
Alvin Finkel (ed.) (2012)
Working People in Alberta: A History
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Alberta is a province which has been dominated by conservative and neo liberal governments. The object of this book is to challenge this conservative image by highlighting the 'communitarian values' of most Albertans. The introduction says that (p. 3)

workers, farmers and small business operators ... have always formed the overwhelming majority of the population. It is a history of this majority, and especially its working class component, that this book tells.

The spur that led to the production of this book was a desire to celebrate the centenary of the formation of the Alberta Federation of Labour in 1912. The book mainly focuses on the lives and struggles of working people against the combined weight of corporations and the government of Alberta. The presentation of material is enlivened with quotations from various activists or persons who found themselves involved in various struggles.

The volume has the appearance and feel of a coffee table book. While it is not explicitly stated anywhere, it is presumably the hope of the publishers that it is something that the working people of Alberta will dip into on a regular basis in learning about the struggles and bravery of their forbears. It is liberally sprinkled with photos of workers across the generations in different types of work, union meetings, workers/unionists on picket lines or at demonstrations, union leaders, contemporary newspaper articles, cartoons and examples of union memorabilia. Such inclusions provide the volume with an extra degree of interest.

Material, with two exceptions, is presented chronologically. It begins with an examination of the organisation of work by different groups of Native people, before the arrival of European settlement. Various chapters examine different time periods and present information on the rise and fall of new industries, the nature and harshness of work, attempts by workers to unionise, various struggles to gain recognition, strike action in either attempting to gain improved wages and working conditions, or to resist attacks on them by employers, aided and abetted by the Alberta government either through the use of police and legislation designed to weaken unions and their ability to utilise strike action and even participate in collective bargaining. The respective narratives do not shy away from struggles with radicals of different hues and more conservative elements within the union movement on how to proceed. Attention is also drawn to the broader political objectives of unions and attempts to build and utilise coalitions to improve the lives of Albertans on such matters as education and health care.

The two exceptions to this chronological approach are stand alone chapters on women and race or ethnicity and immigration, respectively. These are sad stories where historically those who inhabit these categories (both are multifaceted and complex) have been subject to discrimination in terms of employment oppor-

tunities, wages and working conditions. The volume, to its credit, acknowledges that historically unions also discriminated against both groups.

The major weakness of this volume is that it is overly descriptive and provides brief snippets of a seemingly never ending mountain of facts. In trying to do too much the volume ends up in doing too little. It would have also been useful to provide a statistical appendix including historical data on the ethnographic breakdown and size of the population, the size and socio-economic breakdown of the workforce, rates of unionisation, industrial disputes and various measures of lost time (to put the more descriptive material into perspective) and other matters (even a list of long serving union leaders) such as industrial accidents and deaths in Alberta, benchmarked against other provinces and Canada as a whole.

The volume provides an essentially depressing picture of the lot of working people in Alberta. Workers, and the unions that represent them, have found it increasingly difficult to operate against the combined weight of corporations and a provincial government antipathetic to the rights of workers. *Working People In Alberta: A History* pays tribute to those generations of workers and their leaders who have been prepared to stand up and fight for their rights and interests.

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