

The West Wants In: Regionalism, Class, and Labour / Le Travail, 1976-2002

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Article abstract

“The west wants in” was the rallying cry of the Reform Party launched in 1987. What the West wanted, how its aspirations could be fulfilled within Confederation, and how fulfilling them might change Canada itself came to dominate the party’s agenda over the next decade or so. The West’s relationship to the rest of the country has also been a major theme in Canadian labour history, of ten with respect to notions of “western radicalism” or “western exceptionalism.” Reviewing *Labour / Le Travail*’s coverage of Canadian labour over the past quarter-century, this article reviews the extent to which western workers have been represented, the varying ways in which their identity has been characterized, and the degree to which traditional perceptions of a “radical” West have been either reinforced or revised as a result.

The West Wants In: Regionalism, Class, and *Labour/Le Travail*, 1976-2002

David Bright

“THE WEST WANTS IN” was the slogan adopted by the Reform Party of Canada originally launched in 1987. As such, Reform differed from the host of western “separatist” parties and movements of the 1970s that had wanted little or nothing to do with Ottawa. Instead, its leader Preston Manning sought a reconfiguration, or at least a readjustment, of political power within Canada to meet the demands of the so-called “New West,” without dismantling Trudeau’s vision of an overarching nationalism.¹ What the West wanted, how its aspirations could be fulfilled within the federal framework, and how fulfilling them would change Canada itself came to dominate the Reform Party’s public agenda before its transformation into the Canadian Alliance in 2000.

In many respects, the Reform Party was simply the latest in a long line of regional protests emanating from the prairies over the past hundred years. The agrarian movement before World War I, the Progressive Party of the 1920s, the rise of Social Credit and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation during the Great Depression, the Canada West Foundation established in the 1970s, and Ralph Klein’s re-invigoration (if not re-invention) of the Alberta Conservative Party as the vanguard of neo-liberalism, are all part of a western revolt against the centre.²

¹See Tom Flanagan, *Waiting for the Wave: The Reform Party and Preston Manning* (Toronto 1995), 46-48; Sydney Sharpe & Don Braid, *Storming Babylon: Preston Manning and the Rise of the Reform Party* (Toronto 1992). See also John Barr and Owen Anderson, eds., *The Unfinished Revolt: Some Views on Western Independence* (Toronto 1971); Larry Pratt and Garth Stevenson, eds., *Western Separatism: The Myths, Realities and Dangers* (Edmonton 1981); and George Melnyk, *Beyond Alienation: Political Essays on Western Canada* (Calgary 1993), 47-68.

²See Gerald Freisen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto 1987), 339-460.

Taken together, they perpetuate the belief that, at best, the West is somehow qualitatively “different” from the rest of Canada, and, at worst, that it has been excluded from mainstream federalism.

Identifying what the West wants, how its grievances — real or imagined — might be addressed, and what impact doing so will have on the nation are not unrelated to the study of Canadian labour history. One of the more prominent characterizations that emerged in the field in the 1950s and 1960s was a distinction between a radical west and a relatively conservative central and eastern labour movement. The notion of “western radicalism,” or more commonly “western exceptionalism,” soon became a mainstay or cliché, even, exemplified in the work of H. Clare Pentland, Ross McCormack, and David Bercuson, among others.³ In his essay on the Socialist Party of Canada, published in the first issue of *Labour/Le Travailleur* in 1976, Gerald Friesen summarized the nature of this regional identity:

The time and pace of development, and the economy created by the national policies of the federal government, produced peculiar labour-management relations. Thus, the boom-bust character of the hinterland, the proprietary attitude toward the labour force in many industries, and the rough, unstable character of the new communities were causes of western unrest.⁴

Friesen concludes with the observation: “Implicit in this analysis is an emphasis upon the influence of regional consciousness within the western labour movement.... Two generations of Canadian experience had fostered images of a new society in the West, whether radical, hospitable, or merely separate, and thus created a belief in western community.”⁵

This emphasis on region did not go unchallenged, however, and much Canadian labour history of the past two decades has critiqued, questioned, or otherwise revised the whole notion of western exceptionalism. This debate has been exhaustively — exhaustingly, even — documented and does not require re-hashing here.⁶ Recently, even Friesen himself has come to rethink the value of regionalism as traditionally construed. In an essay entitled “Defining the Prairies: or, why the prairies don’t exist,” he concludes that: “It is time to take stock of a new West. It is time to leave behind the imagined prairie region. The new ways of thinking about this part of the country are the result of changes in the western economy, in the

³For a recent discussion of this, see Desmond Morton, “Some Millennial Reflections on the State of Canadian Labour History,” in *Labour/Le Travail*, 46 (Fall 2000), 11-36.

