

The Cliff Scotten Award

As one of the 450 member unions of the Canadian Association of Labour Media (CALM) we have an opportunity to enter the annual CALM Awards. These awards have a total of 24 different categories. We were thrilled when the MAHCP News – article “It’s a Privilege to Have a Union” written by member Janet Fairbairn was chosen for the Cliff Scotten Award. This award is judged on the best piece reflecting the history, traditions and culture of the labour movement. Janet was presented with her award at the AGM. Again Congratulations to Janet.

Respectfully Submitted
Bob Bulloch Secretary
Chair of Communications Committee



Janet Fairbairn and Wendy Despina

Read the winning article (originally published in the MAHCP News September 2008) on the following pages.

IT'S A PRIVILEGE TO HAVE A UNION

By Janet Fairbairn
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Janet Fairbairn

Often I am asked by the members that I represent “what does the union do for me?”, or “what am I paying union dues for”? My answer is always the same. I tell them it is like

insurance, you may only have to use it once in your life time and it will pay for itself over and over again. One may have a job security issue, or it may be a salary issue, or a member may become disabled and not able to carry on in their existing position etc. A lot of these types of issues arise suddenly and without warning, but you can rest assured that the union will be there for you then, and bargain on your behalf. That is reassuring to me for sure. I wouldn't want to be without one.

I have recently taken a course on labour relations and I found some interesting information in my studies which I thought other members may find enlightening. In some countries, trade unions are illegal and a person trying to organize or become a member of one is likely to be arrested



Winnipeg General Strike 1919

and put in jail. In other countries, trade unions operate under government control and do not represent the real interests of their members. In Western democracies, trade unions now enjoy an established place and workers are free to bargain collectively with employers within a legal framework carefully designed to protect the interests of both the employer and employee.¹

I have read ten or more articles regarding union activists that have been either imprisoned or murdered for simply uttering the word **UNION**. I can tell you for sure one place where you would not want to tangle with union issues is Colombia. Although the articles varied in circumstances, the outcome was always the same; death by torture or multiple

bullets at close range. Favier Dario Pelaez Castano, a member of the guard dog handlers group at a prison belonging to the Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario (INPEC) was assassinated in June of this year in front of his wife and his youngest daughter. He was hauled out of his home and shot.² Zully Codina was a mother, veteran hospital worker and union activist. The last role was one that cost Cordina her life, at the hands of paramilitary death squads, whose records show they collaborated with the country's intelligence service to liquidate her and other union activists. She was killed on Nov 11, 2003 when a gunman pumped three bullets into her head moments after she kissed her family goodbye. When I read these articles I wondered what



The Winnipeg Riot June 1919

possessed these people to take such risks when they had to know the outcome, and then I realised that they probably didn't see that they had any other choice. When an individual's livelihood is threatened or their family's security they are willing to fight for what they believe in and hopefully they would not have died in vain so the people they leave behind will have a better life.

We are fortunate in Canada to have The CHARTER OF RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS. Section 2 guarantees freedom of association, which is a very important aspect of industrial relations today. The Labour Relations Act [Section 5(1)] protects the rights of employees to join a union. The act states that no employer may interfere with the formation, selection or administration of a union.

The Winnipeg General Strike is proof of what the work force was like in the past long before some of us were born. After World War 1 many soldiers returned home to find few opportunities, though many companies had enjoyed enormous profits on war contracts. Wages and working conditions were dismal and labour regulations were mostly non-existent. The Bolshevik revolution had just occurred in Russia, and some workers saw this as an example of a successful socialist revolution. This was the pretext that Minister of Justice Arthur Meighen used to accuse the strike leaders of being Communists, and many were deported from Canada after an amendment to the Canadian Naturalization Act.

In 1919 workers within the building and metal industries attempted to unionize by forming the Building Trade Council

and Metal trade council respectively, but the management refused to negotiate. Due to restrictions of labour policy in the 1900's a union could only be recognized voluntarily by employers, or through strike action. Therefore, workers from both industries went

on strike to gain union recognition. An appeal went out for support from other unions and by 11 am on May 15, 1919, virtually the entire population of Winnipeg had walked off the job. 30,000 to 35,000 people were on strike in a city of 175,000. The local newspapers, Winnipeg Free Press and Winnipeg Tribune, had lost the majority of their employees due to the strike and took a decidedly anti-strike stance. The New York Times front page proclaimed "Bolshevism Invades Canada." The Winnipeg Free Press called the strikers "bohunks," "aliens", and "anarchists" (cancel the subscription?).

A counter strike committee, the "Citizens' Committee of One Thousand", was created by Winnipeg's wealthy elite. The Committee declared the strike to be a violent, revolutionary conspiracy by a small group of foreigners. On June 9th the City of Winnipeg Police Commission dismissed almost the entire city police force for refusing to sign a yellow dog contract (asking the police to agree not to unionize or sympathize with the workers). The federal Minister of Labour ordered employees back to work, threatening them with dismissal if they refused. Meighen had amended the Immigration Act to target British Born Radicals for deportation. On June 17 the federal government ordered the arrest of ten strike leaders (including J.S. Woodsworth (who went on to found the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation which was the forerunner of the New Democratic Party). Four days later, strikers assembled at Market Square, where Mayor Charles Frederick Gray read the Riot Act (an act to declare any group of more than twelve people to be unlawfully assembled, and thus have to disperse or face punitive

action). No more gathering at the water cooler. The Royal North-West Mounted Police were sent and charged into a crowd of strikers beating them with clubs and firing weapons. Mike Sokolowski was killed and at least 30 others were injured in what became known as "Bloody Saturday". A number of eastern European immigrants were deported. June 25, 1919, the workers were gradually giving up and the Central Strike Committee decided to halt the strike.

The aftermath was The Royal Commission, which investigated the strike, concluded it was not a criminal conspiracy by foreigners. Organized labour thereafter was hostile towards the Conservatives for their forceful role in putting down the strike. The Conservatives were defeated in the next election and the Liberal government pledged to enact labour reforms proposed by the Commission. In this way the Winnipeg General Strike can be said to have resulted in much improved working conditions for millions of Canadians.

I hope that answers the question of the next person who asks me what the union does for me. I will now say it is a privilege to have one.³



Winnipeg General Strike 1919

¹ Frank Kehoe, Maurice Archer(2005) Canadian Industrial Relations. Text Cases & simulations Eleventh Edition.

Oakville, Ontario CENTURY LABOUR PUBLICATIONS
² Colombia: Two More Trade Unionists Assassinated. Retrieved July 16/2008 from <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2247>

³ Winnipeg General Strike. Retrieved June 22, 2008 from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winnipeg_General_Strike

Editors Note:

The International Trade Union Confederation (IUTC) reported nearly 150 labour activists were killed worldwide in 2006. In 2005 the number killed had risen to 144 from 115 with a further 800 injured, 5,000 arrested and 500 jailed. Published September 18, 2007 by Agence France Presse