities often led to those identified as “agitators” being shipped to a remote location in the dead of winter. After one particularly bitter strike, an inmate wrote to the Unemployed Worker suggesting that this tactic on the part of camp supervisors would come back to haunt them: “The authorities succeeded temporarily in breaking the workers up and transferring them to other camps. The struggle has been transferred also.” While there was some truth to this assessment, relocation meant that workers had to rebuild their committees, a time-consuming process that had to be done covertly for fear of discrimination.

To this point, radicals still saw the struggle against relief camps as best fought outside the camps themselves. In late December 1931, Communist organizations such as the National Unemployed Workers’ Association, the Workers’ Ex-Servicemen’s League, the Workers’ Unity League, and the Women’s Labour League began planning for a Hunger March to Victoria involving workers from across the province to be held on 4 February 1932.
“The attitude of the workers in the Prison Camps, who are now becoming openly rebellious,” explained one Unemployed Worker reporter, “should act as a warning to the authorities. The more economising and suppressive they become, the greater will be the reaction of the workers.” The march was rescheduled for 22 February because the legislature would not be in session on the original date. This move was an incredible stroke of luck for organizers, as it was revealed in early February that the Province planned changes to its policies. R.W. Bruhn announced that camp residents would now have to work 120 hours every month in order to receive their “allowance,” which was to be reduced to $7.50 per month. In an attempt to quell outrage at the drastic reduction in the value accorded to work on relief projects, Bruhn framed the decision in terms of state paternalism rather than the logic of capital and labour. “It should be clearly understood that we are not paying wages in our road camps,” Bruhn stated. “We are only giving relief to destitute men.”

Pat Philip explained the system to a bureaucrat with the federal Department of Labour: the province supplied jobless men in the camps with room, board, and $7.50 per month, and “in return for the foregoing the recipient is expected to perform a ‘work test.’” While Bruhn represented the $7.50 as “an allowance for luxuries,” this pittance was insufficient to allow the destitute to purchase clothing, blankets, and other necessities, now considered by the provincial government “luxuries” and thus a matter of choice for the jobless. One irate worker in the McBride camp noted the irony: “Signs everywhere advocated cleanliness, but no soap was provided.” The seventy inmates at McBride organized a committee to raise the question of soap and other amenities. After two weeks, they had won free soap and blankets, and improvements to the amount and quality of food.

The significant shift in policy to the exchange of 120 hours of work per month for $7.50 per week prompted men in camps to organize more than ever before against the deterioration of relief. Within several days of notification, three hundred relief workers at Allco elected a committee of eight to present their rejection of the new system and launched a two-day strike, refusing to commence road work. As provincial police travelled from camp to camp, at times choosing to evict those who refused to work, some strikers opted to leave of their own accord and seek food and shelter elsewhere. The Unemployed Worker reported, “Prison camps have been deserted by the workers . . . in order to expose their hostility to the camp system, and their determination to secure adequate cash relief.” Approximately one hundred relief workers building the Hope-Princeton highway left camp and proceeded to Princeton, where they managed to secure direct relief from the municipality. Of “this army of homeless, penniless men,” sixty hopped a freight train to Vancouver, according to the Nelson News, while forty remained on “the streets of Princeton, uncertain of their plans.”

“Work Without Wages,” or, Paving the Way for Economic Development
Province, the “orderly” nature of the protest could not conceal the threat that lay beneath the surface: “The men have been entirely orderly and there has been no disturbance. Strong sentiments, however, approaching Communism have been voiced. The Red element appears to be strong. A good majority of the men are transients and a considerable proportion foreigners.”207 This description brands radicalism as a “foreign” doctrine, one not related to conditions in the camps but emanating from abroad.

