



# ***Alberta Labour & Social Democracy***

**Alberta Labour History Institute 2016 Calendar**

# 2016



## JANUARY

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## *Alberta Labour and Social Democracy*

Alberta's labour movement and allied progressive movements were overjoyed with the results of the May 5, 2015 provincial election in Alberta. A majority NDP government after 43 years of large Tory majorities was unexpected and augurs well for working people in Alberta. Kudos to Rachel Notley, her team of candidates and organizers for making it happen.

But the election of a social democratic government in Alberta did not happen overnight. The labour movement was the chief instigator of almost nine decades of organizing labour-friendly, social democratic parties in Alberta. It has been involved in both legislative and extra-parliamentary movements to create social justice and a better distribution of wealth and power in Alberta and beyond.

The province's social democratic history began with the creation of Labour Representation Committees in Calgary and Edmonton in 1917, followed by the creation of an Alberta branch of the Canadian Labour Party (CLP) in 1921, a party launched by the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada. The CLP called for greater state direction of the economy, the introduction of social insurance programs, and protection of workers' rights to organize. Labour elected four members in 1921, and one member, Alex Ross, was included by the victorious United Farmers of Alberta in their Cabinet after that election. Labour went on to win six seats in 1926 but in

1935, it was wiped out in the Social Credit frenzy that swept the province. By that time, the CLP had committed to joining the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, a national organization of democratic socialists formed in 1932 and dedicated to ending the Great Depression while ensuring that the political and economic conditions that had created it never returned.

While the CCF, led by printer Elmer Roper, won a quarter of all votes cast in the 1944 provincial election, the electoral system turned that huge vote into a mere two legislative seats. The party gradually lost support as a combination of post-war prosperity and the Cold War lulled many into believing that the capitalist system had self-corrected. The labour movement took greater ownership over social democratic politics by taking the lead in creating the New Democratic Party in 1961, a somewhat more moderate version of the CCF. In Alberta, oil workers' trade union leader Neil Reimer became the NDP's first leader.

Growth in electoral support for the NDP proved gradual and discontinuous. Though the party won 16 seats in 1986 and 1989 and formed the Official Opposition, it won no seats in 1993 and had to gradually rebuild. Labour-supported organizations like Public Interest Alberta and Friends of Medicare which fought the right-wing Tory agenda helped to create the atmosphere that allowed New Democrats to form a government in 2015.



\$2.00 Per Year, 5c

WINDSOR PLUMBER  
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# JANUARY

## Origins of Social Democracy in Alberta

Social democratic parties everywhere have their origins in the labour movement. The establishment of a variety of unions in Alberta before World War One and the creation of labour councils in the cities and then the Alberta Federation of Labour in 1912 provided the groundwork for the emergence of labour political organizations. These included revolutionary organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Communist Party. But most Alberta labour leaders favoured participation within the existing parliamentary system over the revolutionary overthrow of political and economic rule by capitalists. In 1917, printer Elmer Roper persuaded first the Calgary Labour Council and then its Edmonton counterpart to found Labour Representation Leagues that supported independent labour involvement in politics, particularly to

oppose conscription during World War One.

After the war, Roper and other union leaders decided to create a province-wide Canadian Labour Party which advocated the gradual nationalization of industry, the introduction of minimum wages, and improved access to workers' compensation along with higher payments, among other reforms. Though Alberta was still primarily an agricultural province and the division of seats discriminated heavily against urban residents, four Labour members were elected in 1921: Alex Ross and Fred White in Calgary, William Johnston in Medicine Hat, and Philip Christophers in Rocky Mountain. The first three represented moderate elements in the trade union movement while Christophers was a radical miner who had been active in the IWW.

