

Handout # 9c : BC Labour Leaders and Social Justice Biographies

Helena Gutteridge

From The Labour Heritage Centre

<http://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/project/a-radical-woman/>

A RADICAL WOMAN

Born in England, Helena Gutteridge broke off all contact with her family at the age of 13 because they disapproved of higher education for girls. In 1911, now a union organizer and a “militant suffragette,” she arrived in Vancouver to work as a tailoress. Here she formed the Woman’s Vancouver league, for “obtaining the vote for women on the same terms it is granted to men,” was the only woman on the Vancouver Trades and Labour council, and helped bring about BC’s first minimum wage act.

The first woman ever elected to Vancouver City Council, she became involved in two issues: “white slavery” – the abduction of young women for prostitution – and a lack affordable housing in Vancouver’s East End – “hovels utter utterly unfit for human habitation.” Issues that haunt us still.

When Gutteridge was born in the late 1880s, life was relatively scripted for women of working-class families: leave school, work as a domestic or one of the other few occupations available to women at that time, get married, and raise children—but this path was one Helena refused to follow.

At the age of 13 she left home, found work in a London clothing department as a fitter, cutter, and tailor, and began to pay her way through school. By the time she had finished she was certified in hygiene, sanitary science, and teaching. Perhaps even more lasting than her formalized education was the exposure she received to a wide range of intellectual influences from the various political and social movements surrounding her, including trade unionism, feminism, and the doctrines of philosophy and mysticism popularized by the Theosophist movement.

All of these movements influenced her, but it was her dedication to the Suffrage movement – the movement dedicated to gaining the right for women to vote and hold political office – that brought her to Canada. By 1911 the movement in Britain was increasingly radicalized, using hunger strikes, arson, destruction of property, and protest marches to compel the government to grant women the right to vote. Recognizing that this struggle needed to be extended across the British Empire, a handful of Suffragettes temporarily moved to Canada to aid the growing women’s movement. Helena was one of these women. However, instead of returning home after the four-year mission, as initially intended, she remained in British Columbia for the rest of her life.



Following the long journey by boat and by train, Helena arrived in Vancouver just as the 1912 Recession was about to hit. In the early years of the 20th century the economy was going strong in British Columbia, propelled by the vast natural resources and construction booms across the province. However, as tensions between nations continued to rise in Europe there was a slump in the transatlantic economy and trade, affecting all of Canada, but hitting Western Canada the hardest. Even when war did break out, British Columbia's industry was not immediately suited for wartime production and unemployment levels continued to rise.

If there were few jobs available for men at that time, even fewer allowed women to apply. If you had no family, were not married or were widowed, and especially if you had children, you might receive meager amounts of charity from a religious organization, but things like social assistance, pensions, or subsidized housing and daycare did not yet exist. As Helena was trained as a tailor she did manage to find employment, but spent her time outside of work actively working to seek these very things for those less fortunate.

In her capacity as organizer of unemployed women with the new Women's Employment League, Helena was well aware of the struggle of local women and their children. While waiting for a response on whether or not her organization would receive any funding from the government, in 1914 Helena set up a "make work" project for unemployed Vancouver women: a toy-making cooperative.

By November there were 60 women working on dolls and toys, while another group made Christmas pudding. Soon, an additional six rooms were converted into workspace while other rooms were made into a residence for the workers. While the venture was not ongoing, it exemplified the possibilities present with hard work, determination, and the refusal to take no for answer.

Although Gutteridge remained passionate about labour and women's rights, she married shortly after the conclusion of World War I and moved to the Fraser Valley where she became a poultry farmer. In 1932, after the marriage did not work out, she returned to Vancouver where she immediately returned to politics. She joined the CCF (the party later known as the NDP) and by 1937 she became the first woman elected to city council, championing the cause of, among other things, low-income housing.

By 1941, many jobs were opening up for women, as workers were needed to fill the positions left vacant by men who had enlisted. Helena soon found employment as a welfare officer at Lemon Creek Relocation Project, one of the newly-formed Japanese internment camps that began to dot the interior of the province. The site was abysmal: hastily built dwellings that served no protection against the cold winters, no water, no schooling system for the large population of children housed there, and no electricity. Although improvements came later, they did little to help diminish the fact that the people living there had left behind whole lives in Vancouver.

She resigned in 1945, after most of the camp's population had begun to dwindle, and returned to the coast, where she remained for the rest of her life. With few options and little savings, at the age of sixty-six she took a labour-intensive job at a cannery. It was back-breaking work, but, as she told a friend, it provided her with first-hand knowledge of what life was like for women working at canning factories. Her commitment to understanding of lives of working people continued, even as she neared the end of her life.