That the announcement of the reduction in relief came in the middle of winter, dramatizing the need for suitable clothes and thus the inadequacy of the $7.50 “allowance,” helped to extend the strike campaign widely across the camp system. Early one morning at “Relief Camp Canoe,” one worker reported, “The big boss put his head into the bunk-house door and hollered, ‘all right.’ Not a man turned out.” According to the worker, the foreman could not comprehend why “we wouldn’t go out in two feet of snow with a pick and shovel pounding away in frozen ground at the rate of $7.50 — with soup and two meals a day.”208 Refusing to work for less than the old rate for single transients of $2.00 per day, the strikers decided to send five delegates on the road to the other “prison camps” at Sorrento and Tappen, both on Shuswap Lake. One radical in Camp No. 4 at Hope, where workers had been on strike against the rate of $7.50 per month for several weeks, lamented the fact that the official in charge had ordered that “no supplies are to be given from the store.” He also mused that workers expected the camp “to be shut down, and all the radicals fired from Camps 7 and 9.”209 These collective walkouts signalled the beginnings of the great migration of more than one thousand inmates to Vancouver. In less than six months after the inception of the camps, Communists had brought about a mass movement that brought together thousands of camp residents and jobless itinerants in the cities to fight under the same banner.

“Idle All Along the Line”: Mass Need and the Hunger March

Under the menace of its own disintegration, the proletariat cannot permit the transformation of an increasing section of the workers into chronically unemployed paupers, living off the slops of a crumbling society. The right to employment is the only serious right left to the worker in a society based upon exploitation. . . . This right today is being shorn from him at every step. Against unemployment, “structural” as well as “conjunctural,” the time is ripe to advance along with the slogan of public works.

Leon Trotsky, The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International, 1938 210

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The six thousand demonstrators congregating in Vancouver during the last week in February 1932 were represented by Wilberforce Cooper, rector of the parish of St. James, who was asked to “interpret the Hunger March to the City Council” in his own words. This group, he gravely noted, “represent[ed] a far larger number of workless and hungry and ill-clad up and down the Province.” The question, ultimately, was one of entitlement. “I believe that their demands are fundamentally right,” intoned Wilberforce Cooper. “Hungry, they look daily (as I do) at vast stores of food. They are conscious (as I am) that, seemingly, large sums have been employed to relieve this situation: yet, so largely, results do not arrive.”

The marchers offered proposals for economic reform coupled with demands for political freedom: their banners cried out for the rights of freedom of speech and assembly, a program of emergency works over the winter to provide them with a “stake” to seek employment in spring, and, most of all, unemployment insurance. As the rector explained, “these ‘Marchers’ demand such a revision of the Governmental handling of economic conditions as shall ensure for them and their families the work and the means of living to which, as citizens, they have a right.” Nor did he see a need for police repression of their demonstrations. “I admired the steadiness, orderliness and quiet determination of Monday’s parade,” he noted. The crisis called for the nation’s rulers to abandon the old ways and recognize the revolutionary import of the times:

I believe that radical re-construction of the social order is utterly essential: moreover, where I live in the East end of this city, I am always aware of the gathering momentum of human opinion that is determined upon and making for radical change. They are not out for blood. Most of them are sick of it. They want justice and decent living conditions.

The Hunger March represented the first concrete and workable attempt at a united front by Vancouver’s Communist organizers during the 1930s. In most respects, this front was purely discursive, in that it existed in various textual appeals but not beyond them; few political groups considered the Communist-led movement as anything but suspect, even if transients themselves were worthy of a substantive measure of sympathy. The party’s sectarianism, too, earned it little trust from other leftists. At the same time, united fronts were few, in large part because Communist groups were almost alone in the field: they exerted a singular domination of the leadership of unemployed transient organizations in the two and a half years following the market crash because the competition was next to nil. Unity was possible only if diversity already existed, and this would not happen until after the Hunger
March, when organizations of poor residents sprang up in large numbers. Another obstacle to unity lay in the parliamentary focus of the city’s socialist organizations, which offered few immediate gains for the unemployed and fewer for transients: Vancouver’s non-Communist left could not claim to have consistently defended the right of transients to receive the same treatment as residents.

Yet Communists held out hope that collective action could win the bulk of workers to their agenda: this was, in the practice of the day, a united front from below, although one of necessity. To this effect, they organized camp residents and transient homeless men en masse, as well as a sizeable number of residents, around a single overarching demand: the dismantling of the relief industry as it currently existed. Their immediate program, as constructed frequently over the course of these three years, would have remade Vancouver into the type of utopia articulated by Fredric Jameson at the outset of this chapter: steady work at union rates and the rights of assembly, speech, and organization fully enshrined; bed and meal tickets abolished and the missions and refuges emptied; and gatherings held and parades launched without interference, while police constables walked the streets with orders to protect the rights of tenants against those with property. Any radical would likely have welcomed the realization of just one of these demands.