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					1962 Alberta New Democrats founding provincial convention	1906 Founding meeting of the Edmonton Trades and Labour Council
					1946 Rand Formula introduced	



*Alberta Provincial Archives A/13634*

*William Irvine c.1920, one of the founders of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation*

# FEBRUARY

## Labour's first participation in government in Alberta

When the United Farmers of Alberta formed government in Alberta in 1921, Premier Herbert Greenfield appointed one of the four elected Labour members, stonemason Alex Ross, as Minister of Public Works. The UFA and Labour had agreed informally during the election not to run in the same seats. While the UFA was not especially sensitive to labour's needs, its party philosophy called for the inclusion of representatives of different vocations in government. Ross persuaded the UFA government to expand access to workers' compensation, implement a female minimum wage, and favour unionized labour in government construction contracts.

But a large faction within the Labour Party opposed direct

cooperation with the UFA in the legislature and urged party representatives to take a more aggressive stance in favour of policies of nationalization, social programs, and more extensive public works. In the 1926 election, Ross ran as part of a Labour slate in Calgary, which was a five-member seat. While Fred White placed fourth and socialist Independent Labour candidate Robert Parkyn placed fifth, Ross placed eighth. Though Labour won 6 seats in 1926 and 4 in 1930, the UFA did not include a Labour representative in Cabinet after 1926. Federally, Alberta Labour elected two representatives in 1921, one of whom, preacher William Irvine, would play a major role in social democratic politics for the next four decades.

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Valentine's Day

Family Day

2002 Alberta's largest teachers' strike begins

1906 Lethbridge Trades and Labour Council granted charter

1944 PC 1003, federal government recognizes collective bargaining rights for Canadian workers



*Wikimedia Commons*

*Logo of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation*



# MARCH

## *The Labour Party's role in the Formation of the CCF*

The Great Depression radicalized many Canadians. Before the 1930s, democratic socialists created a number of provincial organizations that only rarely cooperated across provincial and social class borders. Now it became more urgent than ever to have a national party along the lines of the British Labour Party. Both the Labour Party in Alberta and the United Farmers of Alberta supported such efforts and joined the new Co-operative Commonwealth Federation.

But that top-down approach weakened the fledgling CCF in Alberta. The UFA government and the Labour-dominated Edmonton city council joined forces to suppress a Hunger March in Edmonton in December, 1932. Over 12,000 workers

and their families witnessed the suppression of the strike. The UFA government, unlike the grassroots organization that had spawned the government, rejected socialist solutions and focused on cutting costs, generally at the expense of unemployed workers and farmers struggling to survive both low prices for their products and drought.

The failure of the left forces to abandon the UFA and Labour Party to form a grassroots CCF organization created space for the populist Social Credit Party to emerge. That party had no roots in the labour movement and would eventually turn against working people and their unions. In 1935, both the UFA and Labour lost all of their seats in the Alberta legislature.

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		International Women's Day				
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Daylight Savings 1919 Western Labour Conference in Calgary forms One Big Union				St. Patrick's Day	1918 Government of Alberta passes workers' compensation legislation	1919 Civil Service Association of Alberta (CSA), precursor to AUPE, formed
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Spring Equinox					Good Friday	
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Easter Monday						
<b>April 2016</b>						
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Artist unknown

1940s election ad for the Alberta wing of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation

# APRIL

## *Rebuilding the CCF*

After the debacle of the 1935 provincial election, both the Labour Party and the UFA gradually withdrew from provincial politics. The CCF built a grassroots organization in which labour activists played a major role. The party's first provincial leader, Chester Ronning, who led the party from 1939 to 1942, had a background as a farmer, teacher, and missionary. He later became a famous Canadian diplomat who made a major effort to get the Americans to withdraw their invading forces in Vietnam. The CCF won 11 percent of the vote in the provincial election in 1940 but no seats. In that election, the Liberals and Conservatives formed a coalition to defeat Social Credit. The CCF had

great difficulty convincing workers that they should abandon Social Credit for a social democratic party.

