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Wheat Boom Era* By Jean Morrison

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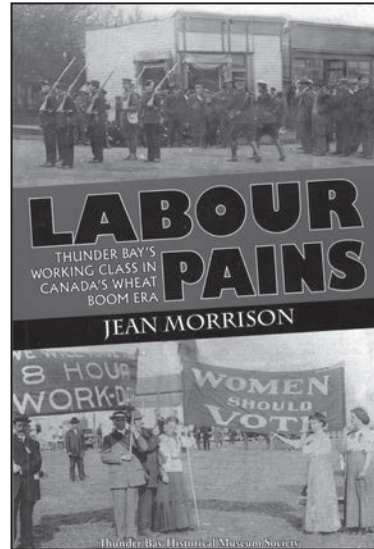
Labour Pains: Thunder Bay's Working Class in Canada's Wheat Boom Era

By Jean Morrison

Thunder Bay, Ontario: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 2009. 176 pages. \$14.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-920119-56-3 www.thunderbaymuseum.com

Labour Pains is the story of working-class formation in Thunder Bay in the generation before World War I. It is also a study in class polarization, often expressed in violent struggles with large corporations like the Canadian Pacific and Canadian Northern railways, in the dissolution of an alliance with middle-class community leaders, and in a split between skilled British Canadian workers and unskilled European workers. Such polarization laid the basis for an even more intense era of workers' struggle across two world wars, the Winnipeg General Strike and the Great Depression.

Thunder Bay originated before 1800 as a crucial, if small, transfer point in the east-west fur trade. As settlement spread over the prairies after 1870, the community grew from a few hundred to 30,000 by 1914, serving as the key transshipment point of bulk products between rail and steamship lines. From here grain flowed eastward into the world economy and machinery and consumer goods westward into the prairies. Thunder Bay became the home of both highly skilled and unskilled transport workers, ranging from elite railway staff to seasonal coal, freight and grain handlers. As well, it became a base for labourers in the forests and mines of Northwestern Ontario, and for service workers within the city. A large, complex, multi-ethnic wage-labour market emerged. The majority was British Canadian (about half native born and half from the United Kingdom), with less-skilled jobs held



principally by European immigrants: Finns, Greeks, Italians and Slavs.

Morrison studies the class-conscious elements of this new social formation, as measured by trade unions and autonomous political parties, in the period between 1903 and 1913. She argues that there was a fundamental shift from a peaceful equilibrium to class polarization as the less-skilled majority demanded a living wage.

By 1900 the railway running trades were participating actively in local politics. Members pushed for telephones and a municipally-owned electric street railway. They mediated labour disputes, acting as lobbyists and supporting the new Industrial Disputes and Investigation Act of 1907. They supported middle-class social gospel reforms, such as the Presbyterian effort to establish a mission intended to 'Canadianize' European immigrants in the Coal Dock district.

In 1903 the American Federation of Labour established the first non-railway unions, under socialist leadership. But building unions for seasonal, less-skilled workers did not mean stable contracts. The railways fought aggressively to prevent or repudi-

ate collective agreements. They victimized known union leaders, divided ethnic groups against each other and, in a series of strikes from 1903 to 1912, imported strikebreakers. They used their private police, municipal police, and the militia to confront strikers by force and in the courts. On 12 August 1909, a gun battle broke out between freight handlers and CPR police, the bloodiest labour riot in Canadian history. Up to forty men were wounded; twenty ringleaders were arrested, with nine convicted. Non-English immigrants became scapegoats for labour violence. A consensual approach to labour relations also failed. The CPR ignored the advice of the Conciliation Board of 1909, as did the Canadian Northern Railway in the 1912 coal handlers' strike.

Class polarization culminated in the 1913 Street Railwaymen's strike. Local middle-class politicians rejected the past practice of mediation through skilled workers and, instead, broke the union and established a low-wage model as a way to attract external investment. Better wages and working conditions for lesser-skilled workers had been achieved only once, in 1912. A prairie harvest labour shortage and socialist leadership with sympathy strikes at the docks made the difference, but a year later the political will to carry a general strike and maintain this victory could not be sustained.

These economic struggles gave rise to two labour political traditions in Thunder

Bay, between the Independent Labour Party, committed to reform based on craft unions, and those swayed by revolutionary socialism and its promise of unionizing lesser-skilled industrial workers.

This polarization would shape the Canadian class struggle into the 1940s, until muted by transformed economic conditions, a purge of the political left, and a more comprehensive industrial relations system.

Morrison tells a powerful story about the making of one working-class community against polarization by employers and the state (and not by Eastern and Southern European workers), as a leading feature of early Canadian industrial capitalism. Well-chosen photographs enrich the story. But this study, largely written in the 1970s, has its limits. *Labour Pains* does not cover the whole of the Thunder Bay working class, leaving aside the First Nations and gender categories, as well as the unorganized majority who voted Conservative or Liberal. Rather, *Labour Pains* focuses—and usefully so—on those members of the working class who consciously fought for equity and improvements in the new wage-earning era, and who generalized politically from this hard experience to test reform, and perhaps even revolution.

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An Historian's Notebook: 100 Stories – Mostly Peterborough

By Elwood H. Jones

Peterborough: Trent Valley Archives, 2010. 291 pages. \$40.00 softcover. ISBN 978-0-9810341-1-9 <www.trentvalleyarchives.com>

Ontario is filled with good stories, and *An Historian's Notebook* exemplifies the best in the art of story-telling. Elwood Jones, the historian of

the title, has composed 100 essays that put Peterborough—from brass bands to genealogy to Red Fife wheat to ever so much more—into the reader's mind, invariably