Since early September 1931, Communists had appealed to the public directly on the issue of camps. “This is an attempt to drive us into prison camps, and we appeal for your help,” pled one radical. On occasion, Communists attempted to provide an ideological framework for the unity of distinct groups in opposition to the economics of the camp system. Like other groups, NUWA organizers hit on the cost argument. One inmate noticed that some of the cabin doors used in the camps were manufactured in Washington. “The patriotic providers of prison camps,” he suggested, “appear to be unable even to provide them from ‘our’ national resources.” “The money has been spent on costly but jerry-built camps, with neither sufficient accommodation for the number of men placed in them, nor the most elementary facilities,” argued another radical. “The grafting contractors have been rewarded by their friends, and got away with the swag, and the camps are exposed more clearly than ever as Prison Camps.” In fact, Communists offered up an argument for the unity of most socio-economic groups against the camps. This was perhaps best expressed in “Higher Mathematics for the Unemployed,” an article in the 5 March 1932 edition of the Unemployed Worker. The mathematical paradigm was suitable given the centrality of value calculations to every problem.

The first problem outlined in “Higher Mathematics” relied on skills of subtraction. The author explained that according to a recent provincial report (the source for these figures remains unknown), the government spent $3.5 million on seven thousand transients in October and November,
or approximately $500 per transient. Yet provincial officials also boasted of limiting the amount spent to maintain transients to twenty-six cents per day, or $15.60 per month. “Where did the other $484.40 go?” asked the writer. “Who got it?” Although the numbers were wrong, the deductive rationale was sound: to provide relief, governments contracted with the business community, meaning that a portion of the funds designated for the jobless became profits in the pockets of patronage beneficiaries and others. A similar logic could be found in other problems. The second question noted that the provincial government purchased wood from the Abernethy Lougheed Logging Company at a rate of $7.50 per cord, wood that “the Allco slaves had to cut gratis. Better wood could have been bought from the small farmers around Allco at less price, and all ready cut,” leading to the question at hand: “Why did they buy from Lougheed, and how much did the government save by doing so? Try and work this out by Algebra.” The third question related to the government’s purchase of meat and fruit, much of it rotten, “from the millionaire wholesalers at a fancy price,” while “small farmers” were forced to sell their produce cheaply in order to pay their taxes: “How will the farmers in that locality pay their taxes and continue to exist[?] To work out this problem, use common sense.”

In each of these examples, the value that accrued to large companies came at the expense of the jobless and other economic sections of the community. Communists were not alone in offering this type of interpretation of the relief industry; similar equations appeared in the ideas of owners and managers of Vancouver establishments that catered to the transient unemployed. “Higher Mathematics” included a problem rooted in the observation that camps had been established around logging and mining towns, “in localities where hotel keepers and boarding house keepers are fast going broke for lack of customers.” We have already seen the lobbying efforts of some of Vancouver’s restaurant owners and rooming-house operators to increase the scale of relief and to change its form from tickets to cash. For instance, E.A. Gillingwater, owner of the Whittier Park Café, asked to be put on the approved list of relief restaurants, arguing that he faced bankruptcy “owing to all single men being sent to camps.” Despite the Third Period scorn for all forms of class collaboration, Vancouver’s Communists suggested that the camps undermined the economic stability of petty entrepreneurs. “Can anyone tell us why some people are paid as high as $5,000 per year for helping the small business men to go on the bum faster than they need to?” the mathematician asked. “To work out this problem use the support of the small business men.”

The final problem focused on the spending statistics on matters of discipline: “For killing the workers of other countries the soldiers are paid $1.10 a day, with board and good clothes thrown in. For building roads and highways the workers are paid 27 c per day, rotten food, and compelled to furnish their
own clothes out of the 27 c per. Guess who the employer is?” Communists and other radicals had long argued that despite their reluctance to spend money on the jobless, governments rarely balked at spending more on police forces during moments of crisis attributed to crowds of jobless men. As they put it in another context, “they pay the policeman 150 dollars per month to club and arrest the unemployed workers for refusing to work 20 months for the same amount of money.”

The author of “Higher Mathematics” used the pedagogical format playfully in order to make a serious argument for a united front, bringing together a wide range of immediate class interests in a single complex equation that both revealed and disproved the value of the economics of the relief camps. That the unity it imagined existed primarily on the page does not diminish its power.