The CCF's second leader, printer Elmer Roper, was a long-time official of the Alberta Federation of Labour. Roper edited the weekly Alberta Labour News from 1919 to 1935, the official newspaper of the AFL. Afterwards he edited People's Weekly, which became the official newspaper of the CCF. William Irvine, the CCF's first Alberta president, co-edited People's Weekly with Roper for a few years. The newspaper continued to publish until 1953. Roper led the party from 1942 to 1955 and later became mayor of Edmonton.

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						April Fool's Day									
						International Day of Mourning									





Alberta Provincial Archives nc-6-130141

*Police block marchers' route just prior to charging crowd during 1932 Edmonton Hunger March*

# MAY

## Wartime Successes and Disappointments

Elmer Roper won the first seat for the CCF in Alberta in May, 1942. Assuming the party's leadership, he used his labour and farm contacts to build a party membership of 12,000 by the time of the 1944 provincial election. Ernest Manning's Social Credit Party had only 8000 paid-up members at the time. But Manning had won over the business community to support of his party as the best means of fending off the "socialist hordes." Roper promised a democratic and gradual transition to socialism through the introduction of social programs and nationalization of resource industries and big companies. His party won 25 percent of the vote in the 1944 provincial election. That translated into only two seats. Roper retained his seat and

Calgary teacher Aylmer Liesemer joined him in the legislature. Interestingly the Communists won 5 percent of the vote and no seats, running on a platform similar to the CCF's. The province had a single transferable vote system at the time that could have elected 6 CCF members and one Communist had the two parties not viciously attacked each other and asked their voters not to give their second choices to the other party.

Roper and Liesemer were effective members of the legislature in defending labour's interests. But the membership was quite discouraged by the poor showing in 1944 and within a few years, the party membership had dropped by two thirds.

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International Workers' Day

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Mother's Day

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1919 Winnipeg General Strike begins

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1919 Alberta workers strike in solidarity with Winnipeg General Strike

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# **C. C. F. STANDS FOR SOCIALISM**

**G. H. Williams said in the Legislative Assembly  
on November 19, 1934:**

**"The gentlemen to your right, the Liberals, will hardly deny that they are supporters of an economic system known as Capitalism, and that they believe a solution to our economic ills can be found within the orbits of that system. We on your left, the C.C.F., hold that the solution of our difficulties can be found only by substituting for the present system a newer, broader, sounder economic system known as Socialism."**



**The official name of the Hitler party in Germany  
is the National Socialist Party.**

**A vote for the C.C.F. candidate on June 26th is  
a vote for Socialism.**

**Do not be misled by C.C.F. canvassers.**

*Peel Library University of Alberta 9947*

*This Liberal party flyer was typical of the red baiting of the C.C.F. during the 1940s*



# JUNE

## *Decimation of the Alberta CCF*

The Alberta CCF, like its federal counterpart, struggled to stay alive in the postwar period. The federal CCF had topped the national polls for part of World War Two and the party formed the government in Saskatchewan in 1944. Shortly afterwards, provincial workers in Saskatchewan became the first in Canada to receive the right to unrestricted collective bargaining. The old-line parties responded with a carrot and a stick. The carrot was to adopt some CCF social and economic policies that ushered in a period of relative economic prosperity that dimmed radicalism. The stick was to accuse the CCF and the labour movement of being agents of the Soviet Union. The Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union raged and everyone from daycare

advocates to advocates for workers' rights to organize and to strike was labelled a foreign agent. The unions were pushed to purge Communists and other left-wingers and to stay out of political and social policy debates. Worried for their reputations, many unionists obliged. Advocates of peaceful resolution of American-Soviet tensions like former Labour MP William Irvine were easy targets for Premier Manning who regarded virtually all reformers as part of a worldwide socialist conspiracy.

The Alberta CCF vote dropped in every election after 1945 and in 1959, they reached rock bottom with no seats and only four percent of the popular vote.