⁴Gerald Friesen, “‘Yours in Revolt’: Regionalism, Socialism and the Western Canadian Labour Movement,” *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976) 153. See also Jeremy Mouat, “The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia’s Hard-Rock Miners, 1895-1903,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 71: 3 (September 1990), 317-45.

⁵Friesen, “Yours in Revolt,” 153.

⁶See Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* (Toronto 1998).

structure of government, and especially in the cultural and communication contexts of contemporary life.”⁷

Yet even if the nature and significance of regionalism have changed, still the concept exists in both the academic and popular imaginations.⁸ And discussion of “the West” or of “western Canadian labour” contains within it the assumption that, somehow and in some way, this regional appellation carries some explanatory weight. This is evident only if in negative ways. For example, over the years there have been various attempts by labour historians to construct “alternative” periodizations of Canadian history that emphasize the evolution of class relations or socialist formations rather than the usual unfolding of national politics.⁹ Useful as these have been, however, they share what strikes me as a mistaken assumption that the Canadian working class can, historically, be viewed as a national phenomenon. This tendency to treat the concept of Canada as unproblematic remains a feature of much writing on labour history. For example, in *Labouring the Millennium*, a collection of essays commissioned by *Labour/Le Travail (L/LT)* to mark the passing of that historic landmark, any acknowledgement of regionalism appeared only in the guise of two essays on Québec; otherwise, it appears not to exist as an aspect of the experience of class. But as Craig Heron notes in his short history of the Canadian labour movement, “Workers experienced quite different opportunities and pressures, as the regions followed their own rhythms of development (and underdevelopment) Not surprisingly, then, we cannot speak of a single Canadian labour movement any more than we can hypothesize about a homogenous working class.”¹⁰

⁷Gerald Friesen, “Defining the Prairies: or, why the prairies don’t exist,” in Robert Wardhaugh, ed., *Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, and History* (Winnipeg 2001), 26. See also Gerald Friesen, *The West: Regional Ambitions, National Dreams, Global Age* (Toronto 1999), and “The Prairies as a Region: The Contemporary Meaning of an Old Idea,” in Gerald Friesen, *River Road: Essays on Manitoba and Prairie History* (Winnipeg 1996), 165-82. The very idea of region, of course, is fraught with conceptual and linguistic ambiguities. For a useful overview of the subject, see John Reid, “Writing About Regions,” in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough 1990), 71-96.

⁸For example, compare George Melnyk’s classic statement of western identity in *Radical Regionalism* (Edmonton 1981) with the essays in his more recent work, *New Moon at Batoche: Reflections on the Urban Prairie* (Banff 1999); especially “On Being a Self-styled Guru of Western Regionalism,” 133-42. My thanks to Allen Seager for pointing me in this direction.

⁹See Gregory S. Kealey, “The Structure of Canadian Working-Class History,” in W.J.C. Cherwinski and G.S. Kealey, eds., *Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History* (St. John’s 1985), 23-26; and Ian McKay, “For a New Kind of History: A Reconnaissance of 100 Years of Canadian Socialism,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 46 (Fall 2000), 69-125.

¹⁰Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto 1996), xiii.

That said, my purpose here is to review the extent to which *L/LT* has served as a forum for debate on the intersection of class and region over its first 50 issues. More specifically, I wish to consider three things: first, the degree to which the West has been adequately represented in the journal; second, the various ways in which western labour has been characterized and studied; and third, how these essays have revised standard or traditional perceptions of western workers. By way of conclusion, I suggest areas or issues for future study that might further complete our picture of the West.

Some clarification is necessary, perhaps, as to what exactly constitutes “the West.” Is it synonymous with the three so-called “prairie provinces” of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta? A tendency to slip back and forth between “the West” and “the Prairies” is common enough, as a recent editorial in the *Globe and Mail* demonstrated when it repeatedly used the two phrases interchangeably.¹¹ Or should the West also embrace British Columbia? That province’s distinct colonial history, its orientation to the Pacific, and its separate economic, political, and cultural evolution are all good reasons for responding in the negative.¹² But to the extent that all four provinces face eastwards towards Ottawa and a federal government that they believe pays insufficient attention to their needs, problems, and aspirations, it is reasonable to regard them as a single region.¹³ That, at least, is the approach taken here in a review of essays contained in *L/LT*.

