

Vancouver City Archives: Some Additional Sources for Labour History

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Until recently, the Vancouver City Archives held virtually no records of the history of labour in Vancouver. James Skitt Matthews, who founded and operated the Archives for nearly four decades prior to his death in 1970, was responsible for this deplorable situation. Matthews, who commanded the garrison which suppressed the Nanaimo miners' strike of 1913, never developed an appreciation for the struggles of the working class, particularly its left wing, during the balance of his life. Despite the dramatic increase in the number of organized workers during his years as City Archivist, and the fact that British Columbia had emerged as the most highly unionized region in North America by the time of his death, Matthews never overcame his prejudice against unions and socialism. He carried this attitude into his work as City Archivist, and collected very little material concerning these sectors of society.

Since 1970, the City Archives has increasingly pursued a policy of reducing this gap in its holdings by approaching, for example, several city unions with the recommendation that their historical records be donated to the Archives. Because Vancouver is a port city, many of the collections which have been placed in the Archives are of maritime origin. One of the earliest unions to respond was Local 280 of the United Sheet Metal Workers International Association, whose records date from the turn of the century to the 1970s. This collection provides the historical background of one of the principal unions involved in the local shipbuilding industry. The papers of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), Local 500, recently came to the Archives, and although the records date only from 1935, the time of a major stevedores' strike in Vancouver, it is possible to reach further back into the history of local longshoremen by turning to the records of the British Columbia Shipping Federation. Formed in 1911 by local stevedoring and shipping companies to coordinate stevedoring services in the province, the Federation meticulously retained records of union activities among coast longshoremen from the 1920s onward. Thus, while the ILWU collection contains nothing on the Vancouver waterfront strike of 1923, the Federation files include copies of the newspaper *Longshoremen's Strike Bulletin* issued during the strike. Other historical materials concerning local stevedoring can be found in the papers of the Vancouver Board of Trade, Vancouver Merchants' Exchange, and the Chamber of Shipping of British Columbia, all held in the City Archives.

As might be expected, the largest and most comprehensive collection of union papers transferred to the Archives derives from the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union (UFAWU). Although the UFAWU was formed in 1945, this collection dating from the 1930s through the 1960s, touches a wide variety of topics including, for example: the early struggles of the union to spread its influence along the coast, the establishment of workmen's compensation and unemployment insurance for fishermen, as well as the issues concerning shorework, the Fraser River fisheries, whaling, and Japanese fisheries off the British Columbia coast. Researchers will be delighted by this collection even should they wish simply to study life in the smaller settlements stretching along the coast. Several other waterfront unions are considering following the example of the UFAWU in placing their records in the Archives.

The Archives also acquires city union records not directly linked to port activities. Such material includes the historical papers of the Painters and Allied Trades Union, Local 138, and the Sign and Pictorial Painters Union, Local 726, which date back to 1889. These collections are significant for their very age and because they illustrate the struggle of a large group of skilled workers for better working conditions. Perhaps of more general interest are the records of the Vancouver and District Trades and Labour Council on microfilm at the Archives. These records include minutes, correspondence, some material of the Oil Refinery Workers Union, and runs of the labour newspaper the *British Columbia Federationist* and its successor the *Labor Statesman*. Much of this collection is available in original form at the Special Collections Division of the University of British Columbia Library. The Archives holds the microfilm copy of the collection for the convenience of researchers wishing to compare the responses of labour with those of local business organizations such as the Vancouver Board of Trade and the Vancouver Merchants' Exchange, whose records are deposited in the City Archives.

This programme of collecting the historical records of local unions is being publicized to encourage individuals knowing of caches of labour material worthy of permanent retention to inform the City Archives. Contacts are being established and maintained with local unions to foster the growth of the labour collection and an awareness of the social and historical importance of labour papers. The success of this programme has been marked by such decisions as the recent transfer of records by the Vancouver Metal Workers Council, which was established in 1911 and includes representatives from many construction trade unions.

Researchers interested in examining some of the above-mentioned collections are advised to contact the City Archivist in advance concerning donor restrictions which might be in force.