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1935 On-to-Ottawa Trek reaches Calgary						
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1912 Alberta Federation of Labour formed						
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Father's Day	Summer Solstice	National Aboriginal Day		St. Jean-Baptiste Day		
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1926 Six Labour members win seats in Alberta election						
July 2016						
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*Photo courtesy Reimer family*  
*Alberta's first New Democratic Party leader Neil Reimer and Tommy Douglas at CLC convention*

# JULY

## Labour and the Formation of the NDP

As the CCF collapsed, the Canadian Labour Congress and some affiliate unions worked with CCF members to create a new party that would allow affiliation of trade unions, unlike the CCF.

The result was the New Democratic Party that formed in 1961 with Saskatchewan Premier Tommy Douglas becoming its first leader. The fortunes of the new social democratic party were aided not only by labour support but by a recession in the Western economies that lasted from late 1958 to 1963.

In Alberta, Neil Reimer, Canadian director of the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers union, and longstanding CCF supporter, became the first provincial leader of the NDP. He campaigned

for a provincial medicare program along the lines of Saskatchewan's pioneer program, for better labour legislation, for occupational health and safety legislation, and for an end to the corruption that marked the Social Credit regime. But only a fraction of the province's unions were willing to challenge the province's Social Credit domination with a direct affiliation to the NDP. The NDP won a by-election in Pincher Creek-Crowsnest in 1966, aided by the votes of retired miners. In the 1967 provincial election, though the party won a respectable 16 percent of the vote, it won no seats.

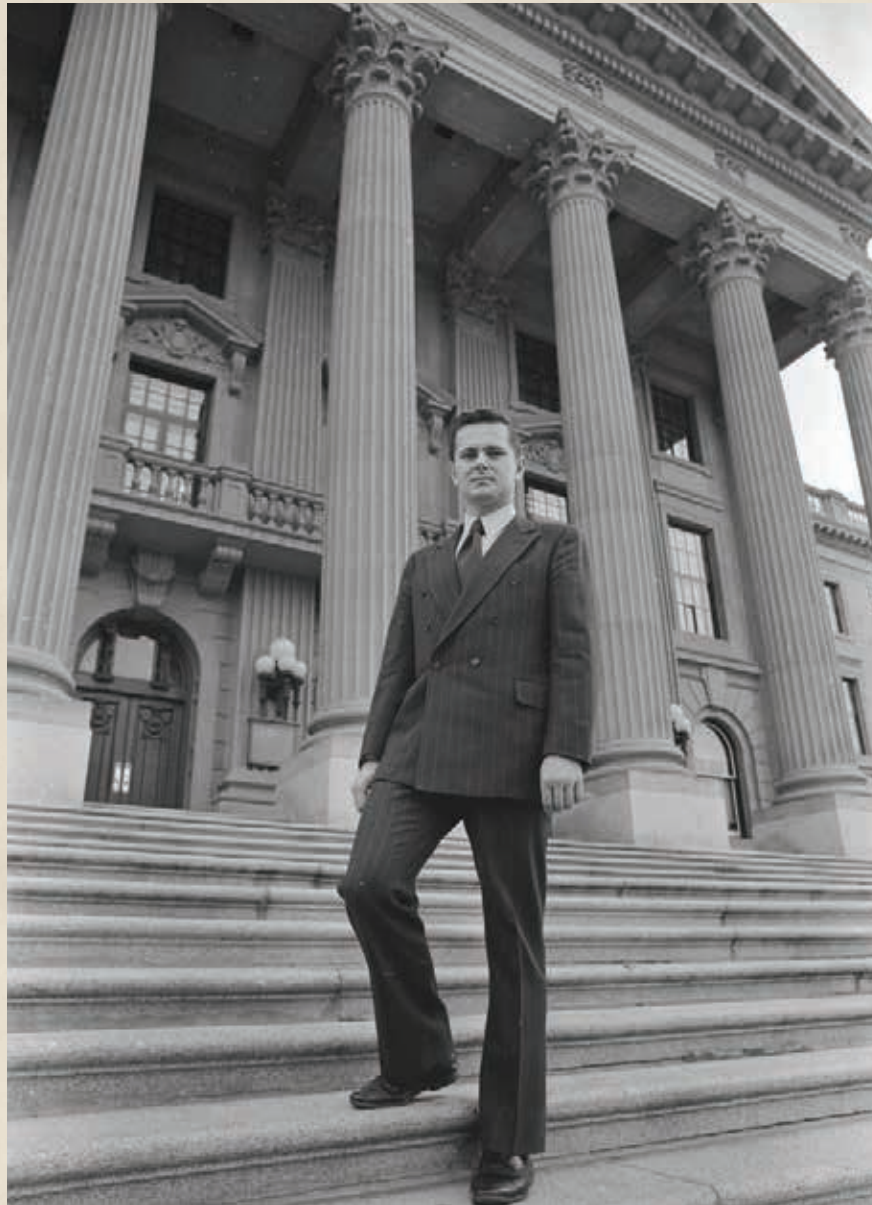
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1921 United Farmers of Alberta government elected; includes four Labour members