Out of some 250 articles published in *L/LT* since 1976, approximately 40 have borne on western Canada more or less directly.¹⁴ These include essays on the region as a whole, individual provinces or cities, specific occupations or trades, and on broader themes such as politics, gender, ethnicity, and language. In terms of their temporal focus, there is — perhaps understandably — a strong bias towards the earlier decades of western settlement as opposed to more recent decades. Thirteen essays — one-third of the total — concentrate on the period 1880-1914, with a further twelve on the years spanning the two world wars (i.e. 1914-45). By contrast, there are just three essays on the entire period before 1880 and only two that deal with the post-1945 era. In terms of their provincial focus, there is also an imbalance

¹¹“Discovering the West,” *Globe and Mail*, 12 August 2002, A12.

¹² For example, this point is made explicitly in the title of Jean Barman’s study of the province, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto 1991).

¹³ The idea of region itself, of course, is fraught with conceptual and linguistic ambiguities. For a useful overview of the subject, see John Reid, “Writing About Regions,” in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough 1990), 71-96. As it relates to the West, once again see the work of Gerald Friesen, especially, “The Prairies as a Region: The Contemporary Meaning of an Old Idea,” in Gerald Friesen, *River Road: Essays on Manitoba and Prairie History* (Winnipeg 1996), 165-82.

¹⁴ This paper is limited to published primary research papers only, and excludes critiques, reviews, and other such statements.

among the essays. Sixteen articles are on labour or labour-related subjects in British Columbia, the remaining 24 dealing with either the 3 prairie provinces or the West as a whole. In terms of representation, then, the West has fared well in the first quarter-century of *L/LT*, even if that representation has been somewhat skewed regarding chronological and geographic focus.

Given the West's historic development as a farming frontier, a suitable starting point here is with the men and women who worked on the farms and homesteads of the region.¹⁵ Four essays in *L/LT* have dealt specifically with agrarian labour. W.J.C. Cherwinski's article on the 1908 harvest excursion to the West highlights the intersection of economic and environmental forces in shaping the experiences of the transient farm labour force. His account of "terrible weather, primitive conditions, deadly boredom, and possible failure" dispels the myth of a western frontier of limitless and unqualified opportunity that pervades the pre-war promotional literature.¹⁶ "For those who did find sufficient work early," Cherwinski concludes, "the reality was not less appealing than the myth; for the unfortunate "the mystique of the west was shattered and with it the unfounded belief in the ability of the nation to provide for all in equal measure."¹⁷ This revision of western mythology is echoed in John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager's study of the attempt to unionize Alberta's beet sugar workers in the 1930s, an attempt ultimately thwarted by a combination of employers and the state. While this anti-labour partnership could be found across the nation, the authors nevertheless conclude that the strikes fought in 1935 and 1936 were "a phenomenon for Western Canada, a class struggle within agriculture, unlike the 'agrarian protest' against the National Policy which has been such an enduring theme in Canadian historiography."¹⁸

David Monod and Jeffrey Taylor provide broader overviews of western farm workers. Monod traces the fight for price parity by Alberta and Saskatchewan farmers, a fight that ended in defeat in 1948 and effectively spelled the end for "non-competitive" farmers in the West.¹⁹ Borrowing from Althusser and Gramsci, Taylor rejects a materialist approach to the subject and instead looks at the lan-

¹⁵The classic statement remains V.C. Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (Toronto 1957).

¹⁶W.J.C. Cherwinski, "The Incredible Harvest Excursion of 1908," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 5 (Spring 1980), 59. For a discussion of "official" images of the West see R. Douglas Francis, *Images of the West: Changing Perceptions of the Prairies, 1690-1960* (Saskatoon 1989), 107-54.

¹⁷Cherwinski, "Harvest Excursion," 79.

¹⁸John Herd Thompson and Allen Seager, "Workers, Growers and Monopolists: The 'Labour Problem' in the Alberta Beet Sugar Industry During the 1930s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 153.