Other commitments continued to appear. In 1947 she joined the Women's International League of

Peace and Freedom, an international peace movement developed in 1915. Here, she was surrounded by women she had met throughout her life in Vancouver, breathing new life into causes of social and economic justice she held dear for most of her life. However, the post-war anti-communist hysteria that was appearing throughout North America was a disruptive and divisive force. Although Helena was careful to not become too closely involved with the debate on either side, she slowly began to retreat from politics. By now it was the late fifties and Helena's health was starting to fail. She said little of her poor-health, but soon discovered that the discomfort and pain she had been experiencing was caused by pancreatic cancer.

She died on October 1, 1960. The brief notice in the Vancouver Sun stated, "She leaves many friends and associates to remember her life long-work for peace and justice."

Memory of this life-long work continues to this day.

Notable Quotes:

On the vote:

"Every reason that men advance for having the vote applies to women. We need the vote for specific legislation but outside that we deserve it for the very reasons that earned it for men...Men don't have the vote because of their ability or intellectual attainments. They vote because they are British subjects over twenty-one years of age."

On the vote and labour:

A unified voting block of working class women would lead to "significant changes in industrial legislation governing working conditions and pay rates, thereby eliminating sweated labour, the undervaluing of women's work and poverty-induced prostitution."

"To work long hours means to increase the ranks of the unemployed, and to increase the ranks of the unemployed means to lower wages. Short hours are far more essential to women than they are to men. The injurious physical and mental effects of such work are plainly visible....and the rapid aging of working women has its injurious effects on the next generation. Women are needed in the labour movement--all will benefit by such organization."

Resources:

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Photo: Helena Gutteridge, City of Vancouver Archives/CVA 371-2693

George North

George North (1920-1990) was a BC journalist, teacher and union official. North provided leadership to many union members across British Columbia during hard times for workers.

For twenty two years, North was editor of *The Fisherman*, the newspaper for the United Fisherman and Allied Workers Union from 1946-68.

Working for *The Fisherman*, North got into trouble with the courts for his open criticism of government during the Ironworkers strike of 1959. Workers were on strike after the Ironworkers Bridge collapse, and they were on strike over safety conditions. The companies petitioned the courts to force the workers back to work, and got their wish when Justice A.M. Manson issued an injunction to striking workers to return under the newly passed Bill 43 Trade Unions Act. North published an editorial entitled "Injunctions Won't Catch Fish nor Build Bridges" (1959). Supreme Court Justice Norman Whitaker (former BC Liberal speaker of the legislature) took offense to the allegations of improper closeness between government and the courts, and also to North's suggestions of 'unity' of workers in the face of injunctions. North was summoned to Whitaker's court and sentenced to one month in Oakalla Prison and a 3,000 dollar fine to the Fisherman Publishing Society.



In 1968, North returned to UBC to obtain a teaching qualification and taught in Prince George in the early 1970s. In 1975 he continued his union activism by becoming a BCTF staff member. Between 1980 and his death in 1990 he was head of the BCTFs Bargaining division, again through many difficult periods for labour.

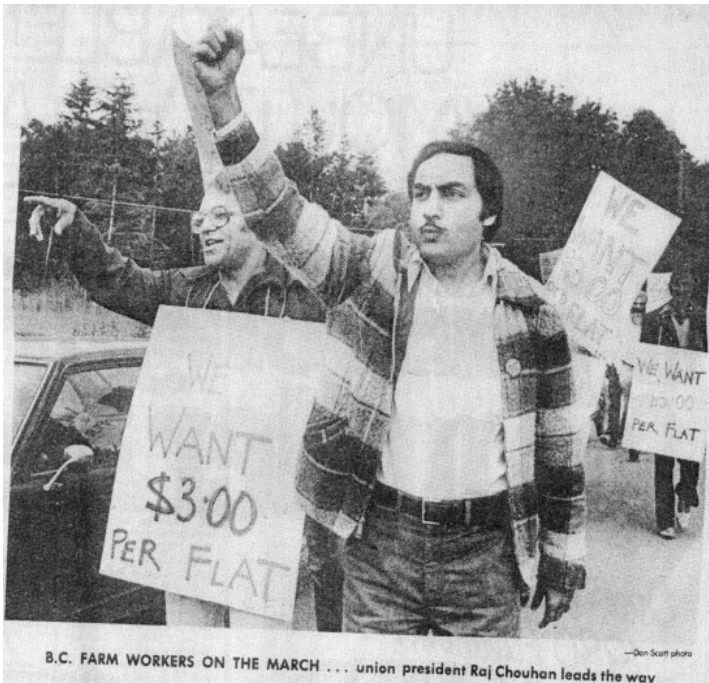
George North also wrote *A Ripple, a Wave: the Story of Union Organization in the BC Fishing Industry*, 1974.