1933 First national convention of the CCF adopts the Regina Manifesto

Canada Day  
1935 On-to-Ottawa Trek violently repressed by RCMP in Regina





*Alberta Provincial Archives J/738*

*New Democratic Party leader Grant Notley on the Alberta legislature steps*

## Grant Notley Years

Notley was an effective spokesman for economic planning and for a better distribution of wealth in Alberta during a huge oil boom from 1973 to 1982. But while oil prices were high, he found

only a limited audience. That changed as a deep recession began in 1982. The NDP vote jumped to 19 percent in the provincial election that year and teacher Ray Martin won Edmonton-Norwood. The NDP became the Official Opposition. Growing labour militancy during the recession caused more working people to reject the Tories and their free-market policies in favour of the labour-friendly NDP. Many worried that the passing of the well-respected Grant Notley would harm the NDP's electoral prospects but Ray Martin picked up the torch from Notley and continued to hammer the Tories in the legislature for their failure to meet the needs of working people in the province.

[illegible]



*Massive rally at the Alberta legislature in support of striking Gainers employees, 1986*



# SEPTEMBER

## Labour and NDP success in the 1980s

On May 8, 1986, Alberta held its first post-Lougheed election. The NDP jumped from two seats to 16, carrying 12 of the 17 Edmonton-area seats, 2 in Calgary, and one each in Athabasca and Vegreville. They had over 29 percent of the vote. The growth in NDP support was the result of a continuing recession and increasingly mean-spirited legislation that attacked the labour movement and financial support for the unemployed. The Dandelion movement of construction workers under attack by provincial legislation that made it easier for firms to ignore union contracts, the looming Gainers strike, and movements of the unemployed increased the sentiment that the Alberta Tories

were friends only to big business.

The NDP also won 16 seats in the provincial election of 1989. But business-financed lobby groups such as the Fraser Institute, aided by the corporate media, managed to persuade many working people that the recession produced by failures of uncontrolled capitalism was in fact caused by too much government regulation and taxation of business and the wealthy. Three quarters of Alberta workers were not unionized but even unionized workers were susceptible to an argument that they were increasingly hearing everywhere while the social democratic viewpoint was systematically stifled.

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Glenbow Archives m-9457-363

Calgary Herald political cartoonist comments on ongoing opposition faced by Ralph Klein's government during the 1990s

# OCTOBER

## *Labour's Response to the "Klein Revolution"*

In 1993 the new leader of the Progressive Conservatives won the provincial election with a promise to effect "massive cuts" to provincial government programs. His chief opponent, Liberal leader Lawrence Decore, promised "brutal cuts." The NDP, defending government programs, lost all 16 of its seats. The party fell into a period of declining membership and resources.