¹⁹David Monod, "The End of Agrarianism: The Fight for Farm Parity in Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1935-48," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 117-43.

guage of agrarianism, identifying a positional shift from opposition to accommodation between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He concludes:

By the 1920s “market, community, and citizenship displaced class, politics, and producerism as the main organizing principles of Manitoba agrarianism The market and co-operation defined the economic, the social was viewed in terms of community and cohesiveness, citizenship and service defined the political, and the educational encompassed the subjective acquisition of these various aspects of knowledge.²⁰

A second group of workers commonly associated with the West are those employed in the region’s various resource extraction industries. For example, British Columbia’s logging industry has been the subject of four separate articles in *L/LT*. Gordon Hak’s essay on the short-lived Lumber Workers’ Industrial Union in the early 1920s discusses the political and economic obstacles bedeviling successful organization of such workers in the aftermath of 1917, while Jerry Lembecke’s account outlines the ideological struggle within the BC International Woodworkers of America in the 1940s. Both authors stress the politics of unionization in the logging industry.²¹ By contrast, Richard Rajala explores the nature of logging itself and the impact of technological change from the 1880s to the 1930s. Adopting a quasi-frontier model or approach, Rajala argues that the increased introduction and application of machinery over a half-century transformed the labour process and consequently reduced the autonomy and control formerly enjoyed by workers.²² The frontier also looms large in Robert McDonald’s study of Burrard Inlet’s settler community in the 19th century. McDonald describes capital’s power over labour as being “sharply curtailed by the ethnically unstable nature of lumber society.” As a result, he argues, “relations between the companies and the community were much more a negotiated process than a simple exercise of managerial domination. Lumber capitalists could not escape the constraints imposed upon them by the frontier nature of their operation.”²³

Much attention has also been paid to the experience and response of coal miners in the West, although any regional significance is on occasion less than apparent. David Bercuson’s brief review of evidence for the disaster at the Bellevue colliery offers a harrowing glimpse into the way that miners lived and died on the

²⁰Jeffrey M. Taylor, “The Language of Agrarianism in Manitoba, 1890-1925,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 118.

²¹Gordon Hak, “British Columbia Loggers and the Lumber Workers Industrial Union, 1919-1922,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 67-90; and Jerry Lembecke, “The International Woodworkers of America in British Columbia, 1942-1951,” *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6 (Autumn 1980), 113-48.

²²Richard A. Rajala, “The Forest as Factory: Technological Change and Worker Control in the West Coast Logging Industry, 1880-1930,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 32 (Fall 1993), 73-104.

²³Robert A.J. McDonald, “Lumber Society on the Industrial Frontier: Burrard Inlet, 1863-1886,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 33 (Spring 1994), 96.

job, though surely it says as much about industry conditions in general as about the West in particular. While William Baker's two separate essays on the 1906 Lethbridge miners' strike clearly underline that dispute's importance to the evolution of state intervention in, and regulation of, the coal industry in Canada, neither throws much light on the lives, thoughts, or actions of Lethbridge miners themselves.²⁴

In that regard, John Belshaw's article on British colliers on the west coast is far more informative. Belshaw takes on the established stereotype of these workers as the bedrock of labour radicalism in the province, and instead offers a more nuanced portrait. "The legacy of the British collier on Vancouver Island was not one of monolithic radicalism nor even Labourism," he writes; "instead it was one of conflicting inclinations which were as politically divisive for labour on Canada's West Coast as they were in Britain."²⁵

In the case of agricultural labourers, loggers, coal miners, and other resource extraction workers, the frontier — either as a physical or psychological phenomenon — is frequently cited as a formative influence. For Robert McDonald, the frontier is "used loosely to mean the first stage of settlement when social relations were new and as yet unfixed."²⁶ Allen Seager, in his study of western coal miners, questions this formula, arguing "Contrary to the mythology of the frontier, the majority of working-class socialists comprised stable industrial communities."²⁷ Despite its debated significance, however, there has been little actual discussion of the frontier itself in the pages of *L/LT*. James Conley's article, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis and the Western Labour Revolt," is one of the few to tackle the subject head-on. Conley asserts:

The literature on western Canadian workers has generally understood the 1918-19 labour revolt as a regional phenomenon, rooted in the frontier conditions of early twentieth-century western Canada. In these "frontier labourer" interpretations, the experiences and expectations of frontier resource workers are seen as the main source of the western labour revolt. Working-class radicalism developed first in the immigrant working class of isolated mining, logging, and railway construction camps and towns, where expectations of social mobility

²⁴ David Jay Bercuson, "Tragedy at Bellevue: The Anatomy of a Mine Disaster," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 221-32; and William M. Baker, "The Miners and the Moderator: The 1906 Lethbridge Strike and Mackenzie King," *Labour/Le Travail*, 11 (Spring 1983), 89-117, and "The Miners and the Mounties: The Royal North-West Mounted Police and the 1906 Lethbridge Strike," *Labour/Le Travail*, 27 (Spring 1991), 55-96.

²⁵ John Douglas Belshaw, "The British Collier in British Columbia: Another Stereotype Reconsidered," *Labour/Le Travail*, 34 (Fall 1994), 14. See also Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-1921," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 23-60.

²⁶ McDonald, "Lumber Society in the Industrial Frontier," 96.

²⁷ Seager, "Socialists and Workers," 367.

were frustrated by a class-polarized frontier society ruled by aggressive, individualistic entrepreneurs.²⁸

Based on his study of Vancouver workers in 1918-19, however, Conley shows that working-class radicalism in the West was not a function of the frontier but rather of labour's ongoing conflicts with their employers under capitalist production, and as such "the experience of Vancouver workers was not unique, but was a local variation on a theme being played out elsewhere in Canada and internationally."²⁹ The danger here, of course, is that the significance of regionalism threatens to dissolve altogether. Conley's challenge to the "western exceptionalism" thesis is important, given the ever-growing presence of urban centres in the West, but there have been few similar case studies published in *L/LT* on which to base conclusive judgement. Glen Makahonuk's 1987 essay on Saskatoon workers essentially borrowed the approach, method, and terminology employed by Bryan D. Palmer and Gregory S. Kealey in their respective groundbreaking studies of Hamilton and Toronto in the 19th century and, not surprisingly, he comes to similar conclusions.³⁰ As such, while Makahonuk's work — much of which has been published elsewhere — represents a shift in our appreciation of class formation in the West. It, perhaps, too readily accepts conventions and explanations that themselves require reassessment. For example, in emphasizing the struggle against "prairie capitalists who attempted to control the labour market and the price of labour in their pursuit of profits in an agricultural economy," Makahonuk runs the risk of reducing the western working-class experience to a variation of that of central Canadian workers a generation earlier.³¹ Consequently, while he downplays any simple "frontier" explanation for western working-class radicalism, he inadvertently all but minimizes any particular influence that regionalism may have played.

My own work on Calgary makes the opposite error. In insisting that historians should look beyond both the "western exceptionalism" and "national revolt" frameworks for the events surrounding 1919, I argue that "the experiences of local urban (and rural) centres should be studied in their own right; whether or not they fit the patterns of Winnipeg or the alleged national revolt should not be a primary issue."³² This might be fine except for the fact that events in Calgary (or elsewhere)

²⁸James Conley, "Frontier Labourers, Crafts in Crisis and the Western Canadian Labour Revolt," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 10.

²⁹Conley, "Frontier Labourers," 37.

³⁰Glen Makahonuk, "Class Conflict in a Prairie City: The Saskatoon Working-Class Response to Prairie Capitalism, 1906-19," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring 1987), 89-124. See Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montréal-Kingston 1979); and Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980).

³¹Makahonuk, "Class Conflict in a Prairie City," 123.

³²David Bright, "'We Are All Kin': Reconsidering Labour and Class in Calgary, 1919," *Labour/Le Travail*, 29 (Spring 1992), 77.

only take on greater significance when placed in broader regional or national contexts. Insofar as the revolt of 1919 should be viewed as part of a historical continuum of unrest, David Schulze's essay on the relationship between the unemployed and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in Calgary and Edmonton before World War I is a useful addition. The unemployed, Schulze claims, were predominantly "unskilled, migrant, and largely immigrant workers ... employed in seasonal, labour-intensive industries, who were ignored by the craft unions and too transient to be easy converts to Socialist parliamentarianism...."³³ However, this appears to return us to a frontier approach, implying that a more mature economy might have offered more resistance against the pre-war downturn. My study of vagrancy in Calgary during the same period casts a different light on how the state responded to those without work, arguing that the attitudes and actions of local police and magistrates on the matter of "wilful idlers" amounted to a form of social control, one designed to win "wider endorsement of the values and ethos that underpinned capitalism" by penalizing those who rejected the same.³⁴