On February 22, the Nuwa organized a parade of several thousand people, after which a delegation led by Arthur “Slim” Evans met with the Relief and Employment Committee. While the challenge posed by the movement of necessity involved grand concepts, Slim Evans went into the meeting with a mandate to discuss a detailed list of concrete demands. The first demand extended beyond the reach of municipal and provincial officials: a program of non-contributory unemployment insurance, valued at twenty-five dollars per week and to be given “without discrimination against race, creed or color.” In the interim, the City was to hire married men to work four days per week at four dollars for every seven-hour day, with “single unemployed workers, male and female, with dependents to receive the same benefits.” The single jobless without dependents would receive three days of work per week at the same rate, or the equivalent in cash relief. The Nuwa thus proposed an immediate program that required single transients without dependents to work 84 hours per month for wages of $48.00, while the provincial government offered $7.50 and board for 120 hours of labour: the disparity between these two visions of the value of the labour of transients was stark.

Like most political groups in Vancouver, the Hunger Marchers called for public works to relieve unemployment. Yet here, too, Hunger Marchers articulated a singular vision, placing emphasis on the construction of hospitals, nurseries, playgrounds, and parks “to be built in working-class districts.” The delegation also wanted the municipality to legislate a ban on evictions for non-payment of rent or taxes, on bank foreclosures, and on the termination of water, gas, or light services by utility companies. Moreover, interest payments on municipal bonds were to be stopped “until the needs of the unemployed are met.” Many of the demands made by the Hunger Marchers would have cost little to nothing. The repeal of vagrancy laws and section 98 of the Criminal Code, a ban on deportations for becoming a public charge and for political activities, and the release of “class-war prisoners”: each of these would, in fact, have shrunk the state, saving money in the process.
By a vote of three to two, the Relief and Employment Committee agreed to recommend to City Council that an emergency meeting be called in order to consider the Hunger Marchers’ platform. They also promised fifteen hundred bed and meal tickets to the demonstrators as a “special concession and not to be repeated after today.” What followed is all too familiar. The City Council meeting began with a report of the Relief and Employment Committee. Then, Aldermen Dean and Miller proposed that “demands 2-12 inclusive, of the Hunger Marchers’ Association be not entertained.” The motion was carried, after an amendment to consider each demand separately failed. Hundreds of Marchers then left for Victoria and a meeting with members of the provincial cabinet. Once again, the components of their multi-dimensional program were declared obviated by financial exigencies and an uncooperative federal government, if they were considered at all.

Returning to Vancouver, the jobless protesters found a municipal government determined to follow the January 1932 provincial declaration that those who refused the order for camp would be denied relief in the cities. On 1 March, organizers asked to send a delegation to the City Council meeting on 3 March, a day for which they had received permits for a meeting at Victory Square and a parade. They did not receive an answer until the day of the meeting and were turned down, but NUWA organizers chose to continue with the planned parade and meeting. As the crowd began to disperse, a delegation attempted to enter the building to again request a hearing. “This was the excuse for the police, who were held in readiness, to attack the workers with unprecedented brutality,” read the account in the Unemployed Worker. The result was “the most savage and unprovoked attack upon the workers in the experience of unemployed demonstrations in Vancouver.” One radical counted twenty-two mounted constables from the city and fourteen from the RCMP, in addition to regular city constables:

The mounties galloped along the sidewalks, heedless of many women and children. ONE WOMAN WITH A BABY IN HER ARMS WAS RID-DEN DOWN. It is not to be expected that the workers would allow themselves to be beaten up without resistance. While many workers were injured, the police did not escape entirely. Three workers and two policemen were removed to hospital. . . . There was no riot, there was no disturbance, until the police charged into the crowd, and by their open brutality carried out the policy of the City Council in forcing starvation upon the unemployed. The City Council must accept responsibility for the slaughter of Thursday. The sadist methods of Edgett, the ex-mountie, and Murdock, the ex-flatfoot, are the methods approved and endorsed by the Council in dealing with the demands of the thousands of unemployed in the City.225

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Arthur Evans argued that violence could have been avoided: had the council “agreed to meet the committee from the unemployed none of the workers, men, women or children would have been slugged or battered up by the Police.” He added, “Had the communication come from some Prince of Siam or other exalted carrion, the City Council would have fallen over themselves and would have met with them within an hour’s notice and wined and feted puppets of that ilk.” Nor would parades cease: “Workers are not going to peaceably starve to death amidst plenty.”