For a link to North's editorial, see BCTF Teacher News magazine, Vol. 18, No 3, Nov/Dec 2005.

Raj Chouhan

Raj Chouhan was born in Punjab, India. As a student in India he was active in student union activities. He arrived in Vancouver in 1973, intending to work and finish his education. Seeing an ad from agricultural labour contractors in the Punjabi language newspapers, Chouhan decided to work in the fields in the Fraser Valley. He discovered the horrible working conditions for farm workers. Chouhan rode in vans with 30 workers, built to hold only 12, and no seat belts. He worked 16 hour days for extremely low wages, and workers were exposed to harmful pesticides without protective gear. When he defended an elderly woman from being yelled at by the labour contractor, he was fired and had to find his own way home.

Many of the workers were women, illiterate even in Punjabi, and some elderly could not speak English.



B.C. FARM WORKERS ON THE MARCH . . . union president Raj Chouhan leads the way —Don Scam photo

Chouhan asked about any unions that could help (unwittingly to a grower's son) and learned there were no farm workers unions. He was also fired.

In 1974 Chouhan was working in a sawmill and began talking to his IWA reps about farm workers. Labour leaders at the time didn't think organizing farm workers could work in BC because of the migrant nature of the job, but Chouhan felt differently. He had been reading a book about Mexican-American farm worker activist Cesar Chavez and felt the issue was quite similar.

"We talked a lot about the farmworkers and around 1978 I read a book on union leader Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers

in California. I talked to labour leaders here about the farmworkers and while they all supported the struggle in California, they didn't seem to think the approach would work here because of the transient, seasonal nature of the work in B.C. But I thought it would work, and I still do." - Raj Chouhan, 1995

Farmworkers were excluded from most labour laws at the time. This meant there was no minimum wage, it was difficult to get unemployment insurance, and their wages were often withheld. There were numerous instances of physical and sexual harassment.

Chouhan and other supporters formed informal support groups to help farmworkers with their

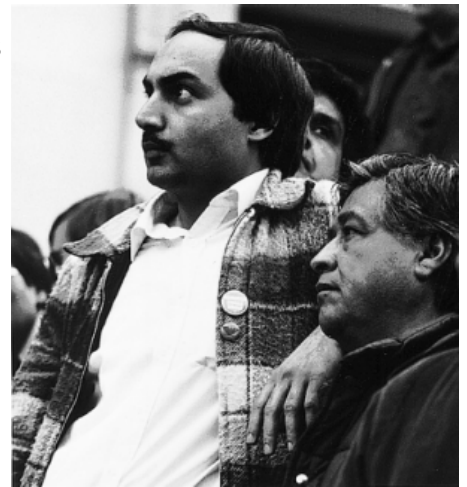
legal cases and language interpretations. By 1978, Chouhan had grouped supporters into the Farmworkers Organizing Committee. By 1979 they were organizing pickets, strikes, and media events. That year, they marched on the Socred Party convention at the Hyatt to press for more labour protections.

In 1980, Local 1, Canadian Farmworkers Union was established with Raj Chouhan as its first President and at its first Canadian Farmworkers Conventions. They were supported by the Canadian Labour Congress and the BC Government Employees Union. The next year CFU Local 1 struck for 15 months and received its first contract.

Raj Chouhan continued to work in the labour movement, serving 18 years on staff at the Hospital Employees Union, and served on the Labour Relations Board. He was also a founding member of the BC Organization to Fight Racism, and served as Vice President of BC Human Rights Defenders.

In 2005, Raj Chouhan was elected MLA for Burnaby-Edmonds and was reelected in 2013.

“The thousands of working men, women and children who provide the hard labour to produce the necessary food for the society have in fact been excluded from the category of working people. But there has to be an end to all this. The farmworkers of this province have realized that these conditions will not change until they organize themselves....I want to make it clear to all who oppose us that the union is here and we are going to organize every field in the Fraser Valley.” Chouhan at at founding convention for a farmworkers’ union for April 6, 1980.



Photos from:

<http://www.rajchouhan.ca/about-raj>

<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/chap2.htm>

<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/cesar1.htm>

Resources:

Zindabad! BC Farmworkers' Fight for Rights, by Murray Bush and the Canadian Farmworkers Union. Surrey, BC: 1995 <http://www.vcn.bc.ca/cfu/about.htm>