One group of urban workers that has received particular attention in *LTT* is teachers. In his fine essay, Terry Wotherspoon traces the transformation of the profession in 19th-century British Columbia from a partnership between public teachers and their employers, into a far more regulated, segmented and subservient workforce. Merging class analysis, state formation, and the labour process, Wotherspoon's article is an example of labour history's power to delve beneath surface-appearances to the complex processes behind historical change.³⁵ Jean Barman looks at the efforts made by teachers in Vancouver in the 1920s to broaden educational opportunities for working-class children.

By opting for reform over class confrontation, working people became allied with like-minded individuals most generously characterized as middle-class. The consequence was considerable change in public schooling despite active opposition by middle-class business interests more concerned with their own immediate economic advantage than with the creation of optimum social infrastructure for the entire community.³⁶

³³David Schulze, "The Industrial Workers of the World and the Unemployed in Edmonton and Calgary in the Depression of 1913-19," *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 48.

³⁴David Bright, "'Loafers Are Not Going to Subsist Upon Public Credulence': Vagrancy and the Law in Calgary, 1900-1914," *Labour/Le Travail*, (Fall 1995), 58. On the question of social control, see also Robert Campbell, "Managing the Marginal: Regulating and Negotiating Decency in Vancouver's Beer Parlours, 1925-1939," *Labour/Le Travail*, 44 (Fall 1999), 109-28.

³⁵Terry Wotherspoon, "From Subordinate Partners to Dependent Employees: State Regulation of Public School Teachers in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 75-110.

³⁶Jean Barman, "'Knowledge is Essential for Universal Progress but Fatal to Class Privilege': Working People and the Schools in Vancouver During the 1920s," *Labour/Le Travail*, 22 (Fall 1988), 14. See also Michael R. Welton, "Conflicting Visions, Divergent Strat-

Studies of white-collar workers are a valuable corrective to an overemphasis on resource workers or transient urban employees that has characterized the writing of western Canadian labour history. They serve also to remind us of the rapid settlement and evolution of prairie society. The ideological battles of the day — among communism, socialism, labourism, and capitalism — were in no way restricted to or derived from the frontier experience of miners and loggers alone. Instead, there was a broad and lasting conflict at the very heart of western society.

The politics and political leadership of western labour have featured prominently in *L/LT*. Several sharp biographical essays have underlined the fact that human agency remains as crucial to understanding the West's development as more intangible, impersonal forces. They have also helped to redraw previous characterizations or stereotypes of western working-class radicalism. For example, Peter Campbell's study of Bill Pritchard does much to revise and correct earlier accounts of the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC). Rejecting what he sees as a tendency to equate the SPC's "scientific socialism" with either economic determinism or the revolutionary program of the Communist Party, Campbell argues: "The evidence clearly suggests ... the Socialist Party's ... Conception of how the revolution would occur owed more to William Morris than to Engels.... In reality, Bill Pritchard's materialism encompassed a humanitarian concern with agency, education, and self-organization of the workers."³⁷ Other biographical appreciations include David Akers' portrait of Jack Kavanagh, the Vancouver communist and trade union leader, and Tom Mitchell's evaluation of Manitoba minister A.E. Smith. Akers traces Kavanagh's journey from pre-war socialism to post-war communism, while Mitchell performs a similar task in recreating the circumstances that propelled the Methodist preacher from the Social Gospel into the Communist Party. Both essays are useful in highlighting the indigenous rather than external forces that lay behind such shifts in ideological position.³⁸

Perhaps the most revealing biography of a western labour figure, however, is Mark Leier's portrait of Robert Gosden. Ghostlike, Gosden has flitted across the pages of western Canadian labour history for years, without ever really coming into focus. As an unskilled labourer, sometime member of the IWW, and informant for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Gosden's life and its significance to the broader labour movement has never been easy to assess. Leier digs deeply into the

egies: Watson Thomson and the Cold War Politics of Adult Education in Saskatchewan, 1944-6," *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (Fall 1986), 111-38.