The effort to revive social democratic perspectives in Alberta fell to the labour movement as the major organized expression of social justice. The labour movement played the largest role in the creation of Friends of Medicare in 1979 to fight extra-billing by physicians. Though it became dormant after that campaign was won, it was revived in the 1990s to fight the Klein government's efforts to privatize parts of the medicare system and

underfund the system as a whole. Labour supported a broader research agenda for a positive role for government by contributing generously to the University of Alberta-based Parkland Institute, founded in 1996. And then labour took the lead in establishing Public Interest Alberta in 2005, an organization that was dedicated to public campaigns to preserve and extend the role of government as a protector of social rights and greater equality among citizens.

The campaigns of these organizations helped to offset the ongoing business propaganda for governments to be little more than agents of big corporations. In turn, this helped to revive the NDP while also causing the provincial Liberals to partially reject their anti-government philosophy of the Decore period.

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*Photo courtesy David J. Climenhaga*  
*The Alberta NDP caucus attend the Alberta Federation of Labour's Centennial celebration 2012*

# NOVEMBER

## Rebuilding the NDP

The NDP slowly rebuilt after the debacle of 1993, gaining strength for its social objectives from labour organizations and civil society organizations where labour was a strong participant. Labour activists provided many NDP candidates in provincial elections. Brian Mason, who became the party leader in 2004 and remained leader until 2014, was a former bus driver who served on Edmonton city council from 1989 to 2000, when he was elected to the legislature.

Election results were generally disappointing before 2015. The party won just short of 10 percent of the vote in 2011 and won only four seats. But the four-member caucus was viewed even by its opponents on the right as punching well above its weight and serving as the real opposition in the legislature. The right-wing

Wildrose party focused on issues of the integrity of PC Cabinet members and MLAs but only rarely opposed the right-wing policies of the government. They did join with the NDP in opposing Bill 46 which allowed the government to impose a collective bargaining agreement. But Wildrose's determination to cut taxes and reduce the government labour force made it clear that they were no friend to labour.

In October, 2014, Rachel Notley succeeded Brian Mason as NDP leader. Notley, the daughter of Grant Notley, had worked for a variety of unions in BC and Alberta in the areas of workers' compensation, occupational health and safety, and labour relations. At the time of her election to the legislature in 2008, she was labour relations officer for the United Nurses of Alberta.

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*Photo Courtesy Ben Lemphers  
Alberta NDP caucus after historic 2015 election victory*



# DECEMBER

## *Election of the NDP*

By the time PC Premier Jim Prentice called an election in early April, 2015, there was much discontent in Alberta. Oil prices had been in free fall for months, and people asked: what had the government saved during the good times so that health, education, and social programs could continue in bad times? The answer was nothing. The Tories had focused on keeping corporate taxes and taxes on high-income earners as well as energy royalties impossibly low; now the cupboard was bare. The Tories' solution was to cut programs further and increase taxes on everyone but corporations. Prentice took special aim at government workers and their unions, promising to achieve lower spending by cutting wages and benefits.

The NDP went into the election with only about a fifth of

the funds of the Tories. But it had people power and a leader whom most Albertans could identify with along with an attractive set of moderate but progressive proposals. These included a province-wide daycare program to ensure a maximum rate of \$25 per day per child, an increase in the minimum wage from \$10.20 to \$15 per hour by 2018, a 20 percent increase in corporate taxes, an end to the flat tax for incomes, a review of royalties, and restoration of funds cut in Prentice's budget to health and education. On May 5, the people of Alberta gave the NDP 54 seats in the 83-seat legislature. Many of those elected had labour movement backgrounds. Rachel Notley was sworn in as premier on May 24, 2015, and her government began implementing many of its election promises within weeks.

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2021 William Irvine of Calgary wins  
first federal labour seat in Alberta  
for Canadian Labour Party

Winter Solstice

Christmas Day

Boxing Day

New Year's Eve



**The Alberta Labour History Institute  
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help us make this calendar possible:**

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- **Chivers Carpenter, Lawyers**
- **McGown Johnson, Lawyers**
- **McManus & Hubler, Lawyers**
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