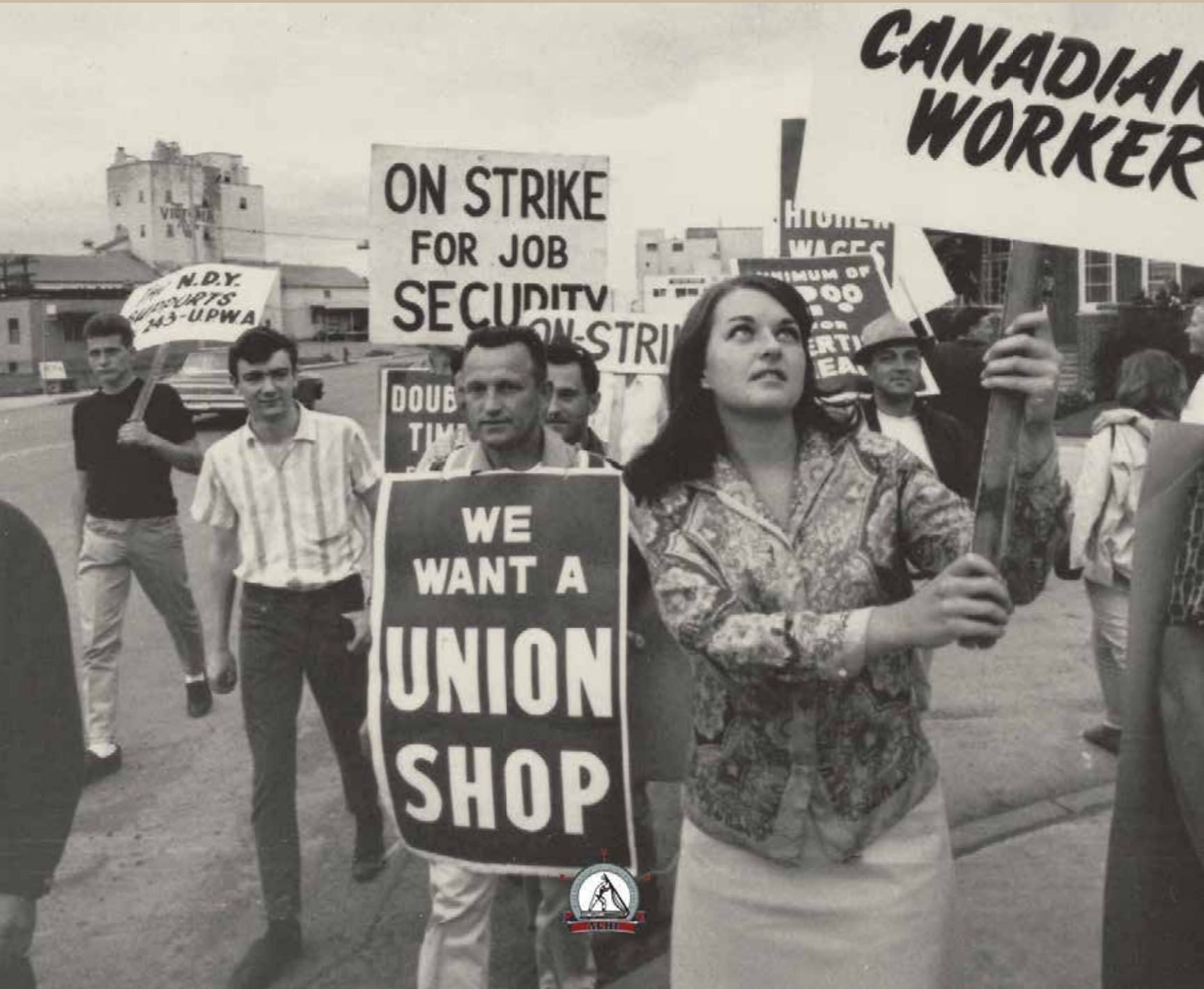


LABOUR HISTORY

2017

ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE



2017



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THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE:

Thanks to Trade Unions we have many rights as Canadian workers and citizens that we lacked in the period before trade unions were formed. Right-wing media and corporate spin doctors in such organizations as the Fraser Institute dismiss trade unions as obstacles to economic growth. They claim that if we did not have trade unions, economic growth would be greater and wealth would “trickle down” to workers.