³⁷Peter Campbell, "'Making Socialists': Bill Pritchard, the Socialist Party of Canada, and the Third International," *Labour/Le Travail*, 30 (Fall 1992), 49.

³⁸David Akers, "Rebel or Revolutionary? Jack Kavanagh and the Early Years of the Communist Movement in Vancouver, 1920-1925," *ibid.*, 9-44; Tom Mitchell, "From the Social Gospel to the 'Plain Bread of Leninism': A.E. Smith's Journey to the Left in the Epoch of Reaction After World War I," *Labour/Le Travail*, 33 (Spring 1994), 125-52.

sources to bring his subject to the surface, and his article on Gosden in the Fall 1998 issue of *L/Le Travail* serves as a preface to his full-length biography published a year later.³⁹

Beyond such biographies, *L/Le Travail* has also published various general studies of western labour politics. These include Leier's account of the Vancouver free speech fights before World War I, Alvin Finkel's essays on the Alberta Labor Party and on the Cold War politics of the same province's Social Credit government, and Larry Hannant's study of the Social Credit movement's appeal to workers in Depression-era Calgary. Taken together, such articles have broadened and deepened historical understanding of western Canadian politics, at least up to the early post-1945 period.⁴⁰

To these may be added articles that focus on the broader relationship between the state and workers in the West. These include Andrew Parnaby's essay on the British Columbian government's use of new legislation — the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act — to stunt the growth of militant industrial unionism in the 1930s. Parnaby convincingly demonstrates how the expansion of formal collective bargaining combined with the criminal and common law to delimit effective working-class action.⁴¹ This piece should be read in tandem with Andrew Yarmie's case study of employers' associations in British Columbia in the early 20th century in order to appreciate the sense of continuity of state management and regulation of labour.

[T]he state did not at all times act on "behalf" or at the "behest" of the general interests of the business community. In forestry, "capitalists were able to make their private economic interests shape public policy, but on broader social welfare and labour legislation the state had to take in to account the pressure from reformers and workers and the overall need to legitimize its power."⁴²

No mention so far has been made of gender, either on its own or as it intersects with class as a mode of analysis. Certainly, no other field of study has done more in recent decades to influence the ways in which labour historians conceptualize their

³⁹Mark Leier, "Portrait of a Labour Spy: The Case of Robert Raglan Gosden, 1882-1961," *Labour/Le Travail*, 42 (Fall 1998), 55-84. See also Mark Leier, *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden, Revolutionary, Mystic, Labour Spy* (Vancouver 1999).

⁴⁰Mark Leier, "Solidarity on Occasion: The Vancouver Free Speech Fight of 1909 and 1912," *Labour/Le Travail*, 23 (Spring 1989), 39-66; Alvin Finkel, "The Rise and Fall of the Labour Party in Alberta, 1917-1941," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 61-96, and "The Cold War, Alberta Labour, and the Social Credit Regime," *Labour/Le Travail*, 21 (Spring 1988), 123-52; Larry Hannant, "The Calgary Working Class and the Social Credit Movement in Alberta, 1932-35," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 97-116.

⁴¹Andrew Parnaby, "What's Law Got To Do With It? The IWA and the Politics of State Power in British Columbia, 1935-1939," *Labour/Le Travail*, 44 (Fall 1999), 9-46.

⁴²Andrew Yarmie, "The State and Employers' Associations in British Columbia: 1900-1932," *Labour/Le Travail*, 45 (Spring 2000), 399.

subject and frame their questioning of the evidence before them.⁴³ *L/LT's* representation of the West has, in part, mirrored this change. Bob Russell's analysis of minimum wage legislation in western Canada is a suitable starting point in this respect. Russell considers the patriarchal division of wage labour under industrial capitalism — "male workers' privileged access to employment and wage-earning opportunities ... counterpointed by the relegation of women to unpaid domestic work responsibilities, less desirable forms of employment, and lower wages" — and the degree to which it was reinforced by introduction of legislation ostensibly designed to advance the interests of women workers. Russell concludes:

Gendered wage policies ... were both an indication of the growing presence of women in industry, rather than their exclusion from it, and an expression of the absence of a socialist feminist presence in industry.... [M]inimum wages did represent a minimal improvement over that which had passed before. They also reflected a further wage entrenchment of wage discrimination on the basis of gender within the Canadian economy. Finally, they were predicated on an ideological vision of the family insofar as not all male wages were family wages and not all minimum wage earners were single women. Given these realities, it is difficult to construe how gendered wages could rebound to the advantage of a very significant proportion of the working class.⁴⁴