To complete the pattern begun in the winter of 1929, the police riot of 3 March 1932 was officially legitimated. A delegation of Hunger Marchers attempted to be heard at the 5 March meeting of the Board of Police Commissioners. Arthur Evans’s letter was read aloud, as was a letter from a prominent merchant. Then the appointed commissioners, led by W.C. Atherton, former alderman and chair of the Relief and Employment Committee, used procedural methods to frustrate the will of the mayor. According to the minutes, “At this juncture a delegation from the ‘Unemployed Workers’ made application to address the Board, and, upon motion, it was decided unanimously that they be not heard.” Mayor L.D. Taylor, who was chairing the meeting, then “produced a copy of a Communist Party periodical” — the 5 March issue of the Unemployed Worker, which contained an account of the riot as well as “‘Higher Mathematics’ Problems for the Unemployed” — and “was prepared to read from it.”

Objection was taken to this, and it was moved by Coms. Atherton, seconded by Coms. Reid, “that this publication be not read.” The Chairman refused to put the motion before the meeting, and Coms. Delbridge was appointed Chairman for the purpose of putting the motion. Upon the motion be put by Coms. Delbridge it was declared carried.

Further discussion arose on the business for which the meeting was called, upon which Coms. Delbridge moved, “That the discussion being carried on at this meeting is not in the best interests of law enforcement, and that no more of this discussion be heard.”

This resolution was seconded by Coms. De Wolfe, and upon the Chairman refusing to put the motion before the meeting, Coms. Atherton was appointed Chairman. Upon Coms. Atherton putting the motion, it was declared carried.

In connection with the Unemployed situation in the City at the present time, Coms. Atherton stated, although we have to cope with the situation, it is really a Government matter as they have pledged themselves to look after the single men. He therefore moved “That we take the matter up with the Provincial and Federal Governments, asking them to look after these men who are raising disturbances in the City of Vancouver.”
Mayor Taylor “voiced his protest against the manner in which the members had received his views, and declared they were antagonistic to him.” He then turned on Chief Constable C.E. Edgett, accusing him of corruption by “showing partiality in raiding Chinese gambling houses.” There would be no forum for the jobless here.

With the Hunger March riot, Communists, and the single unemployed transients generally, lost the battle for the city. One writer attempted to capture the looming importance of coercion faced by the movement upon returning to the camps:

They have the blood of the workers on their hands. Concessions will be made, as they have been made in the past, piecemeal and by degrees, increasing with the militancy of the workers and the strength of their organisation. At the same time, they will use force, not only to avoid making concessions, but to conceal the fact that they are compelled to make them. They will try to intimidate and divide the workers, along with the provincial and federal governments, and the brute force they command. They cannot succeed.

Yet the march did not mark an end to organizing. More than thirty delegates from various camps arranged to meet in Ashcroft in March and forged a “campaign for extending organization and struggle,” while also managing to have food and shelter provided gratis by the municipality. Near the end of March, workers left the camps near Ashcroft and secured five days’ worth of relief from local authorities. Their solidarity held strong, and in a unanimous vote, the group took out membership in the Nuwa. Seven workers in Ashcroft were eventually arrested, although a collective protest managed to get the charges dropped. Other activists were moved from Ashcroft to Camp No. 38, near Lytton, and promptly began their strike again, winning a regular tobacco ration and an additional meal every day as concessions, although they continued the fight against the monthly rate of $7.50.

More than a single cause of discontent, “$7.50” was a symbol with which many grievances were conveyed. Throughout the period from the introduction of the allowance in February 1932 until the province relinquished control of the camps to federal officials in August 1933, many strikes were fought with demands for a higher rate of relief at the forefront. Workers at Camp 43 in Spuzzum, for instance, mobilized against the rate reduction in the spring of 1932, as did inmates at outposts near Beaumont Creek, Cedarvale, Prince Rupert, Stewart, and Usk that summer. The largest protest concerning $7.50 involved approximately seven hundred men who left the camps in May 1932 and made their way to Vancouver, less than three months after the Hunger March. Mayor Johnston of Kamloops took a hard-line approach to the bands of travelling
Hobohemia and the Crucifixion Machine

Demanding work at the rate of fifty cents per hour, hundreds of camp residents were joined by hundreds more local supporters while a committee met with Vancouver’s Mayor Taylor. Taylor claimed that the responsibility for feeding and housing the protesters now lay with the Province. Faced with mass pressure, and wanting to avoid the escalation of collective action, Public Works Minister Bruhn guaranteed the protesters bed and meal tickets for two days on the condition that they then leave the city, prior to the “mass demonstration before the American Consulate in protest against the impending execution of seven negroes convicted of killing a white woman.”