It’s a lie. Comparisons of different countries demonstrate that there is no correlation between “union density” (the percentage of workers covered by collective bargaining contracts) and rates of economic growth. In some of the world’s most successful economies—including Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Finland— the overwhelming majority of workers are covered by union agreements. And in some of the Western world’s weakest economies, such as Spain, Portugal, and Greece, union density is very low.

High union density is correlated with greater equality in the distribution of wealth. In the United States, which has one of the world’s most wealthy economies but a union density of only twelve per cent, the distribution of wealth is poor. For a large percentage of the work force, the unemployed, and retired persons, almost no wealth “trickles down” in the United States. High union density is also correlated with progressive social programs. The Scandinavian countries lead the world in this regard because powerful trade unions have campaigned to get progressive policies implemented and then maintained.

About 30 percent of Canadian workers in 2015 were covered by a union agreement. That’s modest compared to Sweden’s 90 percent but more than twice the American rate. In the late 1970s, Canada’s union density reached 40 percent and the influence of unions on public policy, direct and indirect, was significant by North and South American standards if not by Scandinavian standards.

And what have unions achieved over time in Canada and in Alberta? Through negotiations with employers, they have won significant social benefits for their members, including shorter hours, medical benefits, retirement pensions, pay equity, and occupational health and safety clauses. They have then gone on to try to persuade governments to provide the same benefits for all Canadian workers. The trade union movement in Canada can take credit for such programs as universal medicare, the Canada Pension Plan, workers’ compensation and occupational health and safety legislation. No wonder right wingers want to humble the trade union movement while progressives recognize that it is the anchor of the fight for social justice in our country and our province.



*Rehabilitation clinic operated by Workers' Compensation,
1959—Provincial Archives of Alberta, PA-851/8.*

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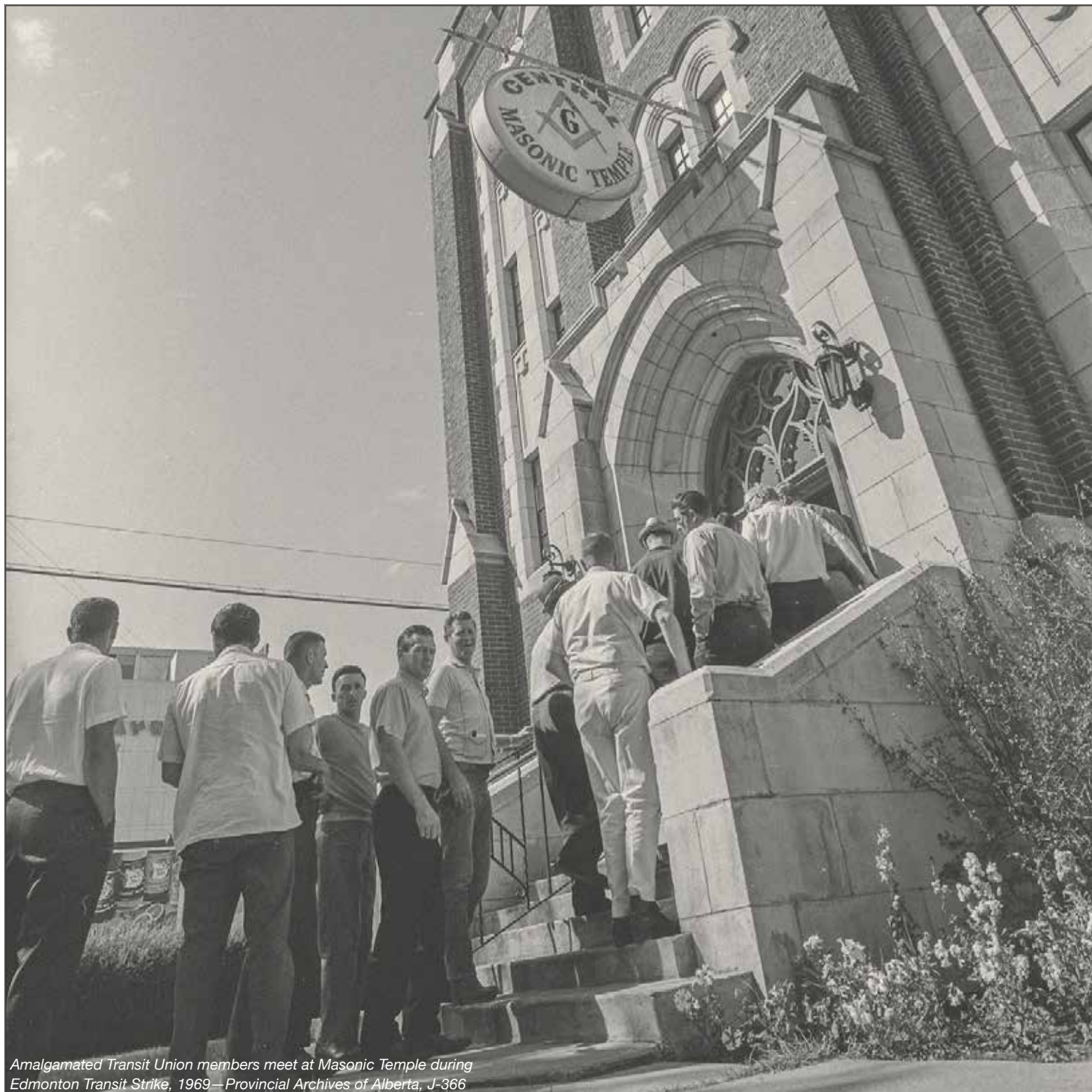
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Workers' Compensation