Gillian Creese provides a different look at the struggle for equal pay in her article on the 30-year battle between unionists and B.C. Hydro/Electric after World War II. Women workers suffered doubly, Creese shows. First, the company "resisted eliminating the female differential, systematically restructured unequal pay, and continually restored lower community standards even when the company's own job evaluation system suggested equal comparators with male jobs." Second, women also suffered in that the union tended to view women's issues — such as unequal pay — as marginal rather than core, and as such its practices and priorities reinforced the existing gendered hierarchy at the workplace.⁴⁵

The most explicit study of the link between feminism and class consciousness in the West comes in William Carroll and Rennie Warburton's essay on registered nurses in Victoria. Based on a survey of some 800 nurses taken in 1985, Carroll and Warburton explore gender consciousness, trade union consciousness, and perceptions of politics, capitalism, and socialism in British Columbia. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, their study found a majority of nurses to be opposed to male prerogatives and in favour of greater equality in terms of equal pay and job opportunities. Younger nurses were more progressive than their more conservative seniors, and class

⁴³See Joan Sangster, "Feminism and the Making of Canadian Working-Class History: Exploring the Past, Present and Future," *Labour/Le Travail* 46 (Fall 2000), 127-66.

⁴⁴Bob Russell, "A Fair or Minimum Wage? Women Workers, the State, and the Origins of Wage Regulation in Western Canada," *Labour/Le Travail*, 28 (Fall 1991), 88.

⁴⁵Gillian Creese, "Power and Pay: The Union and Equal Pay at B.C. Hydro/Electric," *Labour/Le Travail*, 32 (Fall 1993), 244.

consciousness was stronger among those nurses married to working-class rather than middle-class spouses. Most useful for labour historians, however, is the authors' conclusion that "women's oppression is primarily rooted in patriarchal relations of reproduction, which under capitalism have been privatized and particularized within the family-wage household form." One result of this, they argue, is that "practices that occur in the home do not necessarily translate themselves into political positions."⁴⁶

Overall, then, studies on western Canadian labour published in *LLT* have come a long way since Gerald Friesen's article on the labour revolt of 1919. Increasingly wide-ranging and diverse in terms of approach and subject matter, articles on western Canada over the course of 50 issues have stated, restated, tested, revised, and finally transcended "traditional" images of "western exceptionalism." Few, if any, labour historians today would lament this or feel an urge to return to the old debate. Instead, new questions are being asked of the region and new areas for consideration are being proposed.

Yet in some ways there remains much to be done. A historiographical essay such as this is an opportunity also to suggest subjects for future study, based on the gaps in or limitations of the existing body of literature. In chronological terms, very little has been published in this journal on the West during the post-1945 era, and if Friesen's remarks about the declining relevance of regionalism are to be assessed then labour historians might turn more to recent decades. Who did workers vote for in elections and why, which parties did they support, how did changes in the economy and technology affect their experiences on the job? Studies of Native labour in the West during any period are notably absent, as indeed are those of ethnic minorities, for the most part. Child labour — both formal and informal — remains an area in need of examination, and despite recent essays much more needs to be known about the gendered nature of workplace relations.

The list could go on and on, but on the whole *LLT* is to be congratulated not only for expanding our knowledge of western workers but for enhancing our knowledge of the West in general. Indeed, the essays reviewed here make it clear that any sense of the West as a homogenous entity is misleading, for it was always and remains deeply divided along internal lines of occupation, class, ethnicity and gender. If regionalism, as it applies to the West, is to remain a useful tool or model of analysis, Canadian historians must take into account the cumulative manner in which many of these essays have challenged old stereotypes of the West. The results should be interesting. Finally, is Friesen right in stating that regionalism is now largely exhausted as a concept, or are the ways in which it continues to shape — in meaningful and measurable ways — the lives, experiences and responses of workers in the West still worthy of study? If so, what are we to make of the vast region west of Ontario, that so often refuses to fit in with the rest of Canada?

⁴⁶William K. Carroll and Rennie Warburton, "Feminism, Class Consciousness and Household-Work Linkages Among Registered Nurses in Victoria," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (Fall 1989), 143.

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