With aid running out, small groups began the journey back to the camps, hoping that they would not be turned away by foremen holding grudges against radicals. Many still refused to return to the camps; their places were taken by other unemployed men cut off the relief rolls.

The immediate failure of the Hunger March marked, in one sense, both the end of the movement begun on the streets in December 1929 and the beginning of a new movement, one with a greater diversity of constituencies and an even sharper conception of the exploitation at the heart of the relief industry. In the years that followed, activists who dedicated themselves to organizing the relief industry would lead many successful campaigns. The Block Committees and Neighbourhood Councils would assert their organizational strength in ongoing battles with the Relief Department. Even the camps saw a measure of self-determination on the part of the unemployed. In the end, the Tolmie government proved incapable of withstanding either the Liberal onslaught at the legislature or the organizing work of Communists within relief camps. Because some camp foremen had received their jobs through patronage networks, many lacked experienced with the requirements of enforcing discipline. Sydney Hutcheson saw these men as ineffectual, suggesting that new foremen were routinely “broken in” by workers who controlled the pace of their work on roads through repeated slowdowns.

In other instances, workers and camp bosses co-operated to some extent; while the relationship was sometimes strained, grievances could be expressed and remedied within the framework established on the ground. On occasion, a strike would result in smaller changes, such as with food. Some officials in the Department of National Defence believed that the new regime of discipline in DND-run camps was much needed because it would stamp out workers’ control:

In many cases a committee of the men has taken over the management of the camps, and the camp superintendent has not been able to function. This situation has been allowed to exist by the Provincial authorities and by the Fordham Commission but cannot be condoned when camps are taken over by the Department of National Defence.
Within one year of the Hunger March, unemployed committees had asserted de facto control over a sizeable number of provincial relief camps. Along with successes for the Communists, the period after the march witnessed the founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, which in Vancouver had its strong roots in the ideological soil of the Socialist Party of Canada. This had a profound effect, reinvigorating both labourist and social-democratic tendencies and realigning the political sphere.

The camp system grew out of a confluence of forces — the dramatic expansion of jungles throughout the province, the mass demonstrations and clashes with police in Vancouver that summer, the increasing financial strains upon the municipalities, and the vision of economic development possessed by officials like Pat Philip. Tolmie’s cabinet arrived at a spatial strategy designed to bring about the isolation and containment of unemployed transient men in part because of economic considerations. With labour camps, the province could “take advantage” of the savings incurred on work relief projects to facilitate the infrastructure necessary for capitalist growth. The control enabled by isolation and by working and living patterns similar to those in logging camps would obviate the need to investigate character and reform morals. The solution to the Depression thus lay in involving the unemployed in market relations of an unfree character. Herded into the camps and denied other forms of relief, isolated from the population at large, and paid a substandard wage, camp residents were removed from the cities and from the free market for labour.

With unemployment rates reaching upwards of 50 percent in industries such as logging and construction, many transients refused to see their poverty as pathology. For them, unemployment was not a personal failing but a structural problem emanating from a system organized to produce profit, not to meet human need. To fashion a public program capable of creating the moment of solidarity, however brief, embodied in the Hunger March, these radicals drew from their Marxist epistemology a way of understanding the economic relationships involved in the provision of food and shelter. And their movement met with arguments, voiced by those with political authority, which possessed a similarly economic character. The context of mass need — of the tens of thousands of transients who passed through Vancouver during the early years of the Great Depression — made many into materialists. Especially after the gold standard crisis, city councillors and Communists alike framed the question of state control of the unemployed in terms of finances, institutions, and labour. Given the particular context, it is no surprise that economics determined much of the shape and size of the institutions and practices of state rule. The camps thus serve as evidence of the limits of the capitalist system in crisis — the boundaries formed by market exchanges — while the Hunger Marchers testified to a system that lay beyond these limits.

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