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE workers' compensation for workers injured or killed on the job. In Alberta the Workmen's (now Workers') Compensation Board began operation in 1918. Before its establishment workers injured on the job or the families of workers killed on the job had to find the money to hire a lawyer and go to court to try to get damages paid to them. The onus was on the worker or the worker's family to prove that the employer had been grossly negligent in their operation of the workplace. Trade unions argued that most work accidents were preventable if employers were willing to hire enough workers for particular jobs, avoid speedups, and ensure that all equipment was properly maintained. The least employers could do was to pay a portion of the injured worker's salary while he or she was unable to work. Trade union pressure forced the Alberta government, following four other provinces where union pressures also played a big role, to introduce a no-fault workers' compensation scheme.

Over the past century, unions have fought to broaden the definition of workplace accidents under Workers' Compensation legislation, to increase the percentage of a worker's wages that are replaced by workers' compensation, and to reduce intrusive surveillance of injured workers.



*Amalgamated Transit Union members meet at Masonic Temple during
Edmonton Transit Strike, 1969—Provincial Archives of Alberta, J-366*

FEBRUARY

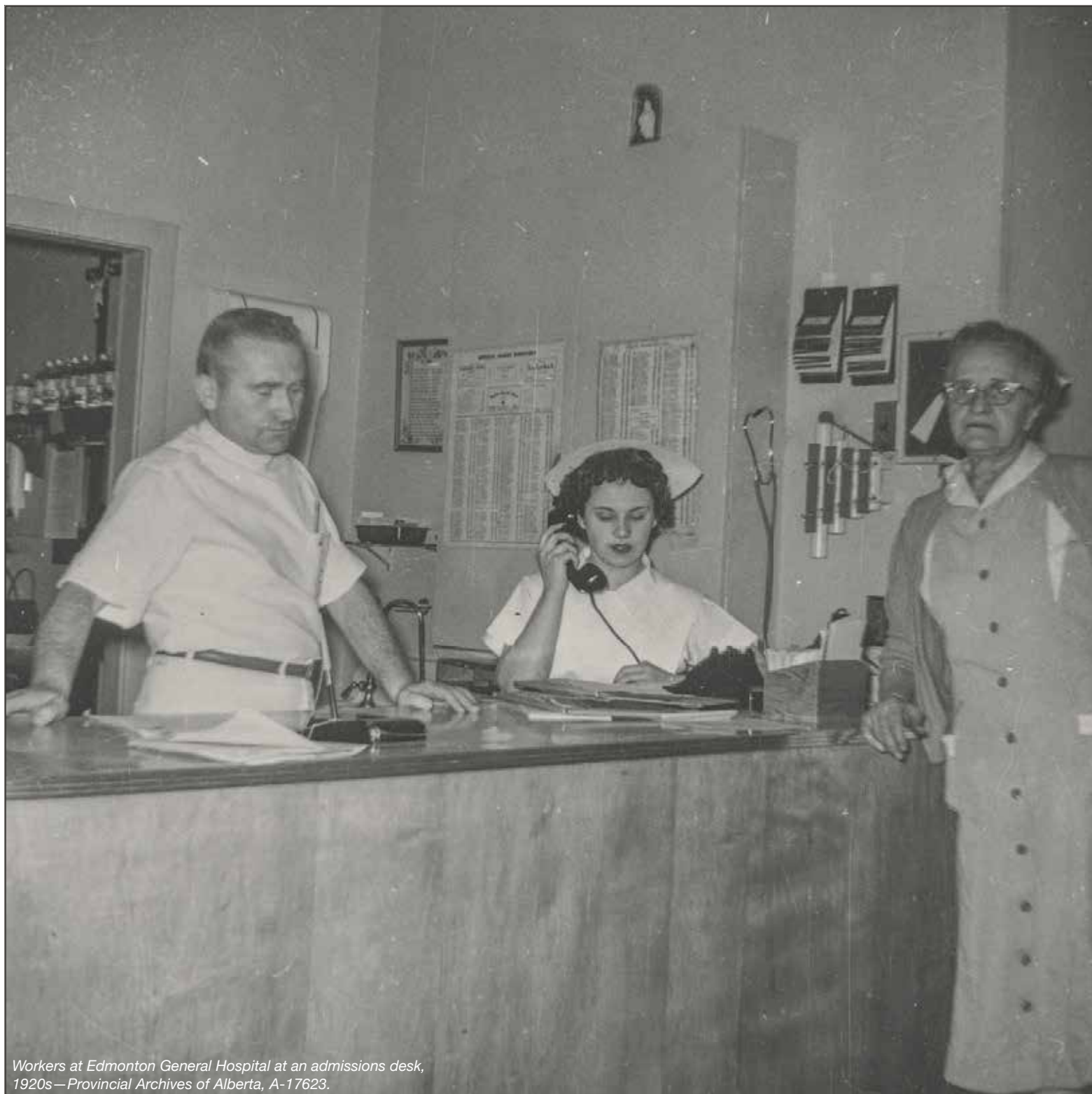
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Weekends

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE “the weekend” and the normal workday is eight hours or less. Before the 1870s, the word “weekend” did not exist. Paid workers might get Sunday off for religious observation but they were expected to work the other six days, often working up to 12 hours per day. Unions in various countries declared that workers had a fundamental right to some relaxation in their lives. That meant shorter work hours and two days off in a row at the end of a work week of five days. Nine-hour movements in the 1870s held demonstrations and strikes in both the United States and Canada and as nine-hour days became more common in the early twentieth century, the labour movement fought for eight-hour workdays. Hours beyond eight hours, they insisted, should be voluntary and must be paid for as “overtime” hours at time and a half or double time rates.

As the union movement grew and its members increasingly won “weekends” and reduced work hours in their agreements, unions began to pressure governments to make two consecutive days off work and eight-hour days the norm. Particularly after World War Two, when the union movement in Canada had become a force to reckon with, legislation for maximum hours of work, two days off work each week, and vacation days became standard in most Canadian provinces, including Alberta.



Workers at Edmonton General Hospital at an admissions desk,
1920s—Provincial Archives of Alberta, A-17623.

MARCH

The calendar displays the following dates and events:

- February:** 1 (Sun), 2 (Mon), 3 (Tue), 4 (Wed), 5 (Thu), 6 (Fri), 7 (Sat), 8 (Sun), 9 (Mon), 10 (Tue), 11 (Wed), 12 (Thu), 13 (Fri), 14 (Sat), 15 (Sun), 16 (Mon), 17 (Tue), 18 (Wed), 19 (Thu), 20 (Fri), 21 (Sat), 22 (Sun), 23 (Mon), 24 (Tue), 25 (Wed), 26 (Thu), 27 (Fri), 28 (Sat).
- March:** 1 (Sun), 2 (Mon), 3 (Tue), 4 (Wed), 5 (Thu), 6 (Fri), 7 (Sat), 8 (Sun) - International Women's Day, 9 (Mon), 10 (Tue), 11 (Wed), 12 (Thu) - Daylight Savings, 13 (Fri), 14 (Sat), 15 (Sun), 16 (Mon), 17 (Tue) - St. Patrick's Day, 18 (Wed), 19 (Thu), 20 (Fri) - Spring Equinox, 21 (Sat), 22 (Sun), 23 (Mon), 24 (Tue), 25 (Wed), 26 (Thu), 27 (Fri), 28 (Sat), 29 (Sun), 30 (Mon), 31 (Tue).
- April:** 1 (Wed), 2 (Thu), 3 (Fri), 4 (Sat), 5 (Sun), 6 (Mon), 7 (Tue), 8 (Wed), 9 (Thu), 10 (Fri), 11 (Sat), 12 (Sun), 13 (Mon), 14 (Tue), 15 (Wed), 16 (Thu), 17 (Fri), 18 (Sat), 19 (Sun), 20 (Mon), 21 (Tue), 22 (Wed), 23 (Thu), 24 (Fri), 25 (Sat), 26 (Sun), 27 (Mon), 28 (Tue), 29 (Wed), 30 (Thu), 31 (Fri).

Medicare

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE universal medicare in Canada. The Canadian trade union movement began campaigning for a national medical care program in the early 1900s but met huge resistance from employer groups and the medical profession. After World War Two, the growing private medical insurance industry became a major lobbyist against government insurance. Most trade unions were able to win some degree of health insurance from their employers. But the unions resented the copayments, exclusions, and high fees that for-profit insurance companies offered. When the Royal Commission on Health Services was established in 1962, right-wing forces claimed that union healthcare plans with private insurance companies showed that public insurance was unnecessary. Union exposure of the limitations of such plans persuaded the commissioners to recommend a universal public program. It helped as well that the New Democratic Party, a party formed in large part by trade unionists, held the balance of power in Ottawa from 1963 to 1968 and made the legislation of a universal medicare program its price for supporting the minority Liberal government.



Hosmer mine man car of B Level, 1910—
Provincial Archives of Alberta, A-11546.

APRIL

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Grievance Procedures

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE grievance procedures to respond to unjust treatment of individual workers or groups of workers—at least, if we are members of a union! Before there were unions, owners of capital and government employers alike could hire, fire, and discipline workers at will. They did not have to provide reasons for firing workers, for setting particular rates of pay for individual workers, or for abusive treatment of individual workers. The advent of trade unions and collective bargaining has changed all of that. Collective agreements provide protections for individual workers and create obligations for both employers and workers. Workers who believe that they have been unjustly treated by management have the right to file a grievance with the union, which then attempts to win justice for the aggrieved worker. While grievance procedures are rare in non-union employments, the rights won by unionized workers have forced governments and courts to recognize the right of all workers to a degree of fairness in hiring, discipline, and firing procedures. But access to the courts when your rights have been violated costs money and dealing with the Labour Department, especially when the government is right wing, often leads nowhere. There is really no substitute for a trade union when it comes to dealing with unjust employer behaviour.



*First Alberta old-age pension recipient, W. Kennedy Lee, September 3, 1929-
Provincial Archives of Alberta, BL-31/2.*

MAY

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Pensions

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE private pensions for most unionized workers and a minority of other workers, as well as public pensions for almost all workers. The trade union movement’s ability to negotiate retirement pensions for its members has caused even some non-union employers, anxious to stave off unions, to offer pensions to their employees. In 1900 most workers worked until they died or were too ill to work; in the latter case they depended on their families to look after them or were forced to accept public relief that would keep them alive. In the eastern half of Canada, many ended their lives in poorhouses for the destitute in abominable conditions. J.S. Woodsworth, leader of the Independent Labour Party, drew a promise of Canada’s first government old-age pension from Mackenzie King in 1926 in return for a Labour promise to support his minority Liberal government. But it was a means-tested, minuscule pension that King implemented. Labour pressures led to the creation of the Canada Pension Plan in 1965 and a recent sustained campaign by organized labour persuaded Canadian governments in 2016 to substantially increase CPP pensions.



Alberta First Nations woman and her baby, c. 1911
--Provincial Archives of Alberta, A-6932.

JUNE

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Maternity Leaves and Benefits

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE job-protected maternity leaves and maternity benefits. Until the late 1960s, when women left work during pregnancy or after a birth, they usually lost their jobs. Trade unions effected major changes in the status of mothers when they began to negotiate maternity leaves in collective agreements. In 1967 Civic Service Union 52, representing inside employees of the City of Edmonton, won unpaid but job-protected maternity leave. In 1971, the federal government, responding to feminist pressures and union successes, legislated maternity benefits under unemployment insurance to a maximum of 15 weeks. In 1975 the Alberta government granted the Labour Board the right to force an employer to permit maternity leave. The government admitted that its legislation was inspired by collective agreements that gave that right to unionized workers.

Unions then struggled to get longer legislated paid maternity leaves as well as provisions for paternity leave. By 2000, the maximum combination of maternity and paternity leave under employment insurance reached a year. Unionized workers in many cases were able to negotiate additional maternity payments from employers. The Canadian Union of Postal Workers led the way with a strike in 1981 that won full-pay maternity leave of 17 weeks. In 1991, nurse Susan Parcels won a court decision that women on maternity leave must receive the same benefits as employees on sick leave during the health-related portion of maternity leave.



Kathleen Andrews, the "First Lady of Edmonton Transit," 1975
--Provincial Archives of Alberta, J-1835/1

JULY

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Pay Equity

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE greater pay equity in Canada than in the past. We still have a long way to go before women and men earn about the same on average and women have as many opportunities for promotion as men. But in trade union settings far more has been achieved than in workplaces as a whole even though before the 1960s, trade unions were as sexist as most other established institutions in Canada. It took a great deal of pressure from women unionists to change union attitudes towards women’s work and women’s participation in unions. In 2010, women covered by a union earned 93.7 per-cent of what men covered by a union earned, while non-union women earned only 79.4 percent of what their male counterparts earned. Unions have pressed for employers to accept the principle of “equal pay for work of equal value.” This involves establish-ing criteria for pay that include educational requirements, complexity of tasks, degree of responsibility, degree of danger, and the like. Such criteria allow employers to compare otherwise rather different jobs and set pay rates objectively rather than employing gender-based criteria. In the federal government in the 1990s, such comparisons led to a significant upgrade in the pay of most women workers. In the City of Calgary in the 1980s it led to big wage increases for underpaid daycare workers and others.



Human rights legislation meant ensuring equal access to accommodation for people of diverse origins in an apartment building such as this one, 1970—Provincial Archives of Alberta, PA-6344.

AUGUST

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Human Rights Legislation

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE human rights legislation in Canada and Alberta. Before World War II, the trade union movement subscribed to popular prejudices in Canada. Anti-immigration in general, the unions seemed obsessed with notions that hard-working Asian workers in Canada were stealing jobs from “real” workers, that is white, British-origin, male workers. They blamed Asian workers rather than employers for low rates of pay in firms that hired some non-white workers. After World War II and the Holocaust, trade unions not only shed their previous racism but became the major institution in Canadian society that worked with Aboriginal people, non-white citizens, and newcomers, as well as non-Christians, especially the Jews, to fight for civil rights legislation. That came first in Saskatchewan in 1947, with Tommy Douglas’s CCF government that was aligned with the farm and trade union movements. The battle in Alberta took much longer because the Social Credit government was loath to interfere with the rights of employers and landlords respectively to employ and to rent to whom they wished. Lobbying by the labour-led Alberta Human Rights Association led finally to the Alberta Individual Rights Protection Act in 1972 and the creation of the Human Rights Commission.



*Inuit students at oil well drilling school, December 2, 1968
—Provincial Archives of Alberta, PA-4633.*

SEPTEMBER

AUGUST							OCTOBER						
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Occupational Health and Safety

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE occupational health and safety legislation. Employers gradually acceded to union demands for workers' compensation in the hope that such provisions would reduce pressures upon them to organize workplaces and the pace of work in ways that would make workplaces safe. Over time most unions rejected the "macho" philosophy that employers preached in which male workers showed their manliness by accepting dangerous working conditions and break-neck speeds. Unions lobbied for government legislation that would set standards for workplace buildings, equipment, and work processes. They also demanded the right of workers to reject unsafe work. In 1973, the result in Alberta was the Occupational Health and Safety Act. It gave workers the right to know about occupational health hazards, the right to participate with management in Joint Health and Safety Committees, and the right to refuse unsafe work. In practice, poor government enforcement meant that the legislation was largely unenforced outside union workplaces. Unions have fought hard to protect their members' health and safety by demanding that employers respect the act, and have struck on several occasions when employers ignored the act and tried to fire workers who refused unsafe work. It is still the case that each year over 100 Alberta workers die preventable deaths from workplace health and safety hazards. The trade union movement continues to fight for tougher enforcement of the Occupational Health and Safety Act.



Department of Public Health travelling clinic employees eating a meal while on the road, 1928-- Provincial Archives of Alberta, A-11747

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Halloween

Improvements in “Female” Occupations

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE improved pay and benefits for occupations traditionally viewed as “women’s work.” Trade unions and feminists have fought for an end to a gender division of labour. But it still exists with some professions like nursing, social work, teaching, secretarial work, retail work, and domestic work overwhelmingly populated by women and construction, firefighting, policing, and mining overwhelmingly populated by men. At one time “women’s work” and low pay were synonymous. The jobs that were largely filled by women were undervalued and underpaid. Unions of nurses, teachers, and social workers have fought with some success to make these professions relatively well paid. Unions of office workers, retail workers, and domestic workers have also proved able to improve the wages and working conditions of their members, but they have faced far more obstacles in their efforts to unionize workers in these sectors than the professional unions have faced. Indeed in recent years the retail sector has undermined gains made in the 1970s and 1980s by unionized workers. In the private sector the United Food and Commercial Workers have played an important role in unionizing women workers and pressuring employers to pay them what they are worth. In the public sector the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and the Health Sciences Association of Alberta have made gains for women workers that have put pressure on private employers to improve pay for women workers in traditional “women’s jobs.”



NOVEMBER

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Organized Struggle Against Austerity

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE an organized struggle against the destructive ideology of austerity, often now referred to as “neoliberalism,” because it is a move backwards from “welfare liberalism” to the vicious “market liberalism” of the period before World War II. During the Great Depression, unions led the struggle against government austerity policies, demanding that instead of cutting government spending that governments invest in public works and social insurance programs to aid the unemployed. After World War II, that message was heeded for about three decades as governments and employers sought to persuade workers not to abandon their faith in the capitalist system that had failed them so badly during the Great Depression and earlier. But as the Soviet Union began to collapse, the right wing in the West proclaimed that the Soviet model was the only socialist model and its failures somehow demonstrated that all forms of socialism and social democracy were failures. As the capitalist system faced a series of new economic crises, neoliberals, who controlled the media, persuaded many people that a return to pre-1945 market economics represented salvation. Unsurprisingly, neoliberals believed that getting rid of unions was part of the solution along with increasing rates of unemployment so as to intimidate workers to accept that capital needed to get more of what was produced and labour less. Trade unions have fought to preserve workers’ gains both on the job and in the form of government social insurance programs, regulations of industry, and minimum wages.



Edmonton workers supporting Dr. Norman Bethune's medical unit during the Spanish Civil War, 1937--City of Edmonton Archives, EA-160-1233

DECEMBER

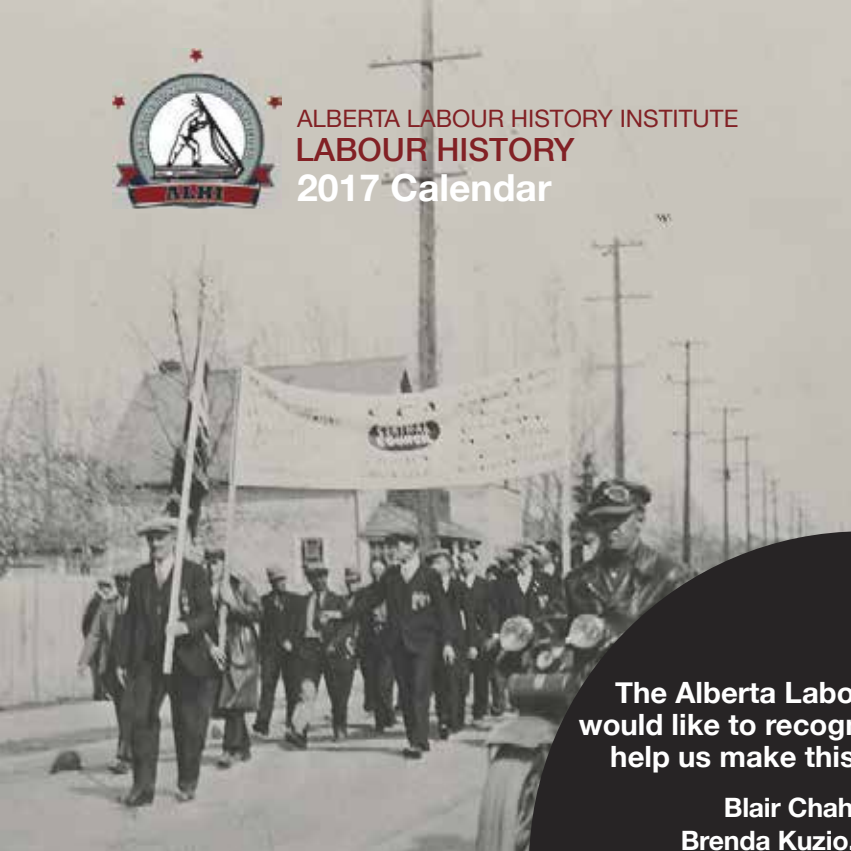
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Global Solidarity

THANKS TO TRADE UNIONS, WE HAVE a means through which Canadians can attempt to aid progressive forces throughout the world that face repressive governments and corporations. In the 1980s, for example, Alberta’s labour movement participated in the anti-apartheid movement and the California grape boycott, collecting funds to help César Chávez in his efforts, among other things, to stop employers from spraying grape fields with insecticides and herbicides that poisoned farm workers and their families. The Alberta Federation of Labour protested American President Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” plans to create a nuclear shield around the United States while expanding its nuclear weapons. Trade unions were instrumental in a thirteen-day Anti-Cruise Easter march, which went from Cold Lake to Edmonton in May, 1983, passing through towns where committees were typically formed around a Canadian Union of Public Employees local in a small-town hospital. The AFL has a Human Rights and International Solidarity Committee and the entire labour movement in the province has been involved in efforts to end the Temporary Foreign Worker program and to ensure that everyone who comes to work in Canada is given a path to citizenship here rather than treated as cheap labour without human rights.



ALBERTA LABOUR HISTORY INSTITUTE
LABOUR HISTORY
2017 Calendar



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would like to recognize our partners who
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